Plato and Machiavelli: Should Statecraft be Soul-Craft?

Michael Robert Caditz

Plato and Machiavelli are fundamentally different in their approaches to leading a state. Plato is idealistic and appeals to "the good" and the soul. He believes justice is always the most profitable path for leaders, and justice must be taught to citizens to improve their lives. On the other hand, Machiavelli's ideal ruler is strategic, using whatever tactics are required (within limits) to remain in power, secure glory, and benefit society. Machiavelli is interested in satisfying citizens' (subjective) desires, not preaching goodness. While Platonic idealism may seem utopian or unreachable, to its credit it strives for harmony and morality. However, Machiavelli's instrumentalism is cruel, dangerous, and self-contradictory.

Plato views justice and profitability to be one and the same: "And so, my good Thrasymachus, injustice is never more profitable than justice"("Republic" 2008 354a). Just as virtuous doctors by definition always act in the best interest of their patients, virtuous leaders will always better the lives of their subjects. In fact, it is not even possible for a just man to be unjust.

Rather than seeking to fulfill subjective desires of the populace, Plato envisions instilling "the good" and "beauty of reason":

> . . . We would not have our guardians grow up amid images of moral deformity, as in some noxious pasture, and there browse and feed upon many a baneful herb and flower day by day, little by little, until they silently gather a festering mass of corruption in their own soul. Let our artists rather be those who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful; then will our youth dwell in a land of health, amid fair sights and sounds, and receive the good in everything;

> and beauty, the effluence of fair works, shall flow into the eye and ear, like a health-giving breeze from a purer region, and insensibly draw the soul from earliest years into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason. ("Republic" 1892 401c-d)

Indeed, rather than allowing citizens to pursue their desires (whatever they may be) Socrates advocates controlling everyday life in the just city, with rules that govern which musical instruments are allowed, as well as rules forbidding "ugliness" and "vice" ("Republic" 1892 Book III), for example.

In order to teach "the good" in Plato's ideal city, speech is censored. One example is the campaign to change the traditional definitions of the Greek gods from flawed and imperfect (as are humans) to perfect and the source of the good: "This then is one of the rules and guidelines about the gods within which speakers must speak and poets compose, that the god is not the cause of all things but only of the good" ("Republic" 2008 380c).

Because the integrity of the soul is more important than outcomes, Socrates goes to his death rather than abandon piety. On death row, if his goal were to save his own skin, Socrates might have taken the escape route offered by Crito ("Crito" 44b). But he makes no exception to his just obligation to Athens: "one must obey the commands of one's city and country, or persuade it as to the nature of justice. It is impious to bring violence to bear against your mother and father, it is much more so to use it against your country" ("Crito" 51c).

For Machiavelli, on the other hand, statecraft is one of strategy and outcome, not of idealism or morality. In contrast with Socrates, Machiavelli seeks to make people content by fulfilling their subjective desires (rather than making them more just and

virtuous): “Well-ordered states and wise princes have taken every care . . . to keep the people satisfied and contented; this is one of the most important concerns a prince can have” (366). This is public relations management, not soul-craft.

A ruler, given the choice of being loved or being feared, is better to be feared: “love is preserved by a link of obligation which, owing to the baseness of men, is broken at every opportunity for their advantage. Fear, on the other hand, preserves you with a dread of punishment which never fails” (363). This is not an appeal to the soul, to justice, or to virtue; it is a strategy to stay in power.

However, it is also strategically important to not be hated. While Plato might suggest that generosity, as a virtue, is necessarily profitable, Machiavelli views generosity as a mistake: “A prince should guard, above all things, against being despised and hated; and generosity leads you to both” (363). The reason he should not be hated is to preserve his power: “he can endure being feared easily while he is not hated” (363).

For Machiavelli, excessive violence should be avoided not for reasons of the soul, i.e., because violence is unjust or morally wrong, but rather to preserve power: “in seizing a state, the usurper ought to consider carefully which injuries it is necessary for him to inflict, and to do them all at one stroke so as not to have to repeat them daily. By not unduly unsettling men he will be able to reassure them, and win them to himself by offering them benefits” (353).

Killing is viewed strategically: “When it is necessary for him to proceed against the life of someone, he must do it with proper justification and manifest cause” (363). This is not because Machiavelli is morally opposed to killing. Indeed, life seems less important than property, specifically because of the way the two are supposedly

perceived by the populace relative to each other: “men more quickly forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony” (363).

Rather than forbidding cruelty as a matter of morality, it is actually encouraged for military benefit: “when a prince is with his army, and has a multitude of soldiers under control, then it is quite necessary he not worry about the reputation for cruelty, for without it he would never keep his army united or attentive to its duties” (364).

To be fair, Machiavelli makes a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence (and thus can be viewed as rational). Agathocles, the Sicilian, is an example of someone who gained power through cruel violence, but attained no glory: “his barbarous cruelty, his inhumanity, and his many wicked deeds do not allow him to be celebrated among the most excellent men. What he achieved cannot be attributed either to fortune or to virtue” (352).

Machiavelli, however, does explicitly permit “evil”: “Cruel measures are properly used—if one might speak well of evil—when they are applied a single time” (353). Unlike Plato’s concern for the soul, Machiavelli’s politics is trumped by strategy. Once a ruler seeking glory tastes the supposed benefits of “legitimate” cruelty once, can he draw the line before the second time any more than one can forego the proverbial second potato chip?

If violence is permitted on the path to glory, then this doctrine would seem to include the horrific actions of despots, so long as they were acting in good faith (however misguided). Adolph Hitler would seem to fit this criterion. Hitler sincerely believed his actions would lead to a better world. He also was rational, in the sense that his brutality was systematic rather than arbitrary. One might respond that he achieved no glory in the opinion of the world, and thus his legacy is not protected by Machiavelli’s

justification for cruelty. But that is a retrospective assessment. Had he won the war and controlled much of the world, sentiment would be quite different; his tactics would retrospectively be perceived as justified; he *would* be celebrated. That Hitler's cruelty failed to achieve glory in the eyes of the world is knowable only in hindsight.

Machiavelli's apparent assertion that ends justify means has a parallel in the modern American debate over whether defeating "terrorism" justifies utilizing torture such as waterboarding. The arguments in favour include the assertion that preventing terror attacks justifies torture, even if such is forbidden under domestic and international law and flies in the face of the morality espoused by democratic societies. The arguments against waterboarding include the questionability of whether valuable information is actually gleaned, the precedent set (if we do it to them, they are more likely to do it back to us) and importantly, the argument that ends *never* justify unjust means. It's difficult to imagine Socrates agreeing that injustice produces justice. However, it seems likely that Machiavelli would be on the side of waterboarding, given his utilization of cruelty if it seems profitable.

Finally, there is a fundamental contradiction in Machiavelli's subjective acceptance of violence as a strategy. The contradiction is within the following logic: "The end goal is to make society a better place. What makes society better is if people are living happy lives. Therefore I will kill people to make for a better society." One might argue that this makes sense insofar as killing some people makes life better for others. But then we must ask, what is the threshold? What percentage of the populace is it justifiable to kill and still assert that life is better for the rest? One percent? Fifty percent? Ninety percent? Such a determination seems arbitrary. It would be consistent

and objective, on the other hand, to argue that *no* amount of premediated killing is justified.

Plato is clear that soul-craft is *one and the same* as statecraft. Machiavelli's overriding goal may ultimately be well intentioned. However, his statecraft is less concerned with the soul than with something different: maintaining power and achieving glory. But Machiavelli's model sets a dangerous precedent which can be—and perhaps has been—seized upon by cruel leaders in pursuit of their subjective versions of a "better world." In the end, Machiavelli contradicts himself by promoting cruelty and violence as a questionable path to making lives "better."

Works Cited

Machiavelli, Niccolo. “The Prince.” *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought – Volume 1: From Plato to Nietzsche*. Eds. Andrew Bailey et al. Peterborough: Broadview, 2008. Print.

Plato. “Crito.” *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought – Volume 1: From Plato to Nietzsche*. Eds. Andrew Bailey et al. Peterborough: Broadview, 2008. Print.

---. “Republic.” *The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought – Volume 1: From Plato to Nietzsche*. Eds. Andrew Bailey et al. Peterborough: Broadview, 2008. Print.

---. “Republic.” *The Dialogues of Plato Vol. III*. Trans. B. Jowett. London: Oxford University, 1892. Print.