

To What End: Machiavelli, Natural Law, and Politics

by Zachary D. Rogers

Abstract

In the following article, the author critically analyzes Niccolo Machiavelli's theories of utilitarianism as set forth in his work The Prince. This paper discusses the utilitarianism and political expediency this text recommends, and the superiority of Natural Law Theory for creating a framework for political action.

The Prince, written by Niccolo Machiavelli in 1513, is one of the most influential and famous books to come out of Renaissance Italy. Machiavelli's objective is to instruct rulers as to how they may attain and maintain power by following opportunistic, utilitarian principles. While these principles are decidedly effective, they are morally reprehensible because they ignore man's nature and *telos*, as well as the intrinsic evil of certain actions. Critical analysis of *The Prince* in the light of natural law will reveal the concomitant evil of Machiavelli's proposed utilitarianism. It will also demonstrate the superiority of natural law as a basis for political theory. In order to understand why Machiavelli urges such drastic disregard for natural law, it is necessary to know a little of the Italy in which he lived.

Written by a humanist, *The Prince* displays all the marks of the period: the quest for truth coupled with the practical ability to function in society, and the learning combined humane values with practical social skills crucial to social advancement.¹ The emphasis on classical history and literature can be seen throughout the work. Machiavelli plumbs for examples to prove his points. The Italy of Machiavelli's day had experienced a brilliant flowering of classical knowledge. Coupled with increased trade, competitiveness between cities and great families, and a zeal to distinguish oneself, these characteristics coalesced to create the unique period historians term Renaissance Italy.² Unfortunately, the constant fighting between Italian city states made life chaotic, violent, and often short—a situation exacerbated when foreign nations such as France and Spain repeatedly invaded, looting the wealth and glory of Italy. Machiavelli lived in an Italy divided and oppressed by foreigners. The only hope he saw for Italians was a determined and skillful ruler who would unite the country and free her from her enemies. He wrote not just a philosophical work, but a guidebook he hoped would be implemented.

The Prince's focus is on how a hereditary kingdom should be ruled.³ Machiavelli recognizes both good fortune and merit are necessary to become an excellent ruler. By merit he means not just being good or valuable, but earning the kingdom through cunning, skill, and effort. Any action is permissible, which is why he can state the maxim "men must either be conciliated or crushed."⁴ This guide does not simply examine and recommend ethical behavior to

¹ J. Myers, "Renaissance Italy and Machiavelli," Lecture in Italian Renaissance and Later Middle Ages, University of Colorado Colorado Springs, Fall 2014.

² Jerry Brotton, *The Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 55.

³ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Philip Smith. N.H. Thompson (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1992), 1.

⁴ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 19.

gain and maintain rule; it justifies all methods and means that will further the good of the ruler and hence the state. Examining Machiavelli's recommendations in *The Prince* will show the focus on utility in politics and the role of expediency in achieving it.

The most blatant example of utilitarian thinking gone awry is seen in Machiavelli's recommendation and justification of the use of cruelty. Cruelty may be good or bad depending on whether it is well employed or unwisely used. According to Machiavelli, cruelty is permissible if it is done "once for all under the necessity of self-preservation."⁵ This advice is found in the context of a passage discussing the barbaric deeds done by previous rulers in attempts to maintain their throne—men such as Agathocles, who rose through the ranks of government and set covetous eyes on the throne. Agathocles one day gathered together the senate and wealthiest citizens and slaughtered them. It is to Agathocles and other men of his ilk Machiavelli is thinking of when he recommends cruelty, for "cruelty well used is the means of salvation for the wicked."⁶

Machiavelli considers two pillars of society to be of immense utility to the state: good laws and good arms. Apart, they are of little use. Together, they are of immense strength, helping to sustain the orderly state by protecting it from outside threats, while maintaining justice and order within. Good government requires a powerful military. Without an efficient military to defend the state, it is nearly impossible to create good laws. Men cannot choose to govern well when they are fighting for their lives. Thus, Machiavelli deems war important and urges its study, stating, "War is the sole art looked for in one who rules, and is of such efficacy that it not merely maintains those who are born Princes, but often enables men to rise to that eminence from a private station."⁷ Machiavelli deems it vital the ruler prepare himself to be captain of his armies. Although the ruler is spurred to be an *effective* warrior, he is not exhorted to be a *just* one. Given the permissibility of cruelty and the emphasis on utility rather than justice, one may imagine what kind of general such a prince would be.

Finally, the prince should strive to have a good reputation. This is nice and proper for a ruler. However, he should be always ready "to use or not use his goodness as necessity requires."⁸ Duplicity may be necessary if a virtuous line of action might lead to his downfall and ruin. Conversely, deception, even vice is justified if it enables him to maintain his position. It is safer for a prince to be feared than loved. To be cruel and feared for the purpose of keeping the people united and obedient is far better than to be loved and deposed. Machiavelli maintains a prince may pretend to be good while doing evil. The prince may even be cruel if cruelty maintains him, protecting his power and his ability to coerce the nation to do his bidding.

According to Machiavelli, the prince is justified in committing heinous acts in the name of self-preservation because they are effective and they maintain his position. He equates maintaining the prince's position with maintaining the state. A powerful and effective ruler will be able to rule and lead the people effectively protecting the nation from envious foreigners while maintaining internal order. Good government is only possible if the state is not weak and divided through weak, inefficient rulers. One should pause to consider the circumstances that have shaped Machiavelli's beliefs and clouded his thinking. He has seen Italy ravaged by invading armies multiple times. Italy's demise has largely been the backwash of weak leadership and squabbling city-states. This is the reason Machiavelli states, "In the actions of all men, and

⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 23.

⁶ Leo Paul de Alvarez, *The Machiavellian Enterprise* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1999), 40.

⁷ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

most of all Princes, where there is no tribunal to which we can appeal, we look to results.”⁹ Note Machiavelli’s *the end justifies the means* mindset. Overcome by his desire for a strong, prosperous, and united Italy, Machiavelli condones utilitarianism in the prince and thus government—to the extreme of justifying unethical behavior—provided the prince can give the state good laws and good arms.

While one can sympathize with Machiavelli’s desire for the welfare of his nation, the end justifies the means rationalizations to which utilitarianism ultimately leads is unethical. It contravenes natural law. Without justifying Machiavelli’s thinking, one would do well to reflect on the historical circumstances that framed it. He lived in a time when Italians idolized their ancestors: the Romans with their mighty legions, regal senate, and flourishing trade. Such rich heritage roused yearning within Machiavelli and his fellow countrymen to see their own Italy—weak, divided, often oppressed by foreigners—rise out of the ashes to its former, prosperous glory. Desire eviscerated Machiavelli’s moral thinking, leading him to ignore the natural law which recognizes man’s nature and concomitant purpose, to ignore the reality certain acts are always impermissible because they do not help man achieve that purpose.

Machiavelli changes man’s nature and ignores his *telos*. Unconcerned with man’s purpose, Machiavelli dispenses with urging the ruler to be morally good, to pursue virtue and a virtuous course of actions, to strive to achieve his ultimate purpose. Machiavelli, instead urges the prince to look to *results* in all of his decision making. Never once, in this entire work does Machiavelli concern himself with what a ruler should do to become a good man; his emphasis is on becoming a powerful man.¹⁰ This can especially be seen in his insistence that good laws and good arms distinguish the state. He then proceeds to subsume law in his strident focus on war. There is an utter lack of concern with helping the citizen realize his nature, but rather with keeping the citizenry peaceable and content.¹¹ This is a drastic departure from medieval thought which saw the purpose of government to shape the moral character of citizens. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* affirmed the patently obvious effects of natural law, stating, “It is by law that man is directed how to perform his proper acts in view of his last end. . . . For the perfection of virtue it is necessary for man to conduct himself aright in both kinds of acts,” both interior and exterior.¹² Man is destined for an end, due to his nature. It is necessary for man to conduct himself appropriately to achieve it. Right conduct is partially predicated upon just laws. These just laws should be created by the ruler and enforced by his government; the civil government therefore plays a vital role in creating a virtuous citizenry. By determining man merely needs to be kept peaceable and content, Machiavelli has drastically lowered the standards of excellence the ruler must achieve for his people.

Additionally, Machiavelli contends, “The desire to acquire is natural and ordinary.”¹³ Because it is in man’s avaricious nature to want more, it is then virtuous for a prince to acquire and maintain a kingdom without regard to means. Greatness is measured by gain. The great man is he who can grasp the most without losing it. Machiavelli’s utilitarian view is solely concerned with and governed by practical results and not with ruler or his citizenry achieving their purpose (*telos*). This is a radical shift from natural law and its view of man’s sinful nature that held sway for centuries. Machiavelli radically redefines good and evil, moral and immoral behavior. To

⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 47.

¹⁰ Ibid., viii.

¹¹ Ibid., 25.

¹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I-II, Question 91, Article 4, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2091.htm>.

¹³ de Alvarez, *The Machiavellian Enterprise*, 17.

understand how drastic this Machiavellian moral shift is, it is necessary to understand natural law theory.

Natural law is laid down by God and “constitutes the principles of practical rationality.”¹⁴ It is by these principles man judges human behavior to be either reasonable or unreasonable. Since God created the cosmos, natural law finds its basis in eternal law, for God established the natural laws that govern the world. Because man is a rational being, the natural law is knowable by nature. Clifford Kossel, writing on Aquinas’ natural law theory, states, “If there is an eternal law existing in the reason of the ruler of the whole community of the universe, then it is participated in some by every creature, because God impresses on them the inclinations to their proper acts and ends.”¹⁵ Man must obey the natural law because it is natural; it governs man according to that nature towards his proper end. Natural law directs man to the good, rightly understood. For man to achieve happiness, he must obey the natural law. Therefore man is subject to the natural law, must use it to govern his own life and judge the actions of his fellow man. He must obey it to fulfill his nature.

The proposition that man was created for an end beyond him is rationally attested by mankind’s universal desire for perfection, a possibility only attainable by reaching the final end: “Therefore, just as of all men there is naturally one last end, so the will of an individual man must be fixed on one last end.”¹⁶ However, man as a fallen creature may confuse his last end with any number of false ends. As an agent of necessity, man acts for ends, but not all of these ends complete his nature. This does not remove the fact that man, created in the image of God and with a consequent purpose, has a fixed end.¹⁷ According to Aquinas, that “last end is the uncreated good, namely, God, Who alone by His infinite goodness can perfectly satisfy man’s will. But in the second way, man’s last end is something created, existing in him, and this is nothing else than the attainment or enjoyment of the last end.”¹⁸ Aquinas believed man’s last end is the same as his happiness. Thus, man’s happiness is found in his final purpose, i.e., to find his rest in God.

The natural law, its basis found in eternal law ordered by God and determined by rationalistic principles, establishes objective moral standards by which some acts are intrinsically wrong. Natural law condemns certain actions such as cruelty, crime, or murder, regardless of the reason for which they are done or the good they may achieve. Therefore, “One must identify the ways in which an act can be intrinsically flawed.”¹⁹ Not all acts are perfect. Imperfect acts must be avoided because natural law condemns them. These acts are wrong for two reasons: (1) the Prime Mover who established natural law condemns them, and (2) they are contrary to nature. According to natural law, the good is to be pursued and the evil abhorred.

The question arises, what is “the good?” If God, the Prime Mover, created the universe, then he also established the purpose for which each thing exists. Everything—man, animal, plant, matter—was made with a *telos*, an ultimate purpose. Man’s purpose is revealed in the longing of the human soul. Mankind, though imperfect, longs both for perfection and the happiness it accords. In order to achieve this goal, man must actualize his potential and live in

¹⁴ “The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics,” last modified September 27, 2011, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/natural-law-ethics>.

¹⁵ Clifford G. Kossel, “Natural Law and Human Law” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 172.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I-II, Question 1, Article 5, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2001.htm>.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I-II, Question 1, Article 7, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2001.htm>.

¹⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I-II, Question 3, Article 1, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2003.htm>.

¹⁹ “The Natural Law Tradition in Ethics.”

such a manner to achieve his purpose. To do so, he must obey the natural law, rationally known and absolutely binding. This natural law never contradicts the divine law revealed in Scripture because both are the creation of the Prime Mover.

Machiavelli has a quite different conception of *virtu* or virtue from the medievals. The medieval conception of *virtu* consisted of two components, greatness of mind and body as well as “acting in accordance with justice and the good.”²⁰ This is completely antithetical to Machiavelli’s conception of virtue as a force that can fight, subdue, and tame fortune in an effort to achieve and maintain power, thereby achieving stability for the kingdom. Such a concept of *virtu* challenges and changes the traditional framework, making possible his lesson of utility and expediency. It is this along with his new analysis of human nature that permits intrinsically wrong deeds to be perpetrated under the guise of being good.

The emphasis that natural law theory places on doing the good and living in accordance with practical rationality is in stark contrast to Machiavelli’s radical pragmatism that condones cruelty, duplicity, and even the avaricious grasping for power. The standards Machiavelli espouses results in and creates a system in which man may commit heinous deeds, so long as those actions produce effective results. Natural law, in contrast, declares some acts are intrinsically wrong, no matter their utility. Additionally, the idea that man has a *telos* requires that he act appropriately to achieve it, thus actualizing his potential. This wonderful system, intrinsic to the created order, does not limit man’s talent but rather creates a framework within which it should operate. These twin ideas—that some acts are innately wrong and that man has a *telos*—establish the parameters for the actions of the Prince and are far superior because they recognize and make use of man’s nature and the eternal law that governs the cosmos.

The natural law account of the world is more compelling than Machiavelli’s utilitarianism for three reasons. First, man has an innate longing for perfection that cannot be achieved without realizing his *telos*, his reason for being. Since the Prime Mover established that purpose, man must live so as to achieve it. Man’s *telos* determines what deeds he may or may not commit while living. Secondly, the natural law, rationally known and binding on all, dictates certain acts are intrinsically wrong, regardless of utility. This also limits which actions are moral. Thirdly (and related to man’s *telos*), man has a vibrant and talented nature that desires to perfect itself. The natural law insists man must strive to achieve his potential and provides the framework within which to do so. Machiavelli’s utilitarianism fails to recognize man’s longing for perfection or his *telos* and the need to act in a manner to achieve it. It refuses to recognize the intrinsic wrong of certain deeds. It denies that the ruler should strive to achieve his potential rather than solely focusing on war. Machiavelli’s system is misguided and lopsided, resulting in a state ruled by a despotic and cruel prince actuated by the desire to acquire more. Although, the ruler may acquire wealth and power, he will remain unfulfilled because he has ignored his own nature and its needs as well as the universal, natural law principles meant to govern his behavior.

Despite the cavernous faults and deficiencies of Machiavelli’s utilitarianism, it has been rigorously defended as a practical and valuable way for rulers to attain and maintain power. Seductively titillating, it promises much yet delivers little. Machiavellian philosophy has been the justification for tyranny throughout the world. Its failure to recognize moral absolutes have resulted in unspeakable barbarities perpetrated upon the weak by those in power. One has to look no further than Adolf Hitler to see the effects of Machiavelli’s thinking. Hitler’s

²⁰ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Leo Paul S. de Alvarez (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, Inc., 1989), xix.

implementation of Machiavelli's philosophies advocated in *The Prince* was at least temporarily effective. They kept Hitler in power. They were practical. They united the German people.

A master of cruelty, Hitler used fear to impose unity. Yet, the allied world rose against Hitler's atrocities, recognizing the tyranny of a despot, the genocide of a people, the infringement of freedom through force is universally, everlastingly evil. Machiavelli's philosophical utilitarianism must be stood up against if atrocities and evil despotic governments are not to prevail. The antidote to Hitler's (and Machiavelli's) ethical tragedy is natural law, a coherent system recognizes man's nature, creates a framework within which he can achieve his potential, and recognizes the intrinsic wrong of certain acts, putting a moral brake on the deeds men, rulers, or governments may commit.

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