

Virtue

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In order to talk about the differences between the idea of virtue presented by Plato and Machiavelli we must first look at their different worlds. Nearly 1,700 years separated Plato's time from Machiavelli's. It is safe to say that Plato's world was considerably different than that of Machiavelli's; not just in time, but in geography and history. Machiavelli was influenced by the early philosophers, having the opportunity to study the teachings of Plato and use or not use them as part of his own philosophy. His study of the Bible was also influential in his arguments; so his ideas, it could be said, sprang from those of the Greeks. Plato, on the other hand certainly had Socrates and other esteemed philosophers to follow, yet he did not have the scope of history or litany of rulers and despots that Machiavelli had to fortify his ideas.

During Plato's era the citizens served the state and Plato clearly believed in just rulers ruled by moral virtue. While during Machiavelli's time, as it is today, the state serves the citizens. Because of this he believed in "Virtu" or whatever was good for the state was virtuous and that the only purpose of the leader was to to make war to protect the citizens from attack. In Plato's time there was no distinction between a private or public life so there was no need to protect privacy and virtue was evident for all to see. For Machiavelli the ruler is justified in doing whatever is necessary to protect and maintain the country and is virtuous in doing so. Plato admonishes such a type of ruler. "So if anyone says it is just to give everyone what is due to him, and if he means by this that what is due from the just man is harm to his enemies, and help to his friends, then whoever said this was not a wise man. What he said was wrong, since

we have clearly seen that it is not just to treat anyone badly under any circumstances.” (pg. 12, 335e) Virtue in this sense is a skill and requires knowledge of what is appropriate. Therefore, an unjust man is not skillful and such a skill-less tyrant is a bad ruler.

Machiavelli’s idea of virtu’ is not derived from moral character, but what is best for the utilitarian needs of the country. For Plato a just ruler behaves consistently, for Machiavelli a ruler shifts their standards based on circumstances and does what seems to be cruel at first but ends up for the benefit of all. In this way he promoted violence if “the ends justify the means.” Machiavelli admired rulers who were able to impose and maintain order, face unforeseen events and reverse misfortunes. In *The Prince* he compares fortune to....”one of those dangerous rivers that, when they become enraged, flood the plains, destroy trees and buildings, move earth from one place and deposit it in another. Everyone flees before it, everyone gives way But this does not mean that, when the river is not in flood, men are unable to take precautions so that when it rises next time, it will either not overflow its banks, or if it does, its force will not be so uncontrollable or damaging.” (Pg. 85) Machiavelli goes on to counter Plato’s idea of consistency in a virtuous ruler. “I would observe that one sees a ruler flourishing today and ruined tomorrow without his having changed at all in character or qualities.” And, more famously, “.... because fortune is a woman, and if you want to control her, it is necessary to treat her roughly. And it is clear that she is more inclined to yield to men who are impetuous than to those who are calculating.” (pg. 87) (It may be that Machiavelli was the originator of modern day misogyny.)

Machiavelli was a steadfast realist, a product of times when the reality of political and religious upheaval was prevalent. Actions appeared to be dictated by conditions and there was

no moral certitude. "circumstances do not permit living a completely virtuous life." (The Prince, pg. 55) Yet despite that he could not go completely to the dark side, perhaps because of Plato's influence? "Pope Leo then, has found the Papacy very powerful; and it is to be hoped that, just as his predecessors made it great by use of force, he will make it very great and respected through his natural goodness and countless other virtues." (Pg. 42) For Machiavelli virtue, or lack thereof, was dictated by necessity. He did not support cruelty for cruelty's sake but for the sake of the country and its people's salvation. "Yet it 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 by acting in such ways, but not glory." (Pg 31)

Plato was an idealist, people are inspired by idealists because it gives them the hope of rising above the current conditions and situations. This may have been the very reason Machiavelli studied him and indeed there are Platonic ideals that he used and built upon such as the notion that rulers are entitled to tell lies if they do it for the benefit of the City or state, or in response to actions of enemies or citizens. (389b-c) For Plato, a ruler should not seek war, because war is unjust it's evil. For him an ideal ruler would be just. Machiavelli believed that rulers should be truthful, keep promises, and do nothing to harm the state as well as exhibit traditional virtues, but he should also not shrink from wrong-doing in order to preserve the state. Still Plato is not so concerned about glory of the state as much as the happiness of the individual; and for that virtue is important. If a leader is successful, then it is evident that they had ideals and visions from the beginning. It might be said that for Plato a happy ruler and citizenry is the most desirable. Machiavelli was troubled by this and Plato's notion that leaders would not own private property and rule without the desire of private gain. "... how men live is

so different from how they should live that a ruler who does not do what is generally done, but persists in doing what ought to be done, will undermine his power rather than maintain it.”

(The Prince, Pg 54)

The fact that Machiavelli lived in a time much closer to that in which we live today and that our current political system has been generally modelled after his ideals does not preclude that Plato has less meaning. In fact, his philosophy may become more meaningful as the Machiavellian system runs its course. Machiavelli's pragmatism is giving way to the notion that we may all be idealists and in more control of our happiness and state of being than previously thought. Plato speaks of something that Machiavelli never mentions, the soul. He insists that individuals and rulers alike need to know the the good and the bad, beauty, poverty, riches, private life and public office, strength and weakness. All these matters are connected to the soul. In that he/she.... “will know how to chose the middle way in all matters, avoiding two extremes both in his life, as far as he can, and in the whole of the life hereafter. This is the way to the greatest happiness for man.” (619a) For Machiavelli virtues are strength and gain for Plato it's learning, spirit and desires. Strength and gain in Plato's world are only necessary to achieve the three virtues, while for Machiavelli they are ends unto themselves.

What would you consider more appealing? For me, as an idealist the choice is clear. While you cannot say that Machiavelli does not hold virtues as important, he does not ennoble them as Plato does. A moralistic society may be messier at times than a totally pragmatic one, yet in the long run the happiness of it's citizens cannot be taken lightly. A leader who is required to make decisions opposite of his beliefs, who has to contradict his identity for the benefit of his country is just not facile enough to view both sides as parts of his soul.

“In acquiring self discipline and justice together with wisdom, it attains a more precious state – in exact proportion as the soul is more precious than the body –“ (591b)