Machiavelli's Ideas for Good Government

History 402

Although there are a few shortcomings (noted inside) and areas where you should have added more by way of your own reactions/analysis, you have otherwise done a good job of researching. The organizing and writing of a research paper. The essay is written and organized well, there is a clear thesis, and you effectively use primary sources and integrate them effectively with (most of) your secondary sources.
The idea of the ends justifying the means to achieving a goal is generally attributed to Niccolo Machiavelli due to his most famous book, *The Prince*. Because of this, Machiavelli is often seen as amoralistic in his political thought. This characterization does not follow from a comparison of *The Prince* with his larger work, *The Discourses of Livy*. In these books, Machiavelli provided instruction on creating and maintaining two different forms of government, both with the goal of establishing what he believed to be a good government. The opposite of this would be the tyranny Machiavelli is often accused of promoting. To dispel the idea of his support for tyranny, we need to understand the differences and similarities between the principality of *The Prince* and the republic of *The Discourses*, but, more importantly, between the books themselves. In respect to the books, the comparisons include the reasoning behind their writing, the form these books take and the activities they promote or denounce. For the governments, the operations and activities occurring in the state are most important. The analysis of these two books will show that Machiavelli sought to promote good government through two different means that shared some similarities, but neither of which proposed the tyrannical rule he is often credited with encouraging.

To understand Machiavelli’s reasons for writing the books, the history of Italy in general and Florence in particular must be examined, as well as Machiavelli’s place in this history. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Italy was not a nation, but a collection of city-states under the rule of both republics and princes. Foreign armies occupied different sections of the peninsula at the invitation of allied city-states. The governments changed on a regular basis. In Florence, the Medici family served as princely leaders until 1494 and the arrival of French troops in the Italian peninsula. The Republic of Florence reformed under the Great Council allowing an aristocratic republican government to rule the city. Machiavelli served as secretary for the
Second Chancery of the restructured Florentine Republic from 1498 until its downfall and the return of the Medici in 1512. Although work on The Discourses started earlier in Machiavelli’s career, The Prince was completed relatively quickly in 1513 in an attempt to gain favor with the Medici leaders, according to Maurizio Viroli. The failure of this action led Machiavelli to continue writing other works, including a play, The Mandrake, and The Discourses. This last work he wrote out of a sense of obligation to pass on his knowledge as expressed in the introduction to Book Two of The Discourses. The difference in reasons for writing these books and the time spent on them seem to indicate Machiavelli’s support for republican government over that of a principality. Despite this situational difference in reason for writing, Viroli argued that both books shared a similar purpose, “not...to explain a scientific or a moral truth, but to persuade and impel to act.” Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa agreed with this purpose for The Prince, believing it was the product of a specific opportunity in history to unite Italy against foreign invaders under a single leader. Whether they would apply a similar purpose to The Discourses is never stated. Either way, Machiavelli’s writings appear to be a product of their times. Overall, the governmental changes of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries provided him the opportunity to observe different political activities and compare them with classical examples.

Both books made extensive use of historical and contemporary examples in proving Machiavelli’s arguments. In The Prince, he used the classical examples of Moses, Romulus and

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Cyrus as men who had come to power through their own means given an opportunity. Cesare Borgia provided one of his main contemporary examples. Machiavelli believed:

"Whoever, then, judges it necessary in his new principality to assure himself against his enemies, gain friends for himself, win either by force or by fraud, make himself loved or feared by the people, followed and revered by the soldiers, extinguish those who can or will offend you, renovate old institutions by new manners, be severe and gracious, magnanimous and liberal, extinguish the unfaithful troops, create new ones, maintain the friendship of kings and of princes so that they must either be gracious about pleasing you or be restrained about offending you, cannot find more recent example than his (Cesare Borgia)."

By attributing all of these characteristics to a man that readers could identify with, he hoped they would understand and act on the information he provided. The Discourses, referring to the works of the classical author Livy, presented a greater connection to the classical Roman Republic. Machiavelli provided numerous references to the actions of Roman leaders, such as Quintius and Appius Claudius, which he proceeded to characterize as good or bad. For comparative purposes, he used contemporary figures, like Cosimo de’ Medici and Niccolo Uzzano, in a similar manner to those used in The Prince. Viroli believed that Machiavelli used history to immerse readers in the topic on a more intimate level than pure reason. This would seem to apply more to the contemporary examples, but the Renaissance is often characterized by an interest in emulating classical Rome. During this period, the historical references may have had a greater effect.

Machiavelli analyzed various operations and activities within the government in order to provide a guide for the potential prince or republican citizen in these two books.

6 Ibid., 57.
8 Ibid., 241.
9 Viroli, Machiavelli, 99.
For example, Machiavelli condemned the use of auxiliary troops as a military force in chapter twenty of the second book of *The Discourses* and in chapter thirteen of *The Prince*. These troops were dangerous in his opinion, "for the prince or republic that employs them has no authority over them whatsoever; only the one who sends them... When they have conquered, such soldiers as these in most cases plunder the one who has hired them as well as the one against whom they are hired..." By inviting foreign troops into the nation as the only military force for defense or offense, the government gave their commander a foothold that he could exploit for his own purposes. In both books, Machiavelli discussed the need for new princes to destroy and rebuild conquered states in order to ensure continued rule, although he provided alternatives to this evil action. This similarity in recommendation for both principalities and republics appeared infrequently throughout both books.

Differences between political operations provided critics of Machiavelli with ammunition to label him a supporter of tyranny. This was due to misinterpretations of Machiavelli’s intent in instructing the prince. In chapter fifteen of *The Prince*, he asserted the need for a prince to know how to be “not good” in certain circumstances to maintain his power. This advice was intended as a protection against the corrupt members of society who would act to bring down a leader who was always good. Later, in chapter seventeen, Machiavelli claimed that a leader who was feared had a better chance of succeeding than one who was loved. While this seems cold, he emphasized that fear differed from hatred, because fear could maintain order, while hatred could lead

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13 Ibid, 88-89.
to opposition. The interpretations of these suggestions that inferred Machiavelli’s support for tyranny ignored later guidance provided in *The Prince*. In chapter twenty-one, he encouraged the virtue of the prince in rewarding and entertaining his subjects. This section alone provided instruction against tyranny by the prince. When taken with correct interpretations of other sections of the book, Machiavelli does not encourage tyranny of any form in the principality.

In comparing the principality to the republic, some historians suggested that the former is needed to establish the latter. Viroli wrote that:

The argument that the restoration of political life can only be accomplished, if at all, by one man alone who uses an almost regal authority does not contradict at all the fact that Machiavelli’s republicanism is a commitment to principles of the civil and political life, and to a mixed government which includes an almost monarchical element in the persona of the Gonfaloniere or a Doge who must, when corruption threatens civil life, assume extraordinary powers to impose the rule of law.

In this respect, problems in government may require an individual to exert greater control in order to ensure the continuation or institution of a good government. *The Prince* described the proper conduct for this individual, while *The Discourses* described the ultimate goal of this exercise of power. Mark Hulliung expressed this idea that the acts described in *The Prince* are intended to reestablish republican order, but he believed that Machiavelli’s ultimate goal was greatness for the republic, not the republic itself. Whatever the goal, Machiavelli, in Viroli’s argument, believed that principalities and monarchies could not allow true freedom as the republic could by ensuring the people’s freedom from fear of oppression. Assuming this is

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14 Ibid., 89.
15 Ibid., 109.
true, Machiavelli opposed tyranny except in times of need to overcome obstacles otherwise insurmountable. His goal was to establish a good, lasting government for the people of Italy.

Machiavelli points out three main threats to good government. These are corruption, the development of factions, and the accumulation of power in the hands of the few. Although these three areas are interconnected, looking at them as separate contributors to the decline of good government allows for greater understanding of their development and prevention.

Although it is never clearly defined, corruption is often discussed in both The Prince and The Discourses. Alfredo Bonadeo argued that Machiavelli’s concept of corruption involved four main components: “moral decay, misuse of riches, disregard of the common good and arrogance of power.” Each of these four aspects of corruption interacts with and contributes to the other aspects in a spiraling effect in Machiavelli’s writings. Machiavelli provided various reasons for the development of corruption in society. A lack of proper religious devotion provided an example for this corruption. He argued that the Christian church, based on a respect for suffering and humility, weakened society, while pagan societies, which promoted bold actions, provided strength and ensured honor through fear of God. The concentration of wealth, power or both in the hands of the few also contributed to corruption in a society. Bonadeo presented Machiavelli’s analysis as a chain, with wealth or power leading to a desire to protect and increase that attribute, requiring developing the other attribute, which goes against the common good. Machiavelli believed the source of this corruption was the wealthy class of the state. He argued in The Discourses that “fear of losing generates in them the same desires that those who desire to acquire possess, “ and the wealthy have greater resources for enacting change, which

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21 Bonadeo, Corruption, Conflict and Power, 12.
can lead to greater conflict between the classes.\textsuperscript{22} The goal of both principalities and republics in Machiavelli’s writings was to prevent the spread of corruption in order to maintain the state.

Turning to the development of factions in society, Machiavelli viewed this as both a cause and a result of corruption. Machiavelli described how the development of the faction of Marius led to corruption that countered attempts to reestablish a republic in chapter seventeen of \textit{The Discourses}.\textsuperscript{23} Bonadeo argued that factions exploited their power to ensure their own continuation in holding power, which led to a weakening in government.\textsuperscript{24} This weakened government proved unable to return to a system promoting the common good. Anthony J. Parel attributed the rise of factions to conflict between the groups, or humors, occurring when groups pursue their own goals at the cost of the other groups in society.\textsuperscript{25} Although Machiavelli supported conflict in a republic, such as Rome, that led to compromise for the greater good in \textit{The Discourses}, in \textit{The Prince} he argued that it was impossible for a leader to please both groups causing a need to take sides.\textsuperscript{26} In neither case did Machiavelli encourage the rise of factions, as these were detrimental to government.

The accumulation of excessive power in the hands of the few had a similar relationship to corruption and factionalism. Machiavelli opposed this accumulation when it led to either of these results, but accepted it if the ends it was used for were good. This can be seen in his description of Romulus in \textit{The Discourses}. In chapter nine, although Romulus had killed his brother and friend, the fact that he established a senate and relinquished most of his power for the common good made him a good leader.\textsuperscript{27} Julius Caesar provided an opposite example for

\textsuperscript{23} The Portable Machiavelli, Bondanella and Musa, 222-23.
\textsuperscript{24} Bonadeo, Corruption, Conflict and Power, 50.
\textsuperscript{26} The Portable Machiavelli, Bondanella and Musa, 183-84, and Machiavelli, The Prince, 64-65.
\textsuperscript{27} The Portable Machiavelli, Bondanella and Musa, 201.
Machiavelli, having gained power through corrupt means and the power to further his own goals. This power could lead to either corruption or good government depending on the use it was put to. Machiavelli supported short-term use of power to enable the reform of bad government. The accumulation of power could be acceptable in establishing and reinforcing the common good, but attempts to use it in any other way lead to corruption and bad government.

Overall, Machiavelli's views presented in The Prince and The Discourses provided guidance in achieving his ultimate goal of a good government. This good government was not the tyrannical one often attributed to Machiavelli, but one where individuals were free from fear of oppression. Although the principality and the republic used both similar and different means to achieve their goals, they shared common threats in the form of corruption, factionalism and misuse of power. He offered solutions as well as examples of these problems. In his books, Machiavelli used historical and contemporary examples to involve the reader more intimately in the hopes of inciting action. If we accept Machiavelli's intention to bring about good governments in Italy, then we need to disassociate him from the tyranny he is accused of supporting.

This is more summary than conclusion; it needs some of your own evaluation and judgment. It might also be strengthened by addressing what you think your examination means for The Discourses. But The Prince is so

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28 The Portable Machiavelli, Bondanella and Musa, 204.
Annotated Bibliography


Machiavelli, Niccolo. The Portable Machiavelli. Translated by Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa. New York: Penguin Books, 1979. This book collects various works of Machiavelli, abridging those parts that the editors believed were too long. It also provides a critical analysis of the collection as a whole.

Machiavelli. The Prince. Translated by Paul Sonnino. Atlantic highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press international, 1996. An alternate translation of Machiavelli’s work, this book allows for comparison of ideas and their interpretation. The author also provides an introduction describing Machiavelli’s ideas as Late Middle Ages as opposed to Renaissance.

Mansfield, Harvey C. Machiavelli’s New Modes and Orders. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979. This book analyzes the different sections of The Discourses, dividing them into subject areas. It also provides the questionable instruction that Machiavelli’s books need to be read and interpreted separately in order to understand them.

Parel, Anthony J. The Machiavellian Cosmos. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. This book looks at the conflicts existing in all governments proposed by Machiavelli. It analyzes the differences between these conflicts in the different works.


As for how you use them?
life. It raises questions of his intent in his writings by taking a relatively humorous approach in its explanations.