Machiavelli vs. Machiavellian

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The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘Machiavellian’ as cunning, scheming and unscrupulous, and Machiavelli is described as a statesman who advocated resorting to morally questionable methods in the interest of the state. To what extent is this entry adequate? Is it, at least, defensible?

For one who has read The Prince and not The Discourses, it is quite easy to outright criticize the 16th century political theorist and statesmen from Florence, Niccolo Machiavelli, for his apparent amoral views on politics. It is ironic that this has been the case when critics attempt to evaluate Machiavelli, without considering his other major work; it is not surprising, thus, when the Oxford Dictionary defines ‘Machiavellian’ as cunning, scheming and unscrupulous, and Machiavelli is described as a statesman who advocated resorting to morally questionable methods in the interest of the state. At the very onset of the most controversial chapters in The Prince, Machiavelli realizes this - that he will be thought of as ‘presumptuous’ for his radical departure from conventional political ideology, but asserts that ‘it seemed more suitable to me to search after the effectual truth of the matter rather than its imagined one’ (126). Machiavelli is a pragmatist. To him, the real world is different from an imaginary, ideal realm, and so his discussion should evolve around dealing effectively with problems in this real world. Perhaps it is this pragmatism which has caused critics to condemn the man for his work. In truth, this view, as expressed in the Oxford Dictionary, is not an adequate entry; it is arguably however, a defensible one.

To understand why Machiavelli considers the usage of morally questionable means by princes and politicians, it is essential to look into the reasons and the circumstances that he explicitly discusses. For Machiavelli, the ultimate standard for a prince is to achieve glory, peace and prosperity for the state. While this is apparent in The Prince, it becomes most evident in The Discourses when he expresses his reverence for Agesilaus, Timoleon and Dion for attaining glory and censures Caesar (205). Showing such reverence for princes who have ensured the welfare and the protection of the state, Machiavelli manifests his view that the interests of the state must take precedence over any other concerns for any politician, including his own morality. Thus an action, if justified by necessity, must be undertaken by a prince in the interest of the state (128). Furthermore, Machiavelli states that the nature of men is problematic — they are ungrateful, deceiving and fickle; thus, to deal with men, a prince must resort to questionable means if necessary, such as instilling fear (131). Machiavelli, like a true Renaissance man, treats the politician like an artist, whose ultimate goal is a prosperous state. It is true that the means that Machiavelli suggests that a prince use may be morally wrong and on that count, the Oxford entry is defensible. However, it is clearly inadequate to brand him as unscrupulous, keeping in mind the ultimate goal that he is trying to strive towards.
Machiavelli carefully examines the circumstances in which he advocates the use of violence and wrongful means in different sections of The Prince. Perhaps the most significant example of this is that of Duke Valentino, when he attempts to secure Romagna. Having taken over the state, the Duke appointed Messer Remirro de Orco, a cruel man, to stabilize it; once Orco dealt with the problems of the powerless lords in Romagna through violence, the Duke stepped in and publicly executed the former (100). The Duke’s aim was to avoid hatred from breeding amongst the people in Romagna because of the excessive use of power by Orco and so he properly utilized cruelty in order to hold onto the province. Thus, it can be argued that Machiavelli, in praising for the Duke, was not necessarily supporting an unscrupulous act since the Duke’s intention was commendable - to setup a strong government for Romagna and make it peaceful. However, realizing the fact that Duke Valentino used an immoral mean and killed Orco after securing Romagna, the claim against Machiavelli remains defensible.

The same principle can be seen when Machiavelli praises the Duke for ‘putting to death all the relatives of those lords he dispossessed’ in order to protect the territories he conquered (100). Machiavelli supports the intention of Duke Valentino – to prevent the new Pope from utilizing the hostile feelings of the families against him – simply because it was necessary for the Duke to do so to be able to hold onto his conquests.

Machiavelli recognizes the fact that while everyone knows about the importance of virtues and values, it is impossible for a prince to be all good if he wants to hold on to his state. He states that ‘a man who wishes to make a vocation of being good at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good’ (127). Thus a prince must know how and when not to be good in the interest of the state. Machiavelli brings up the example of Hannibal, a general known for his cruelty, and asserts that for Hannibal to maintain such a large army, he needed to keep up his reputation as a ruthless commander (132). Ultimately, this reputation, according to Machiavelli, is what ensured Hannibal’s success. Romulus, the founder of Rome, who murdered his brother and Titus Tatius on his way to found the state (200), is similarly held in high regard by Machiavelli. Conversely, the failure of Scipio to employ cruelty and instead his compassion towards his troops ruined the Roman leader (133). Thus, Machiavelli proves that cruelty, being necessary to either maintain military control or establish a government as in the case of Romulus, should be used by a prince. Machiavelli himself states that while the actions of figures such as Hannibal and Romulus are questionable, these men do not deserve reproach as they were ‘violent in order to mend things’ (201). In the light of this claim by Machiavelli, it is again clear that the original entry is defensible, but also inadequate - keeping in view the goals that these men set out to achieve.

Machiavelli’s stance can be further examined when he explores the idea of the economy of violence and the necessity to wage wars. He advocates that a prince should ignore the ill reputation of utilizing violence in a situation where the execution of a few men would prevent disorder and save the lives of many more (130). The Florentine statesman explicates this idea when he differentiates between cruelties and labels some violent acts as ‘well-used cruelties’ because these are done out of necessity and for the protection of the state. Similarly, Machiavelli’s stance on warfare is seen when he pleads to Lorenzo Medici to revive Florence and quotes from Livy, stating ‘Only those wars that are necessary.
are just, and arms are sacred when there is no hope except through arms’ (163). On the other hand, Machiavelli brings forth the tale of Agathocles the Sicilian and Oliverotto of Fermo who used inhuman acts of cruelty (as well as the latter’s egregious ungratefulness) on their way to power and censures them – not because these men used violent means, but because they did not strive to achieve glory and a prosperous state (104). Machiavelli’s position is very clear here – he does not reject evil means, and to that extent, the Oxford claim is valid. However, Machiavelli also states, ‘it cannot be called skill to kill one’s fellow citizens, to betray friends…: by these means one can acquire power but not glory’; thus he declines to endorse violence, or any means for that matter, which lacks the ultimate objective of glory. Hence, the claim can be seen as inadequate again.

In the most controversial chapters of The Prince, Machiavelli discusses the importance for a prince of miserliness as well as means for him to keep promises. The Florentine theorist argues that ‘a prince must consider it of little importance if he incurs the name of miser, for this is one of those vices that permits him to rule’ (129). For Machiavelli, generosity is worse than miserliness as the former requires a prince to tax his subjects and in the process, he earns the reproach of the people; Machiavelli conversely cites Pope Julius II and the kings of France and Spain as examples of statesmen who succeeded because of their miserliness. He extends his advice by arguing that a prudent ruler should break his promises since the men around him are ‘a sorry lot and will not keep their promises’; Alexander VI was a man who recognized this nature of men and thus indulged in deceit and ultimately succeeded (134). Machiavelli also advocates that a prince must know how to be a fox and a lion at the same time; he implies that a prince must be treacherous as well as violent since there is no difference between these vices and both are needed for the ruler to succeed. Machiavelli’s unequivocal suggestion of practicing vices makes the Oxford claim defensible again as he supports the use of morally questionable means. However, he also states that a prince ‘as long as it is possible, should not stray from the good’, and should only take up evil when it is necessary to deal with the problematic nature of men he rules over (135). On this count, it would be wrong to call Machiavelli unscrupulous since he recognizes that these vices are reproachable, but nevertheless indispensable.

A critical point in resolving the question on hand is Machiavelli’s treatment of religion. In The Discourses, he expresses his reverence for religious leaders and states that ‘Among all praiseworthy men, the most praiseworthy are those leaders and founders of religion’ (203). He emphasizes that religion plays a crucial role in the success of states such as Rome since it facilitates the establishment of good institutions. Machiavelli argues that it is religion that provides the support for introducing a military; keeping in view the importance Machiavelli places on arms for a prince, he attributes the greatness of states to their religious undertakings. The implication of this is that it is invalid to call Machiavelli scheming and unscrupulous, keeping in view the reverence he has shown for religion and its values. However, it is still possible to defend the Oxford claim in questioning Machiavelli’s reason for respect of the religions. It seems that Machiavelli, in The Discourses, subordinates religion to the necessity of the state and admires it not because of its inherent moral goodness but because of its utility. It can be claimed that Machiavelli was attempting to employ religion merely as a tool to achieve political...
ends; perhaps to that end, it is a morally questionable mean.

Irrespective of the assertion of the Oxford entry, Machiavelli makes it clear that there is little precept for morality in politics. For him, politics has the lone objective of achieving glory and prosperity for the state and thus conformance to morality must not worry any prince in working towards that goal. A prince must do what is politically, not necessarily morally, necessary. When Machiavelli warns that a prince should ‘keep his hands off the property and the women of his citizens and his subjects’, his concern is not so much for upholding moral values in respecting the honor and livelihood of citizens but because that is what a politically prudent prince must do (132). Similarly, Machiavelli states that princes must not shame or threaten the people around him for the very same reason and uses the example of the fall of Antoninus to clarify the claim (143). While Machiavelli does not unconditionally endorse evil means, he does not rule out their necessity either. The Oxford entry is defensible if we condemn Machiavelli for not ruling out questionable practices; however, it is not adequate again because Machiavelli places emphasis not on acting in a morally depraved way, but in one which is politically prudent.

In conclusion, the historical context of must be kept in mind before making a final evaluation of the Oxford entry. The Prince was written by Machiavelli for a specific time period: the early 1500s when Italy was in a tumultuous state; hence many of the suggestions he extended were meant as remedies to that particular state of affairs. The Discourses on the other hand was a work which reflected his own political views more comprehensively. Nevertheless, the claim of the Oxford dictionary, condemning him, remains defensible if the extreme measures, which Machiavelli proposed for princes flouting moral standards, are considered. Yet, when the Florentine’s views are evaluated in conjunction with the ultimate objective of glory and a secured state he advocated for, the entry must be deemed inadequate.