

## **Rationality in Machiavelli and in Kant<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The paper contains interpretation and comparative analysis of Machiavelli's and Kant's conceptions on rationality as two prime examples of "realist" and "idealist" modes of agency. Kantian model of rationality is viewed as an augmentation of the Machiavellian one, not an opposition to it. To elaborate the point, Robert Aumann's model of act-rationality and rule-rationality is applied to the two philosophical models. Kantian practical reason is interpreted as an addition to Aumann's instrumental rationality, providing rules for rules, or "rule-rule-rationality".

### **Keywords**

act-rationality, rule-rationality, Kant, Machiavelli, Aumann

### **Introduction**

It is tempting to juxtapose Niccolò Machiavelli and Immanuel Kant, the compelled theorist of political life and the free practitioner of philosophical reclusion. Textbooks may benefit from using the two as towering figures to personify the realist and the idealist strains of political thought, yet this representation might seem too straightforward upon closer

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inspection. Interesting analysis of similarities between the positions of Machiavelli and Kant as writers in the “mirror for princes” genre has been recently presented here in CTK (Foster 2015). I would also like to stress not the opposition, but the continuity of line of thought of the two great philosophers, particularly visible in the way they treat human rationality.

Rationality is seen as one of the key anthropological ideas of Modernity by many contemporary thinkers, from Max Weber to Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor. The modern person is the one who through “disenchantment”, secularization, consistent reasoning and empirical corroboration forms and increasingly detailed and verisimilar image of the world and learns to transform this world according to his/her image of the self, which also undergoes transformation in the process. Modern rationality is rooted not only in science, but also in politics: freedom of conscience, natural law, social contract and other ideas rationalized political life, which increasingly became an object of systematic enquiry and construction. To some authors (for instance, Ernst Cassirer) proposing this rational approach to the political is the crowning achievement of Machiavelli, the founder of modern political science. Kant sums up his view of a modern person in his notion of autonomy, uniting rationality (in Kantian broader sense of the word) and freedom.

Before we turn to history of philosophy, let us try and choose a working definition of rationality. In general, contemporary outlooks on rationality have epistemological, economical, or moral leaning. We shall exclude epistemology and combine economical and moral outlooks under the guise of political rationality, which deals with strategies of navigating the world of conflicting interests, of confrontation and cooperation between all sorts of agents. Human history can perhaps be seen as the trace, left behind by the totality of such strategies. One of the neatest and most common definitions equates rationality with self-interested behavior. It is general enough to satisfy most, regardless of the view on “self” and “interest” (and, for that matter, on “behavior” and “is”). Also important for our purposes is the difference between rationality as instrumental capacity for choosing suitable means to an end, and practical reason as the capacity for choosing between ends (Kolodny and Brunero 2016; Wallace 2014).

Juxtaposing Machiavelli and Kant essentially means claiming that they had mutually exclusive answers to the fundamental question “what is a human being?”, that their political philosophies are founded upon irreconcilable anthropological models. I would like to argue that this is not the case, that a Kantian individual can be viewed in several important respects as an extension and elaboration of a Machiavellian individual, that Kant’s alleged idealism is an attempt to “climb on the shoulders” of Machiavellian realism, not to straightforwardly refute it. The support for this thesis is provided by comparison of treatment of political rationality by the two philosophers. I should like to start by reconstructing some of the main features of Machiavelli’s and Kant’s treatments of rationality, and then compare them along the lines of a recent model, suggested by Robert Aumann (Aumann 2008).

### **Machiavelli's reason**

Machiavelli has been regarded not only as the first proponent of empirical methods in politics and creator of political science, but also as an admirer and propagator of classical wisdom and tradition of rhetoric (Skinner 1978; Viroli 1998), as a humanist, warning against the dangers of tyranny or satirizing it (see Isaiah Berlin's comparison of positions by Spinoza, Croce, Gentili and others (Berlin 1972)), and, of course, as the teacher of evil, giving certain human vices status of *virtù*, giving rise to "acquisitive liberalism" (Strauss 1958). Whichever account of Machiavelli's achievements we side with, his view of political life as rational maximization of power remains unquestioned.

This play of maximizing power unfolds on stage that in many ways shapes it. Any conceptualization of political life rests on numerous basic assumptions regarding the world. In some cases, like in Kant's, the image of the world is elaborate and itself examined. In other cases, like in Machiavelli's, its explanation never becomes a task so is left to curious readers. Anthony Parel (Parel 1992) and Maurizio Viroli (Viroli 1998; Viroli 2010) take the task of reconstructing the great Florentine's image of the world. In its most general it is the product of interplay of the three forces: Heaven, Fortune and God. Insofar as men possess magnanimity and *virtù*, they can become the fourth force. Heaven (sometimes Machiavelli speaks of "Nature" instead (e.g. *Florentine History*, Book VII)) is the domain of determinism in classical sense, it is bound by unchangeable laws, and celestial motion determines the lives of humans and human societies through rise and fall of *virtù*. This tidal flow (not unlike that famously depicted by Matthew Arnold in *Dover Beach* and brilliantly adapted by Charles Taylor in his *The Malaise of Modernity*) forms the background for human achievements and failures. Viroli points at Machiavelli's poetry as the source for most detailed cosmological observations and their connection to the political:

From this [heaven's motion] result peace and war; on this depend the hatreds among those whom one wall and one moat shut up together (Viroli 1998, p. 18).

Machiavelli speaks of Heaven's influence over the circularity of human affairs, over rise and fall of *virtù* and corresponding shifts from lawlessness to heights of order, from evil to good, and back (Ibid.). Knowledge of Heaven's motion and its effect is the first prerequisite of exercise of political rationality.

The deterministic predictability of Heaven is contrasted with the unpredictable Fortune, which has the power to override, to tilt and shift Heaven's influence over people. Fortune's eyes are "ferocious and sharp; she distinguishes very well the good, whom she punishes with servitude, infamy, and sickness, and the brave and the audacious, "who push, shove and jostle her", whom she rewards with power, honour and riches" (Ibid., p. 20). Fortune is irrational and impenetrable to human rationality, so those involved in politics are both at constant risk of misfortune and hope for a lucky chance. Fortune's role

is where Machiavelli's view of human affairs turns darkly ironic. Still, Fortune's interference is not a reason for idleness, as men can rely on *virtù* to attract Fortune, to overcome her blows and to take control of the things that have not been affected by Fortune.

Machiavelli's God is unorthodox. He has no part in workings of Heaven and Fortune, although the Florentine does occasionally grant him the role of the creator of all things (Ibid., p. 21). God's main power is to sometimes override Heaven and Fortune to help the miserable, to give "relief to the unhappy". Yet he, like Homeric gods, sometimes takes sides in human warfare. Machiavelli frequently uses the phrase "God and nature" to denote the origin of worldly arrangements (Ibid.). God does not reward the virtuous and strong, he favors the weak and believing. God is sentimental rather than rational, and for men proper mode of communication with him is through prayer, not through reason.

These three forces are beyond human control, and only Heaven's regularity can become an object of knowledge. Because men cannot influence these three forces, human affairs become the prime object to exercise their rational capacity over, and that is what interests Machiavelli. Men are divided by their "nature" into those who seek to rule (*grandi*) and those who resist to be ruled (*popolo*) (e.g. dedicatory letter to *The Prince*). In Chapter XVIII of *The Prince* Machiavelli famously questions human integrity: a ruler has to be a man and an animal in due time. As an animal he has to utilize cunning and force, as a man he has to be "*prudente e virtuoso*" (Ch. VII). Wisdom here means the ability to reason and rationalize in political affairs. Political rationality as the ability to read Heaven and to differentiate between its laws and the play of Fortune and God's intrusions is augmented with the capacity to read human tempers, motives, interests, to predict their moves and plan one's own. This rationality is what allows to see "the gap between how people actually behave and how they ought to behave" and not to fall victim of confusion (*The Prince*, Ch. XV).

Political rationality dealing with the "is" and not the "ought" is markedly instrumental, it is a tactical means to achieve one's strategic ends. It might seem from early chapters of *The Prince* that Machiavelli is content to consider power as rulers sole end, but this impression turns out to be false. The final chapter betrays the author, and his other works and letters show convincing proof that the great Florentine was inspired by his own vision of the "ought". But whereas his view of political mechanics was sharp, novel, and worded precisely, his vision wallows in rhetoric full of references to biblical God and ancient texts, of grand imagery and pleas that are at odds with the teaching that made him famous. Machiavelli strikingly lacks the language to augment the "is" with the "ought" – yet at the same time senses its necessity.

### **Kant's rationality**

Immanuel Kant is the thinker often accused of the opposite: having developed a detailed theory of the "ought", he despised the "is", and this resulted in a lifeless speculative

doctrine, centered on duty, unattainable to human beings. This reading of Kant (even in its milder forms) is unfair, as one can envision his practical philosophy an outgrowth of realism espoused by the likes of Machiavelli and Hobbes. Kant's strategy does not consist in head-on attack on realism, it consists in showing its insufficiency and overcoming it. This is allowed for by supplementing the rational capacity with the faculty of reason or, to be more precise, by subjugating the former to the latter.

Comparison of Kant and Machiavelli is complicated at least by two facts: that Kant didn't write political philosophy, and that he never specifically referred to Machiavelli. That Kant's political philosophy is largely unwritten is agreed upon by many avid readers, among whom are Hannah Arendt, John Rawls, Allen Wood, Howard Williams. Yet its shape and detail is visible in his moral philosophy, philosophy of history, philosophy of law, as well as in Kant's treatment of some political issues like international peace and right to revolution. Kant's political philosophy is an integral part of his critical project, for it, too, "denies knowledge in order to make room for faith". This time it is the empirical knowledge of political life and human nature that realism provides us with. One can presume that Kant had a firm grasp of Machiavellian realism. There are at least two sources for it: Frederick's celebrated *Anti-Machiavel* and Achenwall's treatise on natural law, on which Kant used to lecture. A brief but brilliant sketch of realism's extremities in Appendix I of *Towards Perpetual Peace* is also evidence that Kant consciously reacted to the doctrine.

Let us proceed by briefly restating the background, against which Kantian image of the political is drawn. Machiavellian political life is boiling of human interests, jammed in the cauldron of Heavens, stirred by Fortune and God, heated by passions. Kant adds to this a broader vision of great teleological movement of history. This movement is apparently directed by what Kant calls "Nature", although we can be sure neither of Nature's plans nor of its very existence behind nature (with the lowercase "n"). Kant discusses this problem in his works on philosophy of history (e.g. I 8:27, 8:30-31; EF 8:365-367). Through conflicts and wars, using inherent human "unsocial sociability" Nature pushes humankind to some distant end. This end is uncertain and problematic, for humankind is always free and increasingly able to bring itself to a disaster (at which Kant hints, for example, at EF 8:343). It is also hidden from individual person's view, for we as individuals play an infinitely small part in this indefinitely long process of emergence of *Menschheit* (e.g. I 8:18-19, R 6:74).

However, there's *a priori* evidence that we do play a part, and that is the voice of moral law. Its apodictic force cannot possibly have empirical origins, and that, for Kant, is a sign of its higher order and special purpose. Moral law is operated by practical reason that is different from mere instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality is a tactical ability that helps us promote our empirical or heteronomous interests, which we have to do to maintain our empirical subsistence. Practical reason is directed at strategic ends of Nature – that are at the same time our final ends, summed up in the vague image of "kingdom of ends". Reason has the negative power to veto the rational pursuit of interests if it does not pass the test of categorical imperative. It also, Kant claims, sometimes

directly prescribes a course of action, when taken in a positive sense. Insofar as we follow practical reason we also exist as transcendental beings.

Two things are important to properly understand Kant's treatment of instrumental rationality. First is that he does not try to play down its role. It would be a mistake to think that Kant tries to refute calculating self-interest altogether and replace it with the dictate of pure practical reason. Kant acknowledges the empirical, heteronomous, "impure" side of human nature and understands the power and inevitability of rational egoism<sup>2</sup>. He generally accepts the realist view of human nature, adding some technical modifications, such as explaining the mechanism of rationalization of self-love into maxims of practical reason. But his aim is to demonstrate that this is only part of the picture. He tries to transcend realism by expanding realist's notions of the "self" and of "interest" and by showing the necessity of reason through transcendental argumentation. Second is that he does not try to morally condemn the political use of instrumental rationality as such. It only becomes problematic when it violates categorical imperative, when we act on a maxim that cannot possibly become a universal law<sup>3</sup>. Kant admits that we do use other people as a means to our empirical ends, he forbids to use them as a means *only*.

### **Aumann's conception of rationality**

In 2008 Robert Aumann came with a suggestion to differentiate between rule-rationality and act-rationality (Aumann 2008). It was his way to resolve the contradiction between the previously dominant view of human perfect rationality and behavioral facts that challenged this assumption.

Ordinary rationality means that when making a decision, economic agents choose an act that yields maximum utility among all acts available in that situation; to avoid confusion, we henceforth call this *act-rationality*. In contrast, under rule rationality people do not maximize over acts. Rather, they adopt *rules*, or modes of behavior, that maximize some measure of total or average or expected utility, taken over all decision situations to which that rule applies; then, when making a decision, they choose an act that accords with the rule they have adopted. Often this is the act that maximizes their utility in that situation, but not necessarily always; the maximization is over rules rather than acts (Ibid., p. 2).

This model seems a plausible approximation to our rationalizations, and Aumann uses it convincingly to explain a variety of experimental data. So applying it to clarify and compare historical approaches seems a fruitful task.

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<sup>2</sup> This is one of the key topics of *Religion...*; see, e.g. (Anderson-Gold, Muchnik 2010) for analysis.

<sup>3</sup> As explained, for instance, in (R 6:20-21).

Let us begin with Machiavelli, the acknowledged father of modern consequentialism<sup>4</sup>. Interestingly enough, a Machiavellian world is not especially predictable, so the consequences of one's actions are always dubious. Of the four forces at play in a Machiavellian world only one, Heaven, displays law-like behavior. Fortune and God are essentially unpredictable, and humans are too often confused and distorted. All of this makes our rationalizations fuzzy. Only two tools allow for some order: our knowledge of Heaven and our knowledge of human nature, of "humors" and passions that drive the political life. The former is provided by astrology, and the latter is provided by the study of history and exercise in ability to correctly find historical analogies to current events (ability, which Kant would relate to the power of judgment).

Uncertainty and unpredictability of much of the world, which lends particularity to every situation, leave little place for universalization. Machiavellian rules are rather basic and few, and he often reminds the reader of the role of chance. It seems safe to say that in the Machiavellian world it is rational to often be act-rational.

Aumann admits that his idea of two types of rationality comes from the familiar distinction between act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. However, the notion of rule obviously enjoys a much more prominent role in Kant's philosophy than in utilitarianism, so it is tempting to slightly modify Aumann's model to accommodate Kantian moral mechanics. It seems this can be done by adding another level of deliberation: we are to check if a rule meets the rule, i.e. the categorical imperative. The result perhaps could be called rule-rule-rationality. Let us look at it in some detail.

Kant differentiates between actions, done from a) inclination, b) self-interest, c) duty (e.g. G 4:397). He also speaks of instincts, often connecting them with inclinations (e.g. I 8:19), so for our present purposes we need not try to differentiate between them. Inclinations are many and varied, they have a great part in human motivation, and actions done from them are immediate, i.e. don't undergo rationalization. Kant readily hands over their study to psychology (G 4:391-392). While inclinations and instincts place us among animals, rational self-interest is a specifically human feature. It allows for complex calculus of inclinations and instincts. These are the substance of self-interest, the form is provided by sensibility and understanding. Because substantially self-interest is empirical, its study also belongs to psychology (Ibid.).

Turning back to Aumann's model, we find that the modes of pursuing self-interest can be both act-rational and rule-rational: there are instances when one has to calculate a situation-specific plan of action, when one finds it expedient to follow a rule, and also – perhaps, this is what happens most of the time – when one combines rule-following with analysis of specificities. This is sufficient to explain consequentialist (e.g. utilitarian) rationality, but this is not enough to explain Kantian meta-concern with respect for moral law and duty, which cannot possibly have empirical origins.

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<sup>4</sup> For a rare argument to the contrary see (Benner 2009, p. 326).

It is important to note that this twofold model of rationality would have satisfied Kant, too, if our actions affected only things. Kant does not abstain from consequentialist thinking, he only denies its moral worth. There's a place in his theory for self-interest, mediated by combination of rule-rationality and act-rationality. There's a place for instrumental attitude towards things and even persons. Persons, however, have a set of properties that cannot be expressed in thing-language, so they require special treatment in addition to being treated as things. And this is where the need arises for the additional level of rules, showing us how to combine these two attitudes, as well as for "pure moral philosophy", showing us how these rules operate.

## Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis. First, contemporary models of rationality are useful for reconstructing and comparing classical philosophical theories of the political. Second, some classical theories are rich enough to sometimes suggest expansions to contemporary models. Third, these theses are exemplified by Kantian theory of practical reason providing grounds for adding to Aumann's concepts of act-rationality and rule-rationality a concept of what can be called "rule-rule-rationality". Finally, comparison along the lines of Aumann's model between Machiavelli's and Kant's views on rationality shows the latter to be an extension, not an opposite of the former. This corroborates a broader thesis that Kantian moral metaphysics is a superstructure built upon realist conception of self-interested agent as an enhancement, not as a replacement.

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