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The Limits of Separating Politics from Morality in The Prince by Machiavelli

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Abstract. This article analyses the limitations of Machiavelli's concepts of separating politics from morality in his book The Prince, with referencing to serval relevant academic literatures. The article argues that Machiavelli's concepts have limitations from three perspectives, which are descriptive rigour, recognition of legitimacy, and justification. Therefore, Machiavelli's concepts in separating politics from morality might not only be helpless in maintaining the existing political order and stability, but also could deeply damage the public belief in legitimacy and intensify potential social conflicts, which could prevent politicians from achieve Machiavelli's expected goal as a "responsible" ruler. This article explains that political actions that violate moral principles might gain some extent of justification to protect clearly defined state and public interests based on certain background context. However, the recognition of exceptions does not mean that society should systematically accept Machiavelli's concept of separating moral principles from politics, because ethical considerations remained important in decision-making during ordinary political context.

Keywords: Morality, Legitimacy, Recognition of Legitimacy, Justification Standard

1. Introduction

One of the main discussion questions in Political Science is about the relationship between morality and politics. The research brought on the concept of political realism, which describes that politics should not be directly dominated by morality [1]. Machiavelli holds one of the most foundational positions in the history of political ideology, especially based on his contribution to political realism [2]. In his book The Prince, he brought up that rulers sometimes need to violate morality to maintain their power in politics, which could help maintain the political order and its stability. However, there were several different opinions towards his theory, for example, the views that are against to treat morality as the foundation of the political order based on political realism or the views that believes moral principles need to be reflected in the political actions based on political moralism [2], and these arguments about the relationship between morality and politics last till now. One of the main reasons that made researchers focus on the relationship between morality and politics is that this topic could help the public fully understand the complexity in the situation of politics [1]. Studying the relationship between morality and politics could better help explain the complexity in political

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struggles and issues in reality. This paper critiques Machiavelli's opinions on the political necessity of conducting immoral actions and discusses the potential limitations of his concepts.

To analyse whether there were potential limitations in Machiavelli's views about politics that cannot rely on morality and a responsible ruler needs to learn how to violate morality when necessary, this paper reviews the content of The Prince and engages with relevant academic references from the perspective of descriptive rigour, legitimacy and justifiability. The core argument is that Machiavelli does not clearly explain the key determination that triggers the "necessity" of immoral action, and that separating morality from politics could weaken the recognition of legitimacy and the constraints on the justification of the ruler's political actions. The limitations from the perspectives of rigour, legitimacy and justifiability mentioned above allow rulers to prioritise their own interest than states' interests in political action, while further threatening the foundations of political stability and conflict with Machiavelli's concept of "responsible" governance that serves the public interest.

2. Discussion

2.1. Descriptive rigour

From the perspective of descriptive rigour, Machiavelli's theory does not clearly define the triggering conditions under which immoral action becomes "necessary," thereby leaving political action without effective criteria for judgment. Machiavelli provides detailed explanations to justify why the necessity of politics goes beyond morality, and he argues that political leaders need to learn how to be bad based on circumstances. But his discussion about necessity remained conceptually undetermined as Machiavelli did not specify the conditions under which immorality becomes necessary in political practice, which became one of the core visible definitional gaps in Chapters 15 to 18 of The Prince.

First, Machiavelli's concepts frequently discuss "necessity," but they lack a clear, objective standard and conditions for determining when and how to trigger it. For example, Machiavelli stated in Chapter 15 that "Hence, if a ruler wants to survive, he'll have to learn to stop being good, at least when the occasion demands" [3], but he does not clearly define how to determine "occasion" or define the specific triggering conditions for this situation. Similarly, Machiavelli wrote that "A ruler mustn't worry about being labelled cruel when it's a question of keeping his subjects loyal and united" [3] in chapter 17. Machiavelli defines the loyal and united as the necessary conditions for maintaining political order, but there is a lack of a clear standard to define the extent to which a decline in the public's "loyal and united" toward rulers could threaten political leadership and further trigger cruelty. Both statements clearly state that the goal is to go beyond morality due to the necessary demand for survival, but they lack clear objective criteria and evaluation conditions to determine when necessity is triggered.

Second, without objective standards for when the immoral action is "necessary," the ruler's subjective judgment becomes the primary determining factor in deciding whether it is necessary. This could make the immoral actions due to necessity become normalised and used as routine governance. For example, Machiavelli mentioned "A prudent ruler cannot and should not honour his word when it places him at a disadvantage" [3] in Chapter 18. Because the disadvantage was not clearly defined, the ruler can subjectively define it based on their own judgment. Therefore, Machiavelli's expectation to break morality in politics could shift from an exception due to necessity to a pathway that normalises exceptional actions, especially immoral actions to daily politics based

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on their demand. This could make the necessity from a time-limited emergency condition into an unrestricted, reusable justification.

Third, as the triggering condition of necessity in Machiavelli's theory was not clearly defined with descriptive rigour, civil society has lost the basis for judging whether political actions conform to regulations. Not only could prevent effective social insight during political practice and damage the political transparency, but also prompt the public to challenge the motivations behind the political actions [4]. Take the " PRISM Program" in the United States as an example, the US government launched large-scale illegal surveillance towards the citizens based on the necessity of national security, which is contradictory towards the right of privacy being protected by the Constitution, and aroused widespread public doubt [5].In this example, the US government failed to clarify the specific social context that make "national security " become the triggering conditions of necessity to launch of surveillance on the public, and did not clarify the range and scale the surveillance should covered, which prevents the ability of civil society to effectively evaluate whether the political power operation within the allowable range Although the "PRISM Program" could be helpful to prevent domestic terrorism, critics still argue that unrestricted surveillance on the public can be used to maintain their preferred position in politics and expand discretionary power [6, 7]. Therefore, when immoral political actions lack defined triggering conditions, they are more likely to generate public doubt about the motivations behind power [4].

2.2. Recognition of legitimacy

From the perspective of legitimacy, Machiavelli treats the public recognition of rulers' legitimacy as a political tool that could be manipulated rather than the foundation of political order [8]. This makes legitimacy recognition more fragile, which damages the voluntary obedience and increases the risk of political instability.

First, Machiavelli discussed that "A prince, therefore, need not necessarily have all the good qualities I have enumerated, but it is very necessary that he should appear to have them" [3], this means rulers can manipulate the public's recognition of political legitimacy by maintaining a moral image, which reflects that he does not treat legitimacy as a normative foundation of political order, but as a political instrument generated based on the limitation that the public focuses more on the outward appearance of political actions. The ruler can manipulate personal character through political performance and public propaganda, such as selectively displaying virtues in public [9], thereby projecting a publicly accepted moral image, avoiding public hatred and winning recognition of legitimacy, which could further reduce risks and maintain the stability of governance [10]. Machiavelli argues that "For men in general judge more by the eye than by the hand; for everyone can see, but few can feel" [3]. Therefore, morality is only important in Machiavelli's concepts because it can be visible to the public and could become manipulated through different political actions. These actions create discretion, allowing rulers to manipulate public image and use it as a tool to manage public relationships instead of a restriction on political actions. Therefore, rulers need to become performers who constantly stage their morality in public to gain essential recognition of their political legitimacy [9]. Despite performance, public propaganda is another method to achieve the goal of maintaining morality and image through communication [10]. Because the public focuses on the outward appearance of political actions, public performance and propaganda are the most direct and effective ways to let them understand the ruler's image. The performance explains the morality from the visibility perspective, while the propaganda explains it through communication. These steps could generate a comprehensive moral image of the rulers, which aligns with the public expectation that rulers should obtain a moral appearance instead of a

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cruel one [10]. During this process, the rulers could avoid being hated by the public, which is one of the key components to maintaining the dominations. As Machiavelli states, "A prince whose people do not hate him is much less likely to be attacked" [3], which means morality is been used as a tool to shape public recognition in order to reduce the potential risk of political instability.

Machiavelli discussed that rulers could gain recognition in legitimacy through faking moral images [3]. However, faking morality is not only unacceptable in political ethics [11], but also unable to produce consistent recognition of legitimacy in political practice to support the long-term political order [12], regardless of whether the public has been successfully manipulated to generate recognition of legitimacy towards the ruler. From the perspective of political ethics, faking moral images such as secretly commit immorality political actions or generating morality by public performance and propaganda to gain recognition in legitimacy, should be viewed as violating the principle of political sincerity which damages the foundation structure of the political order, and can not be acceptable by the healthy order of civil society [13]. From the perspective of political practice, even if the ruler gains certain recognition of legitimacy from the public through faking morality, the ruler needs to invested large amount of political cost, such as information censorship, restrict the freedom of speech and other methods to control the ideology, in order to better cover their secret immorality and maintain the fake morality, which is difficult to be sustain over the long term and is subject to continual risk of being exposed to the public [14, 15]. Once the tricking morality failed, and the ruler's faking moral images were identified and exposed to the public, the trust foundation towards the political order could be seriously damaged [16], further resulting in the systematic collapse of the public credibility, which refer as the "Tacitus Trap" [17].

Second, when rulers gain unrestricted discretion to violate morality, their actions are more likely to exceed the reasonableness boundaries. The obedience could become less focused on the recognition of law and norms, but focus more on forced obedience to power. During this process, the public recognition of the ruler's legitimacy will be further damaged, which weakens the voluntary obedience of the public. During the political practice, the ruler's actions need to obey political principles and rest on publicly justifiable grounds as the reasons to recognise legitimate [18]. However, violating morality could prevent rulers from providing enough justifiable explanations for the public to believe that their actions are reasonable, and the laws and norms lose their authority as the standard to judge political actions. If rulers carry out costly and exhausting projects for the demand of political achievements and ignore the demands of the public and social costs, this cannot convince the public that their actions are reasonable and legitimate. The weaken judgement standard causes serious consequences, for example, one of the main social problems is that it dissolves the social confidence in laws and norms published by the rulers and leads to the collapse of the social texture [19]. Damaging the recognition of the importance in laws and norms reflects on the destruction in the image of laws in public opinion, thereby fewer people are willing to obey the rule of law and recognise the legitimacy of the political order. Instead, the public was forced to obey due to the fear that the rulers had the power to punish the follower disobey them. Therefore, this reflects that the power becomes more effective than common recognition in laws and norms. Under this condition, the obedience of the political order does not rest on stable recognition of legitimacy, but on the fear of being punished by power. This could only provide rulers with the minimum public respect that allows politics to maintain order without hatred, as they lost the recognition of legitimacy in the political actions [19]. Therefore, the political action with unrestricted discretion to violate morality damages the recognition of legitimacy as it destroys the authoritative image of laws and norms, which shifts the voluntary public obedience into forced obedience to the ruler's power.

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Third, as voluntary obedience drops, leaders lose the image of political authority and need to rely more on forced violence actions to maintain power, which not only raises the costs to maintain political order but also intensifies public resistance, which could promote more risks to political stability. Empirically, rulers tend to take further forced actions to maintain power as they notice the increasing threat to their political authority positions and less public voluntary cooperation [20]. As Machiavelli describes, rulers should choose to be feared instead of being loved, as it is safer for rulers when the public is feared [3]. This connects the obedience with forced action through the fear of potential punishment. However, the forced actions, including police suppression and public surveillance means the increasing cost during political action, and made maintaining power less affordable to the rulers. Machiavelli argues that using fear as a forced action could prevent public hatred and resistance [3]. For example, the Ceaușescu regime frequently used violent actions, such as killing, to maintain its power and control in the country, which motivated large numbers of public resistance. Then the Ceaușescu couples were executed, and soon the regime collapsed [21]. In this example, the Ceaușescu regime follows the guidance of Machiavelli's concepts that letting the public feel fear is safer for the ruler, which results in the regime's political legitimacy is not grounded in the public recognition of law and normative order but instead relying on the forced mechanism of fear, and obedience effectively shifts into forced obedience to power [22]. When the fear of the punishment could not be maintained the minimum respect and obedience that allow the politics to function normally, the public feelings turned into hatred, and it could lead to the potential risks of collapse of the political order [19].

2.3. Justification standard

From the perspective of the justification of the ruler's political actions, Machiavelli excludes morality from the core definition of state interest, which makes state interest difficult to distinguish from the ruler's individual interest, resulting in rulers could prioritising their own interest in political practice and even equating their own interest demand as the state interest [23]. Equalising individual interest as state interest could damage the justification's role as a constraint on power and the foundations of political order, which further increases the instability of the political order.

First, the core of state interest is the public interest, and moral principles, such as fairness, justice, and harmlessness, are core standards for defining public interest [24]. Machiavelli defines "state interest" in terms of the survival of the state, security of the power, and stability of the power, while weakening the essential position of morality, and describes them as something need to be protected through any means, even by actions that violate morality. Thus, Machiavelli's views of state interest tend to represent more of the ruler's self-interests rather than the interests of the public as a whole community, increasing the risk that rulers will place their own interest above state interest. Morality plays a key role in achieving public interest, as it helps promote fairness, equity and common goods in society, for example, it ensures that the allocation of resources is for the benefit of the whole community instead of narrow interests [24]. Therefore, moral principles functioned as the restrictions that the motivation of political action is benefiting the public instead of only the privileged group who hold power. During the achievement of public interest, it also acts as the moral guide lead rulers to make ethical decision-making in public that could benefit the whole state [24]. Which means the pursuit of state interest demands that rulers understand the importance of public interest, and recognise the constraint mechanism of morality for rulers to ensure that the motivation of the political action is based on the demand of the public instead of themselves. However, Machiavelli highlights that preservation of the state is the priority over the welfare of the public, and he defines it as the survival of the state, which should be protected through any means, including

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violation against justice, freedom and other moral principles [25]. Based on concepts in his book The Prince, he mainly argues that the power and stability in politics are the core components of the state's interest, and other dimensions, such as public interest and morality, could be weakened and even sacrificed if necessary. However, the public interest and morality are the key determinations that promote ethical decision-making, which ensures the ruler's political actions benefit the whole society. Therefore, the state's interest, especially the survival of its power and stability without considering morality and public demand, should be considered more as benefiting the rulers individually instead of the community as a whole. However, this led to the ambiguity of the boundaries between the state's interest and the ruler's interest based on Machiavelli's concepts, as he defined what he expected to be the benefits of the ruler as the state's interest. Thereby, increasing the risk that rulers will prioritise their own interests, such as the maintenance of power above state interests.

Second, because the concepts of state interest and ruler's self-interest are conceptually confused, rulers are more likely to ignore the restriction of the justification demand on their political actions, and the leaders could use "justification" as a political tool to manipulate personal interest as state interest. This can promote public doubts about the justification basis of the political order and then increase the instability of politics. Because Machiavelli's definition provide a ambiguity definition which is difficult to distinguish the ruler's interest from the state's interest, the ruler prioritises the satisfaction of their own demand than the demand for public interest in politics. Meanwhile, the ruler could manipulate their own benefits as state benefits without the constraint mechanism of morality and the demand for consideration of public demand in politics. During the process, it also provides justification for rulers to gain individual interest, as it is covered under the name of the state's interest and is difficult to identify. However, it could lead to serious consequences as the rulers instrumentalize the justification of political actions. One example is Saddam's regime in Iraq. In this example. Saddam Hussein manipulated and described their self-interest as state interest, failed to meet and obey the demand to follow the justification restrictions of the power, which then caused damage to the justification basis, and also led to further collapse of the political order [26]. Because what Saddam described as the state's interest did not include the expected element of morality and the public interest, which could let the public challenge his motivation and justification behind these actions. During this process, it generated distrust and doubt between the public and the ruler, which promoted the instability of the political order. When the Saddam regime was affected by external factors such as the intervention of the US military, the ruler and political order that loses public trust and support will rapidly disintegrate and collapse.

2.4. Clarification

Violating morality due to the necessity to protect the state's interest and the demand of public interest might grant certain justifications, but this does not reflect Machiavelli's view that separate moral principles from politics should be completely accepted [27]. In a certain social context, the political action that violates morality might be considered justifiable based on the clearly defined triggering condition of necessity [28]. For example, the Second Sino-Japanese War was the specific historical context in which state interests were forced to deal with fundamental threats; Chinese society was facing the unjustifiable invasion lead by the Japanese army. In order to defeat the invasion force, the Chinese army used a series of actions that were considered immoral in ordinary moral principles, such as deception and assassination [29]. These immoral actions were not used for the gain induvial benefits or expanding power but to maintain the survival of the community, thereby granting certain justifications in the social context. In this example, being invaded is the

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condition Machiavelli discussed that triggers the necessity to violate morality, and resist from the immoral war actions, such as genocide, brought by Japan, provided the anti-invasion justifications for the Chinese army. Therefore, both countries commit certain immoral war actions, but the resistance against invasion, including immoral action could gain certain justifications based on the certain social context.

However, acknowledging the objective of exceptions does not reflect that of Machiavelli's concepts on separating morality from politics, which could be systematically accepted in political actions [27, 28]. The core argument of this paper is not to deny the existence of exceptions in political practice, but to analyse that the exceptions in reality do not offset the ambiguous standard to triggering the concept of necessity to violate morality based on Machiavelli. Exceptions mainly reflect that immoral actions sometimes could be grant context based justifications and accepted by society, but exceptions do not prove that the rulers can gain justification when they have the discretion to define the necessity to violate morality. For example, the immorality during the anti-invasion war only grants justification because the context of the fight against invasion, it is still considered unjustified and unacceptable in an ordinary political context [29].

3. Conclusion

To sum up, this article analyses Machiavelli through the lens of descriptive rigour, legitimacy recognition, and justification of the ruler's political actions. This paper argues that Machiavelli's theory lacks descriptive rigour while damaging both recognition of legitimacy and ignoring the constraints on power justification; these issues let rulers prioritise their own interest than states' interests in political action. These issues threaten the foundations of politics and conflict with the ideal that these could help maintain the state's interests responsibly based on Machiavelli.

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