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Against "Learning Not to Be Good": The Case for Moral Politics

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Abstract. Machiavelli says in The Prince that rulers must "learn not to be good". It means that good government and moral behavior cannot always go together. This essay disagrees with that idea. It argues that Machiavelli treats morality as a tool to be used or discarded when needed. But this is not just practical thinking. It is a wrong understanding of how political power works. This essay uses text analysis and case studies. It also looks at ideas from Locke, Rawls and Aristotle, comparing them with views from Weber and Walzer on the "dirty hands" problem. There are three main points. First, morality is necessary for political legitimacy. For example, the cases of Syria and Denmark show that when morality breaks down, governance becomes unstable. Second, when rulers treat morality as a tool, they damage politics. They weaken social norms, reduce trust in institutions and create ongoing problems. Third, when this way of thinking is used in international politics, it harms cooperation between countries. In the end, the essay argues that good leadership does not mean ignoring morality. Instead, it means using moral judgment carefully and in a controlled way.

Keywords: Machiavelli, morality, political legitimacy, Dirty hands problem

1. Introduction

Machiavelli observed in Chapter XV of *The Prince*: "Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity" [1]. This assertion overturned centuries of political thought and has continued to provoke subsequent study and critique up to the present day.

Machiavelli's qualification that immoral conduct should only be deployed "according to necessity" suggests that he was not entirely indifferent to moral considerations. In this sense, his argument is not one of outright amoralism but rather closer to a call for political prudence—namely, knowing when to set aside one's goodness. However, when he regards moral virtue as an acquirable tool to be strategically deployed or withheld, this indicates that he no longer views morality as the foundation of legitimate rule, but merely one of the sovereign's many instruments. This is exactly the central issue discussed in this essay.

The essay challenges Machiavelli's perspective that morality is of negligible importance. His separation of politics from morality ignores the moral foundations of legitimacy on which political

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power rests, and by treating morality as a tool, he undermines the very foundations of international cooperation and political stability.

This paper will analyze this issue from three angles. Firstly, it analyzes that morality is a necessary condition for political legitimacy and stability. Second, it examines Machiavelli's instrumentalization of morality in political education. Finally, the key differences between political realism and moral instrumentalization will be clarified.

2. Literature review

Scholars have approached the relationship between politics and morality from two broad perspectives. The first strand, represented by Machiavelli and later developed by Max Weber and Michael Walzer, holds that political life is incompatible with full moral goodness. Four centuries later, Weber similarly acknowledges in *Politics as a Vocation*: "Whoever wants to engage in politics at all, and especially in politics as a vocation, has to realize these ethical paradoxes. He must know that he is responsible for what may become of himself under the impact of these paradoxes. I repeat, he lets himself in for the diabolic forces lurking in all violence" [2]. For Weber, politicians sometimes have to do things that are morally questionable, and this is inevitable. Moreover, Walzer admits in *The Problem of Dirty Hands* that good men entering political life are systematically required to do morally troubling things. He explains a conventional opinion that the dilemma of dirty hands is a central feature of political life, that it arises not merely as an occasional crisis in the career of this or that unlucky politician but systematically and frequently [3]. Thus we can see that Machiavelli is not the first person to think that one might have to learn how not to be good.

A second strand, exemplified by Locke, Rawls and the Aristotelian tradition, insists that morality is essential to stability. Locke argues in *Second Treatise of Government* that rulers derive their authority from the consent of the governed, and that this consent can be withdrawn when rulers fail to honour their obligations [4]. Rawls's idea of public reason holds that the exercise of political power is legitimate only when it can be justified on terms acceptable to all citizens as both reasonable and rational [5]. Aristotle, whose influence underlies both strands, offers the deepest challenge—politics is an extension of ethics and its highest end is the achievement of the good life [6].

Drawing on Locke's social contract, Rawls's notion of public reason and Aristotle's conception of politics as an extension of ethics, this essay argues that Machiavelli's treatment of morality as an instrument challenges the foundations of political legitimacy, undermines the educative function of politics and destabilizes the basis for international cooperation.

3. Main argument

3.1. Morality is a prerequisite for political legitimacy and stability

Political power relies on legitimacy, and morality is among the essential prerequisites for that legitimacy. If rulers deviate from moral norms, they undermine the very foundations of their governing authority.

Drawing on Locke's social contract theory, rulers derive their authority from the consent of the governed, and that consent can be withdrawn when rulers fail to honour their obligations [4]. Rawls's notion of public reason further holds that political power is only legitimate when it can be justified by reasons acceptable to all citizens [5]. The case of Syria shows these clearly. In 2011, many people staged peaceful protests demanding political change and fairness. The Assad

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government used violence against these civilians. This broke the moral duties of leaders and removed any right the government had to rule. The nation descended into a protracted civil war as people lost faith in the government and withdrew their support. Syria continues to face numerous challenges. This demonstrates how unethical behavior by leaders undermines their authority to rule and makes it difficult for the nation to remain stable. Strong and long-lasting governance requires morality.

Denmark exhibits the opposite. The Danish government treats its citizens fairly and in accordance with moral principles. Leaders are forthright and truthful. They provide excellent public services. According to Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, Denmark scored 90 out of 100 in 2024 [7]. This is the world's highest score. This demonstrates that moral governance is a reality in Denmark rather than merely a concept. People trust the government because it behaves morally. They think the government serves their interests. People obey the law and support the government because of this trust. Denmark has maintained stability for a considerable amount of time. This demonstrates how political power is influenced by morality, which is among the most significant justifications for a government's ability to maintain its authority.

After demonstrating that morality is a prerequisite for political legitimacy and stability, the following section explores a deeper dimension of this issue, examining what happens when leaders ignore morality and what is lost when politics ceases to embody it.

3.2. Machiavelli undermines the educative function of politics

Aristotle argues that one of politics' essential functions is not merely to manage society but also to shape the character of its citizens [6]. According to this perspective, politics has an essential educational function. Machiavelli effectively deprives politics of this role by viewing morality as merely instrumental.

In *Politics*, Aristotle writes that the legislator's primary responsibility is to instill virtue in the populace. The good life, not merely survival, is the aim of politics. The republican tradition, from Cicero to Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, also stresses civic virtue as the foundation of stable republics. Even Machiavelli himself admits that civic virtue matters for republics in *Discourses on Livy*, which shows a tension in his ideas [8]. In the modern world, Jacinda Ardern's response to the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings shows that moral leadership can strengthen political power. Her moral credibility gave her political support, which helped pass gun reform laws faster than would have happened otherwise.

This essay argues that there are three reasons why Machiavelli downplays the normative role of morality. First, there is the modelling effect. When citizens see leaders do well even though they ignore moral rules, people will learn that morality is not necessary. They will slowly damage the shared values of citizens. Second, citizens will lose trust in their leaders, failing to believe that the leaders will act morally. As a result, they become less willing to participate in public and political life. Finally is the problem of corruption. A system that rewards clever tricks over honest behaviour will push out people who act morally. Those who stay are the ones willing to use dishonest means. These individuals establish the rules over time. Then, more dishonesty is rewarded by the rules. This starts a vicious cycle that is difficult to break.

So, this essay has shown that when Machiavelli treats morality just as a tool, it undermines the educative function of politics by undermining shared values, weakening public trust and corrupting political institutions. The next section turns to the international dimension of this problem. If morality is treated as a mere tool within a state, the same logic applies to relations between states, and there will be far more serious consequences for international cooperation and stability.

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3.3. The instrumentalization of morality destabilizes the basis for international cooperation

If morality is nothing more than a tool people pick up when it is convenient, there is no stable basis for international trust, treaty-keeping or cooperation. This directly contradicts the logic of modern globalization and international institutions.

The prisoner's dilemma helps explain this problem. If all countries treat moral rules as tools, which means following them when useful and breaking them when not useful, the result will be terrible—no one follows the rules at all. All parties ends up worse off. Things like modern international trade and climate agreements only work because countries believe moral commitments matter. If morality is just a tool, these systems will break down quickly. Walzer agrees that political leaders sometimes have to do things that are morally wrong in *The Problem of Dirty Hands*. But he says that leaders should still feel guilty when they do so [3]. Guilt matters. It means moral rules still exist. They have not disappeared, they are merely set aside. The Prince in Machiavelli's discussion is different. He does not need to feel guilty. He only cares about what gets results.

This comparison between Walzer and Machiavelli shows something important. Walzer acknowledges that politics is hard and that leaders sometimes have to make difficult moral choices. But he does not say that morality stops mattering. The guilt he describes is proof of this. Moral rules are still there, still have power. Leaders feel them even when they break them. Machiavelli's Prince, on the other hand, sees morality as optional—something to use or ditch "according to necessity" [1]. He never talks about guilt, never suggests the prince carries any kind of moral weight. This is exactly the difference between them. The former is political realism. The latter, however, completely excludes morality from politics. And when you strip morality from politics, you don't just lose rules but trust. International systems built on trust cannot survive if moral rules disappear.

4. Conclusion

This essay has put forward three core arguments in response to Machiavelli. First, morality is necessary for political legitimacy and stability. When leaders ignore moral rules, people lose trust in them. When people lose trust, governments cannot stay in power for long. The cases of Syria and Denmark show this clearly. Second, politics has an educative function, shaping the values and character of citizens. If morality is treated merely as a tool, such trust will erode and eventually vanish. Citizens will learn that morality does not matter. So trust falls, and what follows is institutional corruption. Third, treating morality as a tool destroys the basis for international cooperation. Trade, treaties and climate agreements only work because countries trust each other. If morality is just a tool, that trust will disappear.

Machiavelli was right about one thing—politics is hard. Moral rules are sometimes not enough. Good intentions do not always yield good outcomes. But being right about this does not mean morality does not matter in politics. A good leader will not follow moral rules blindly. Instead, a good leader will use moral judgment wisely. As Aristotle calls it, phronesis.

The number of documents used in this paper is limited, and future research can be further discussed with more documents.

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