

POL200 (Political Theory: Visions of the Just/Good Society)

Political Good in the Worlds of Aristotle and Machiavelli: A Comparative Essay

By Filip Zaleski; 1008241500

2023.03.18

Word Count: 2542

Ins.: Matthew Walton

T.A.: William Gregson

Should political leaders be good? If so, what makes a leader “good”? Discuss by comparing the perspectives of either Aristotle or Christine with either Machiavelli or Hobbes.

Politics is governance, and governance has decided the fate of human civilizations for eons. The qualities of individuals responsible for governance, political leaders, have been debated since the days of the first recorded scripts. The question of whether leaders should be good, and what that means, is an extensive one and is at the heart of this paper; it compares the stances of two prominent philosophers – Aristotle (d. 322 BCE) and Machiavelli (d. 1527 CE). I submit that Aristotle is idealistic about the good to the people while Machiavelli is advisory about the good to the ruler. I operationalize this claim by demonstrating that Aristotle ties the goodness of one’s rule with an adherence to the correct constitutional function of that type of rule – and since all constitutions seek equity, good rule champions what is equitable in relation to the benefit of the city-state, namely the common benefit of the citizens.¹ Machiavelli’s perception of good, however, is more about the effectiveness of leadership from the perspective of office; one’s *virtù* does not enable them to benefit the people, but to maintain power.

The first section of the essay, *On Who the Ruler and the Ruled Are*, explains and interprets some critical foundational theory about what sorts the rulers from the ruled, what attitudes each thinker has toward them, and what it means to rule. The second section, *On the Goodness of the Ruler*, specifies what it means to both thinkers for a ruler to be good and offers nuances from both perspectives. The essay then comes to a close with an evaluative conclusion.

On Who the Ruler and the Ruled Are

Before scrutinizing the individual, it is imperative to outline how Aristotle and Machiavelli envision the political community. Machiavelli talks about the behaviour of the ruled exclusively as responses to rulers and to phenomena affecting the entire state such as war or oppression.² Aristotle, however, accepts that circles of power and rule can be reduced all the way from the nation, to the city, to the household, to the

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998), 1283b40.

² Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. & trans. David Wootton (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), Ch. III, 9.

individual – all of these exist because humans are not only interdependent,³ but are also “political” animals that are able to organize.⁴ Within every outlined level of society, therefore, there exists a distinct type of rule: an individual rules himself, a master rules a few people, a household manager rules a group, and a statesman or a king rules the entire political community.⁵ An individual (an animal⁶) has two basic constituents, the soul and the body, that exist in a variable power hierarchy. It is in an animal that we first witness the rule of a master, their soul ruling over their body (an ‘unwilling subject’) and the rule of a statesman: their understanding ruling over their virtuous desires (a ‘willing subject’).⁷ Just like individuals exhibit intrinsic power hierarchies within them, so do the remaining levels of society (e.g. the child or the woman are the ruled in the household, the citizen is ruled in the city-state).

Through scrutinizing human nature, both Aristotle and Machiavelli converge on their own iterations of some natural law. Aristotle says that through interpersonal differences akin to the body versus the soul, “some are suited to rule and others to being ruled”⁸ – those whose greatest offering is physical labour are “natural slaves.”⁹ They ought to be subject to this rule, for they depend on the master (both in provision and in reason), and for they ought to fulfil their communal obligation just like everyone else. Nature distributes obligation not only through sorting by cognition, but also by body: slaves are strong and able-bodied while rulers are physically useless but “upright in posture” and with qualities needed ‘for war and for peace.’¹⁰ Machiavelli makes a similar natural distinction but across two dimensions: ambition and awareness; “there are three types of brains: one understands matters for itself, one follows the explanations of others, and one neither understands nor follows.”¹¹ Understanding for Machiavelli is a literal awareness of one’s circumstance and of nearby events while for Aristotle it is a crucial acceptance of one’s personal capacities

³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252a25.

⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a1-5.

⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252a1-15.

⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254a30-35.

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b1-10.

⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254a20.

⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b19.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b30.

¹¹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 22, 71.

and duties, as well as a control over one's impulses.¹² Though these definitions slightly differ, Aristotle and Machiavelli agree that rulers must have a natural capacity to understand their role and its demands in the political community for it to even exist. While people that 'neither understand nor follow' are deemed "useless"¹³ by Machiavelli, Aristotle's society has a function for all levels of people from statesmen to slaves. Individuals do not merely respond to power from above, as in Machiavelli's world, but are motivated by their own obligations in the political community.

Machiavelli's nature of society rests on the assumption that people are naturally ungrateful, fickle, deceptive, and prone to conflict¹⁴ – without a strong leader to enforce order, society devolves into chaos. Where Aristotle believes that good citizens "understand" their role in society and thus propagate a natural hierarchical harmony in society, Machiavelli takes the opposite stance. For him, the two classes found in all cities, the populace and the elite, are at constant odds due to the nature of man to either oppress or not want to be ordered about.¹⁵ This grand game of ability and strategy leads to an inescapable conflict which decides on the eventual political structure¹⁶ – it is either faction that, if successful in conflict, will decide on what constitution the state adopts. In contrast, Aristotle submits that society is driven by an individual desire for 'good citizenship' derived from the constitution because while the safety of the community is every citizens' goal, "the community is the constitution."¹⁷ Aristotle sees a world where it is possible, and indeed ideal, for a man to have within him virtues for both ruling and being ruled¹⁸ while Machiavelli sees a bipolar *rule or be ruled* ultimatum.

Evidence from *Politics* and *The Prince* speaks to virtue as a distinguishing factor between the ruler and the ruled. For Aristotle, not only should a ruler originate from the politically competent and active (the

¹² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b5. 'Understanding rules desire' and one's 'affections'.

¹³ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 22, 71.

¹⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 17, 52.

¹⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 8, 31.

¹⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 8, 31. The conflict spurs "three possible consequences: rule by one man, liberty, or anarchy."

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1275b28.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277b19.

citizenry), but they should possess the most virtue of all. This is because in their virtue, they will be able to administer justice the most effectively – regardless if justice is seen in the city-state as an egalitarian benevolence or a “monstrous” capacity to “subdue” one by force.¹⁹ Machiavelli, on the other hand, recognizes that power reaches rulers through various voluntary or involuntary streams like competition or succession, but where an opportunity for power exists, he submits that those that demonstrate the most *virtù* (and coincidentally aren’t at odds with fortune) come to rule. Where Aristotle is idealistic, Machiavelli is advisory – he doesn’t support virtue as a prerequisite to justice²⁰ but as an essential tool that one must demonstrate to fulfil their personal (as opposed to communal) goal. Notwithstanding this difference in perspectives, Aristotle does agree that the most virtuous ought to be in power because under the best constitution, the polity, the only correct response to those most virtuous is to elect them to power.²¹ Aristotle does recognize and understand, however, that in city-states with alternate constitutions, like ones emphasizing equality, there is an understandable argument in favour of ostracizing those of ‘godly’²² virtue for the purpose of political consistency.²³

Having outlined virtue from both perspectives, the two following paragraphs examine it more closely as an important prelude to the discussion of political good. “People should be either caressed or crushed”²⁴ is a particularly memorable if not illustrative phrase from *The Prince*. *Politics*, however, demonstrates that Aristotle does not seem to believe in coercion. He stretches virtue as something capable even from the slave – and, in fact, a virtuous slave is part of a properly-functioning city-state; for “if the subject is not going to be [virtuous], how will he be ruled well? (...) if he is intemperate and cowardly, he will not perform any of

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1255a15.

²⁰ Machiavelli indeed does not condone running society on justice. The ruler should take any means necessary to maintain his power and the stability of the state, rather than being constrained by traditional moral and ethical notions of what is just or unjust.

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1284b34. In a polity, it is awkward to both expel those most virtuous, and to have the populace rule over them. Thus one should “obey such a person gladly.”

²² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1284a10.

²³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1284b8. For “no painter would allow an animal to have a disproportionately large foot, not even if it were an outstandingly beautiful one.”

²⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 3, 9.

his duties.”²⁵ Aristotle contends that the ruler and the ruled must share in virtue, granting that “there are differences in their virtue,”²⁶ coming from their differing functions in the city-state. He accepts, however, that virtue, when “equipped with resources,” is “particularly adept in the use of force and anything that conquers does so because it is outstanding in some good quality.”²⁷ For Machiavelli, *virtú* does not encompass proper citizen behaviour but particularly excellent action by the Prince. This is clear from the way he describes events; The Romans exemplify *virtú* by crushing Phillip and Antiochus in Greece,²⁸ but when the citizens of a subordinate population find strength to rebel,²⁹ this isn’t *virtú* – just natural conflict with the ruler.

Neither Aristotle nor Machiavelli see virtue as a fixed characteristic. Virtue in its truest sense, for Aristotle, appeases the part of the soul that rules and that is ruled³⁰ – it is not a singular quality or correct action as it is for Machiavelli; something like an action demonstrating splendid application of foresight. Aristotelian virtue is thus still possible even for those missing the deliberative part of the soul; a child’s virtue relates to their father, a slave’s virtue relates to their performance of tasks.³¹ Aristotle makes a crucial division between virtue as it relates to being part of a political community, and to being a good man – these do not have universal forms because people not only differ in the constitution they live under, but they are also personally dissimilar and thus have differing personal virtues.³² There not being a single, all-encompassing virtue is similar to Machiavelli who sees *virtú* as a range of ideal responses (i.e. ones showing foresight, intelligence, strategy, restraint, etc) to the particular predicament faced by the ruler.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1259b40.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1260a1.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1255a15.

²⁸ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 3, 11.

²⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 5, 17.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1260a4.

³¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1260a28-37.

³² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1276b27-30.

On the Goodness of the Ruler

Aristotle makes the following logical argument. An excellent and desirable ruler is good (and additionally possesses practical wisdom).³³ Since a ruler cannot be a citizen through mutual exclusivity, their goodness needs to be personal – it ‘must be the same as that of a good man.’³⁴ Given that personal good is tied to “understanding” one’s role in society, as mentioned, a good man that is a ruler will understand his duty to rule. But how should he rule? Aristotle closely ties the good of one’s own rule with the adherence to the proper function of that type of rule. A good master, for instance, rules for the sake of his own benefit but coincidentally produces positive benefits for the slave for he is dependent on him.³⁵ A father, a household manager, is a part of a whole – the household – and therefore “shares coincidentally in the benefit.”³⁶ In fact all types of rule invoke benefits to all parties involved for Aristotle – he is not troubled with the inherent correctness of a type of constitution seeing it produces common benefit.³⁷ It is when “deviant” constitutions, those that aim at private benefit instead of common benefit like tyranny, oligarchy, or democracy, that rule is bad³⁸. Such deviant constitutions are characterized by the ruler’s inability to adhere to the true function of their rule and ruling in a way incompatible with the political community. For instance, a tyrant, Aristotle says, is an absolute ruler that rules the political community like a master and thereby enslaves the populace.³⁹

In terms of the administration of good, the two thinkers vastly differ. Where a good citizen obeys and fulfils their proper role and duties as a ruled individual, the ruler does so appropriately with the model of their authority under the constitution and the underlying purpose they thereby adopt. A good leader thus:

³³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277a14-17.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1277a21.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1278b25.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279a6.

³⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279a29. Any constitution that produces common benefit is one that “must be correct.”

³⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279b4-8. “Tyranny is rule by one person for the benefit of the monarch, oligarchy is for the benefit of the rich, and democracy is for the benefit of the poor.”

³⁹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1279b16-18.

- a) shows political virtue because it allows him to manage well⁴⁰ and enact policies that ensure common good, and
- b) defends justice because “justice is common benefit” and a city-state cannot exist without it. It is the groundwork which enables all other virtues.⁴¹

Goodness is not invariable to Aristotle, though, and a leader can turn bad at any time if the personal equilibrium within them is broken by appetite.⁴² When those ruling the polity began to prioritize wealth as opposed to virtue and justice, they ‘became less good’ and it was this which gave birth to oligarchies.⁴³ By contrast, Machiavelli’s function of rule is not related to being “good” as a leader, but to restoring order to a previously disjointed society.⁴⁴ In fact Machiavelli believes that a ruler should conserve the delivery of good and do so progressively so that the populace fully appreciate it and so that under no circumstance is there an eventual change in policies.⁴⁵ This is a guidance for rule that makes no recognition of the positive externalities of “good” rule other than popularity with the leader – Machiavelli is not concerned with fostering a flourishing and comfortable society but a consistent and long-lasting rule. A good Prince possesses enough *virtú* as to eliminate his competition and entrench his power. Only once the Prince’s position is secure, will the populace reliably reap benefits and enjoy stability. Then, the leader can disperse good and ‘embark on great undertakings, do remarkable things, and amuse the populace’⁴⁶ – but even these efforts are for the purpose of legacy and ease of governance instead of public good. One exception to this is Machiavelli’s encouragement of and reward for good work or work that demonstrates *virtú*. Those that benefit the city or the government should be rewarded.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1283a21.

⁴¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1282b17.

⁴² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1287a30. For “passion perverts rulers even when they are the best men.”

⁴³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1286b10-15.

⁴⁴ Matthew Walton, “Week 3: Machiavelli I (*Political Theory from Empirics*),” Lecture. University of Toronto: POL200, January 26, 2023.

⁴⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 8, 31.

⁴⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 21, 70. This in a way that does not allow for authority or dignity to ‘slip under any circumstance.’

⁴⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 21, 70.

Both thinkers have a model for “wrong” rule. Aristotle says that though one can hold office, he can hold it wrongly if they are elected by a constitution that is imposed by force and not for the common benefit. For Machiavelli, however, the rightness or wrongness of rule is whether the Prince does right by himself; whether the Prince strategizes and moves effectively as to prevent opposition and maintain a comfortable grip on power, not whether the people are done justice. Misrule for Aristotle harms both the master and the slave; they are tied by mutual benefit.⁴⁸ Machiavelli recognizes that when times are tough, and when the ruler dissatisfies the populace, his grip on power is fractured and vulnerable. A wise ruler will therefore ensure that ‘no matter the circumstances, his subjects have an interest in preserving both him and his authority.’⁴⁹

Conclusion

Interacting the Aristotelian and Machiavellian perspectives of political good with each other produces valuable insights into the nature and the correct form of governance. While Aristotle viewed good leadership as a moral and ethical imperative, Machiavelli prioritized the practical considerations of political power, order, and stability. Though the thinkers disagree on political good, they both derive their perspectives from a personally-established logic about the nature of humans and political communities. They also both recognize the importance of satisfying the governed (though with different motivations), and are weary of abuse and corruption in political leadership.

Politics and *The Prince* support the view that Aristotle is idealistic about the good to the people where Machiavelli is advisory about the good to the ruler. Aristotle’s focus on common good and the principles of justice and virtue reflect his belief that political leaders have an obligation to serve their community on all levels. In contrast, Machiavelli is able to sacrifice moral and ethical considerations when the maintenance of power and stability is at stake.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1255b10-15.

⁴⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Ch. 9, 34.

Ultimately, comparing the two perspectives highlights the prominent tension between idealism and pragmatism in political leadership, raising an important discussion about the qualities and values that make a leader “good”.

Bibliography

Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998.

Machiavelli, Niccolò. *The Prince*. Edited and Translated by David Wootton. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994.

Walton, Matthew. *Week 3: Machiavelli I (Political Theory from Empirics)*. Lecture. University of Toronto: POL200, Isabel Bader Theatre, January 26, 2023.