

COMPARISON OF MACHIAVELLIAN AND ARISTOTELEAN GOVERNMENT

It is the expressed aim of individual men to achieve happiness. And this happiness of man depends on the characteristics of his state. For the happiness of man is an important discussion which affects all men; to ignore it is to fall into the snares of sadness.

Within the natural law, there are two contrary styles of government: the Machiavellian and the Aristotelean. The Machiavellian argues for the use of vice to achieve happiness; the Aristotelean argues for the use of virtue to achieve happiness. By Machiavellian, we mean the argument predicated by Niccolò Machiavelli in 'The Prince'. By Aristotelean, we mean the common interest constitutions of 'The Politics': collectively or individually. Let us examine these styles of government to decide which is the more useful for achieving individual happiness.

On the one hand, the Machiavellian government advocates the means to individual happiness. In short, followers of this school believe in the maxim 'kill or be killed' as the sum of life in politics. In Machiavellian governments, political cunning and ruthless cruelty are the currency of statesmanship. It is by following personally advantageous courses of action that a man best secures his political power, and with it the happiness of his state. King Henry VII is a strong example of the Machiavellian prince who by securing his political advantage at the expense of his rivals best served the common interest of the realm. However, Machiavellian governments depend on deception. And whilst noblemen so often willingly confuse themselves with eloquence, the people are less susceptible to its charms. They believe in truth and listen to proportionate fear. And noblemen will only bend the knee as long as they fail to realise their strength. And so whilst Machiavellian governments in isolation are useful for short term tyrannies, oligarchies and democracies, they are repugnant to monarchies, aristocracies and polities. And so Machiavellian governments in isolation fail to achieve the happiness of the individual.

On the other hand, the Aristotelean government advocates the means to individual happiness. As defined earlier, the Aristotelean government is characterised by the rule of one, few, many or a mixed constitution for the common interest. By serving the universal principles applicable to all men, a government best creates the competencies in men that we call virtues, and from the sum of these active virtues come happiness. For the individual citizen in his state, we see this in Alexander the Great, the Roman Senate and the Church governments. Of course, like hedonistic and legalistic ideologies (with utilitarianism and Marxism to mind), it is easy to equivocate Aristotelean political philosophy with ideology to the untrained mind. However, like the Bible, these political constitutions need to be seen in the wider, interrelated context of the natural law. It is as important to know about the anatomy of plants as it is the passionate virtues to govern a state to its full potential. It is not by the helm of a ship that it sails, but by the sum total of all activity done by its sailors at their various stations. So too with the governing of the state, and with it, each individual's happiness.

The Machiavellian government is effective in the short term, whilst the Aristotelean is more so in the long term. Nevertheless, the two cannot survive independently. Machiavelli needs Aristotle as much as Aristotle needs Machiavelli. Machiavelli is as much a part of the natural law as Aristotle.

To have Machiavelli alone is to fall into the hollow thundering den of corruption, plots and murder. To have Aristotle alone, without the rest of the natural law, is to live in a city without defences against the clever machinations of Machiavellian statesmen. Particular men like Severus who became Emperor of Rome by playing the lion and the fox. And whilst fortune can be kind, it can also be bitterly cruel.

The natural law is an interrelated system of government that depends on all observations of life: strong and weak; cruel and kind. Whilst Aristotle points us in the best direction, the wise citizen needs Machiavelli to point out the tyrants in waiting and use his tools against him. With this knowledge used together, a statesman protects and grows the happiness of his citizens; without it, his state becomes a slave to faction and idealism. Observe nature, learn all, protect your realm.