

Comparing Machiavelli and Aristotle's Advice for Tyrants

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ABSTRACT

Machiavelli's advice, which is on the basis that a prince wishes to attain glory, is that the prince must be able to undertake ferocious actions. To achieve glory, a prince ought to have powers, and to achieve glory with this power, this power needs to be used effectively. One ought to do what is best for the people, which could entail vicious deeds. But, since the ruler only needs to have a reputation and legacy of virtue instead of acting virtuous at all times, Machiavelli argues that one ought to act vicious when necessary, with temperance, prudence, and timing. Aristotle, however, offers an alternative, urging the tyrant to become king-like for the sake of both his own safety and the people. Upon assessing the two's colliding advice along with modern psychological evidence, Aristotle's advice is wiser.

Introduction

Aristotle and Machiavelli offer fundamentally different advice to tyrants about how they should maintain their rule. Their contrasting advice to tyrants illuminates fundamental differences in their political philosophies. Aristotle sees politics as a branch of ethics. He insists that political leaders exemplify the same virtues that citizens should strive for. Machiavelli, by contrast, emancipates politics from ethics, claiming that statesmen are governed by rules fundamentally different from ordinary citizens. In relation to tyranny, this contrast is manifest in the way in which Machiavelli recommends the use of wicked and immoral actions, whereas Aristotle insists that evil always be avoided. Machiavelli instrumentalizes wickedness in a way in which Aristotle does not.

Defining Tyrants

Aristotle defines tyranny as a corrupt form of kingship whereas Machiavelli ignores the distinction between tyrants and kings. According to Machiavelli, tyrants are just kings you don't like, and kings are tyrants you do like. Aristotle begins his analysis with a contrast between true and corrupt regimes. True regimes are those which aim for the good of the entire political community whereas the corrupt regimes are aimed solely for the good of the rulers (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1279a). Thus, to Aristotle, tyranny is a rule by one for the one. By contrast, Machiavelli's fundamental division is between republics and principalities. Republics and principalities are regimes ruled by the many and one respectively (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 5). Aristotle believes that one cannot understand tyranny without first understanding kingship just as one cannot understand disease without first understanding health. But, Machiavelli believes that the distinction between kingship and tyranny is merely subjective.

How do tyrants come to power? According to Aristotle, sometimes kings "overstep the limits of their hereditary power" and claim supremacy for themselves. More often, says Aristotle, tyrants are a byproduct of democracy in which wealthy men claim to champion the interests of the poor but serve only their own interests (Aristotle, *The Politics*, Book V, 1310B).

Machiavelli discusses three ways in which princes come to power. The first is a prophet like Moses, who commands at the behest of God (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI, 20). The second is the new prince, who boldly seizes power from an existing leader. The third is the founder, who establishes a new and long-lasting regime such as Cyrus the Great of Persia and Romulus of Rome (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, VI, 21). Aristotle's demagogic tyrant most closely resembles Machiavelli's new prince.

Philosophers' Advice

Aristotle sounds most like Machiavelli when he outlines the traditional methods tyrants use to maintain power. First, he suggests they "sow distrust among the people" (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1314a). To do so, a tyrant ought to "employ spies..., for the fear of informers prevents people from speaking their minds, and if they do, they are more easily found out" (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1313b). In addition, Aristotle suggests "not [allowing] common meals, clubs, education and the like" such that the people cannot come to trust one another (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1313b). While an individual citizen may not be stronger than a tyrant and his forces, the people as a whole are. Thus, by decreasing the unity of the people, a tyrant eliminates a threat to his power. Second, Aristotle also suggests oppressing the people by such means as heavy taxation, forced labor in massive public work projects such as the pyramids, and waging constant power to create the need for a strong ruler. (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1314Aa). Third, Aristotle recommends breaking the spirits of the subjects. If sowing distrust and enfeebling the people fails and eminent citizens manage to arise, then the tyrant has to eliminate these exceptional people either by exile or assassination. To remove potentially dangerous citizens, Aristotle recommends "[lopping] off those who are too high; he must put to death men of spirit" (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1313b). By eliminating exceptional people, the tyrant shatters the people's spirits.

After offering this seemingly realistic and Machiavellian advice, Aristotle points out that these traditional methods are bound to fail. Aristotle argues that tyranny is an inherently unstable form of rule and that tyrants are usually killed. He, therefore, argues that if a tyrant wishes to live a long life, he should moderate his regime to make it more like a kingship. By monopolizing power, the tyrant ends up making many enemies. Aristotle says, "there is a danger also in not letting [the people] share [power], for a state in which many poor men are excluded from office will necessarily be full of enemies" (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1281b). Tyranny strips everyone but the tyrant of political rights, which fosters anger from the people toward the tyrant. This consequence, compounded by the fact that Aristotle has established that the majority is realistically stronger than an individual, suggests that the tyrant will be overthrown.

Tyranny has a complicated relationship with democracy. On one hand, democracies often decay into tyrannies by means of demagogues. These are leaders who care only for themselves but who also pretend to befriend the people, thus using popular support to undermine democracy. On the other hand, tyrannies can pave the way for democracy because tyrants often undermine the power of nobles, which serves to empower the people. Aristotle claims the "love of gain in the ruling classes was always tending to diminish their number, and so to strengthen the masses who in the end set upon their masters and established democracies" (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1286b).

Tyrannies, according to Aristotle, are highly hazardous to tyrants. Tyrants are the targets of men with vengeance, fear, contempt, and ambition. Aristotle claims that when a tyrant's insults anger people, people are spurred to "act out of revenge" (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1311a). When people act out of anger, they disregard "rational principle," attacking and at times killing the tyrant (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1312b). Additionally, tyrants cause fear in people, which makes the people paranoid. Such paranoia leads to the tyrant being a target of violence. To add, a tyrant's self-indulging actions such as being "always drunk," breed contempt, which, in turn, makes it more dangerous for tyrants (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1312a). Furthermore, a tyrant is vulnerable to men of ambition who "regard the killing of a tyrant simply as an extraordinary action which will make them

famous and notable in the world” (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1312a). History shows that most tyrants are killed well before they reach old age.

In light of such risk in being a traditional tyrant, Aristotle offers an alternative: make the tyranny “more like the rule of a king” (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1314a). Aristotle believes a tyrant ought to “appear, not harsh, but dignified” (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1314b). The philosopher claims that by acquiring a favorable reputation, the tyrant is safer, for he is no longer susceptible to the aforementioned dangers of tyranny. For instance, to gain the trust of the people, Aristotle urges tyrants to “pretend concern for the public revenues” and properly use public funds like a “steward of the public,” for people get upset when “they see their hard-won earnings snatched from them and lavished on courtesans and foreigners and artists” (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1314b). By acting like a servant to the people, the tyrant wins the favor of the people. In turn, the ruler is not susceptible to vengeance, fear, contempt, and ambition from the people, ensuring his safety. To thicken the facade, a “tyrant should if possible be moderate,” for a “drunken and drowsy tyrant” is despised and subject to contempt from the people (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1314b). As established, contempt poses a danger to tyrants. Not to mention, such behavior would yield the tyrant a poor reputation, making him susceptible to the blades of ambitious men.

Counterintuitively, in acting as a fair ruler, a tyrant becomes half-good, thus transitioning from tyranny to king, which will ensure the power and safety of the ruler. This transition reflects Aristotle’s thoughts in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle claims that “virtue of character results from habit” just like a craft (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a). Simply put, “[people] become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b). Thus, Aristotle suggests, if a tyrant acts in the interest of the people like a king to win their trust and favor, then, inadvertently, the tyrant will slowly become a king. Aristotle’s strategy could be described as fake it until one makes it.

Machiavelli would view Aristotle’s advice as naive. At the core, Machiavelli believes that “a man who wishes to make a profession of doing good in all things will come to ruin among many who are not good” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XV, 53). Machiavelli believes that people who act purely good are taken advantage of by bad people, who are all too common in the world. Thus, Machiavelli believes that wicked means can yield good ends. Machiavelli is often said to teach that the ends justify the means. Therefore, rulers ought to “learn to be able to be not good, and to use that ability or not use it according to necessity” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XV, 53). Machiavelli recommends not cruelty for its own sake but cruelty well-used.

Machiavelli argues that because circumstances are always changing in politics, staying in power requires rulers to remain flexible. Thus, Machiavelli argues a ruler ought to “imitate both the fox and the lion, for the lion is liable to be trapped whereas the fox cannot ward off wolves. One needs, then, to be a fox to recognise traps, and a lion to frighten away wolves. Those who rely merely upon a lion’s strength do not understand matters” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, XVIII, 60). Machiavelli’s ideal prince or tyrant knows when to lie and when to tell the truth, when to be cruel and when to be compassionate. For example, Machiavelli teaches rulers about the necessity of breaking their promises. Being true to one’s word unconditionally would be harmful, for some “are treacherous and will not observe their promises to you” (Machiavelli, XVII, 60). Machiavelli would argue that while the act of lying might not be perceived as virtuous, the ruler must lie if the occasion demands it.

Machiavelli argues that princes require a different code of ethics than private citizens. Private citizens ought always to be generous, but princes should always be stingy because by being stingy, they can lower taxes and public expenditure. Private citizens ought always to be compassionate, but princes must be cruel because their compassion can encourage or foster outbreaks of crime which will require even greater cruelty later (Machiavelli, XVII, 57). For Aristotle, by contrast, a ruler ought to be a paradigm of the moral virtues aspired to by all citizens. In other words, for Machiavelli, politics has its own rules whereas for Aristotle politics is a branch of ethics.

Means and Ends in Politics

It is often said that for Machiavelli, the ends justify the means, and the end of politics is power. But, Machiavelli's end is glory, which is often mistaken for power. What is glory? To have glory is to have a good reputation that lasts long through the ages, not to be confused with infamy. According to Machiavelli, power is merely a prerequisite to glory. Machiavelli demonstrates this by introducing armed and unarmed prophets. The historical example of religious reformer Savonarola was offered, "who perished together with his new order as soon as the masses began to lose faith in him; and he lacked the means of keeping the support of those who had believed in him, as well as of making those who had never had any faith in him believe" (Machiavelli, VI, 21). In other words, attempts to change and support for these changes without real power entail nothing, for "people are fickle; it is easy to persuade them about something, but difficult to keep them persuaded" (Machiavelli, VI, 21). Therefore, it is pertinent that one has power to "force [people] to believe" (Machiavelli, VI, 21). Machiavelli's example of an armed prophet is Moses who was successful when Savonarola failed.

It is important to note, however, that power is only a means or prerequisite to glory. That is, it is possible to have power but not glory. Take Agathocles of Syracuse for example. Though Agathocles was a successful leader, accomplishing numerous military successes, he came to power by "kill[ing] all the senators and the richest men of the city" during his campaign (Machiavelli, VIII, 30). Here, Machiavelli claims that Agathocles' "actions cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow citizens, to betray one's friends, to be treacherous, merciless, and irreligious; power may be gained in such ways, but not glory" (Machiavelli, VIII, 30). For Machiavelli, glory entails fame for having done good, not infamy.

While there is a seeming clash between power and virtue in attaining glory, it is important to note that Machiavelli's goal is to be remembered as virtuous, not to be virtuous in all cases. Machiavelli claims that many of the crimes of successful rulers are forgotten in history (Machiavelli, IX, 33). Hence, only the perception of historians is important, not what actually transpired. It brings further relevance to the aforementioned leniency that Machiavelli cites that historians have in analyzing new principalities. Machiavelli, therefore, advises a prince to conduct his affairs to manipulate perception. Specifically, Machiavelli calls for economic usage of ferociousness, advising that "injuries should be done all together so that, because they are tasted less, they will cause less resentment; benefits should be given out one by one, so that they will be savoured more" (Machiavelli, IX, 33). Machiavelli generally advocates for glory through adept use of power in not only achieving good but also carefully and timely performing vicious actions when necessary.

Analysis

In my own view, Aristotle's advice to tyrants is wiser than Machiavelli's. Aristotle is aware in advance of the Machiavellian strategy, and he indeed outlines it, but he is also aware of the fatal limitations of Machiavelli's realism. First, Aristotle understands that using wicked methods makes the ruler himself wicked and that wicked people are not happy and do not live long lives. Second, Aristotle would argue that Machiavelli's idea of flexibility in a ruler is physiologically infeasible. Aristotle insists that virtues and vices are both habits and that once we learn to lie or tell the truth, it becomes difficult to act contrary to this habit. Habitual truth-tellers cannot tell lies and habitual liars cannot tell the truth (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b).

This reasoning is backed by modern physiological studies, which indicate that people lack control over their actions when it comes to vices. Pathological liars, for instance, lie even when it is not in their best interest (Curtis and Hart), which indicates that vicious actions tend to control us. Therefore, it would be ideal if vicious instruments can be used, when necessary, but it is empirically clear that these vicious instruments overtake us. But, that is not to say that all of Machiavelli's advice is flawed, especially Machiavelli's argument that virtues are not objective. Combining the fact that one should not flexibly engage in vices and the fact that public virtues

are not private virtues, one should believe that a ruler ought to establish a set of principles for a ruler to follow and strictly adhere to them.

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