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Governmental Philosophies of Plato, Saint Augustine, Machiavelli, and Montesquieu

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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

GOVERNMENTAL PHILOSOPHIES OF:
PLATO
SAINT AUGUSTINE
MACHIARELLI
MONTESQUIEU

AN HONORS PAPER SUBMITTED TO

DOCTOR JIM BERRYMAN

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is not to give an indepth discussion of the various books. The purpose, rather, is to give scattered statements which reveal the flavor of the books as much as revealing the contents.

Each of the books included reflect highly the era in which they were written, and must be weighed in the understanding of the books.

Plato's Republic

Plato says that justice would be simple if men were simple. Why is it that such a simple paradise---Utopia--- as he describes never comes? Because of greed and luxury. The desire for luxury breeds competition which in turn breeds class-divisions that are not natural.

He sees every form of government ruining itself by distortion of the basic principle. Aristocracy ruins itself by too narrowly confining its base of power. Democracy carried out seems little more than rule by a capricious mob who is also uneducated.

The city was the basic unit of government in Plato's day. What he most desires for that city is unity and harmony. This unity is not, however, uniformity. There will be three "estates" of men: the wise men, the brave men, and the useful men.

The education of these men is very regulated to achieve the best end. Music and gymnastics will be the education. The stories the people hear will be very limited. The poetry of Homer will not be allowed because much of his poetry shows the inhabitants of Olympus in a bad light. The music will be simple. Higher education will be in the realm of mathematics.

The guardians are to have everything in common, not possessing wealth of their own. Men and women are to mate under civic control so as to produce the best children. The children are not to know who their parents are, but be wards of the state, calling everyone who is old enough mother and father, and all their own age brother and sister.

Women are to receive the same training as men and are to render the same service.

St. Augustine's The City of God

Much of St. Augustine's thought is lost in the bulk of the book and the innumerable historical.

The occasion for the writing of the book was the plunder of Rome by Alaric in 410. He takes great pains to dispel the idea that Rome's greatness was derived from its paganism.

Government with its sanction of force is not an institution of God for the human race, but a punishment of sin.

St. Augustine defines a commonwealth as a company of men associated in a recognized system of rights and a community of interests. "If justice be absent, what is a kingdom but a crowd of gangsters? And what is a gang but a minor kingdom?" (Bk. 4,4).

It is extremely difficult to pin down St. Augustine's political thought, for it is very fluid, or rather that the only real commonwealth was the City of God.

There is lacking any definition of Church-State relationships.

Machiavelli's The Prince

The basis for Machiavelli's politics lies in his conviction that for the most part men are stupid and irrational.

Men are moved by passion rather than reason, and one of the greatest passions is ambition.

When Machiavelli talks about a "virtuous" prince he does not mean one who exemplifies the standard Christian virtues of charity and patience. He means a ruler who is shrewd enough to serve his own interests well without crossing those of his subjects as to make them dissatisfied and rebellious.

According to Machiavelli, man is essentially a doer. Man is a creature who fulfills himself by unrestrained activity.

The two principal instruments of power are force and propaganda. The successful prince cannot dispense with either. The chief rule with force is to apply it ruthlessly. This action will probably make the prince hated, but it is much better to be feared than loved.

While force is indispensable, it is expensive. It is desirable, therefore, to win the people over to one's side. Propaganda must always be backed by force. Of all the propaganda techniques at a prince's disposal one of the most valuable is religion.

Montesquieu's The Spirit of Laws

Montesquieu's definition of virtue, in a republic, is the love of one's country, that is, the love of equality. It is not a moral nor a Christian virtue, but a political.

What are laws? "Laws, in their widest meaning, are the necessary relationships which derive from the nature of things." These relationships are therefore inherent: They must be related to the type of government. They also vary with the characteristics of the climate.

The idea of relativity of human beliefs and institutions is fundamental to Montesquieu's outlook. Hence comes the attitude that the world is not uniform and differences are to be expected.

Montesquieu abandoned the traditional divisions of types of government into monarchy, aristocracy, democracy. Instead he classified governments according to their manner of conducting policy: republic, based on virtue; the monarchy, based on honour; and despotism, based on fear.

Dividing political authority into the legislative, executive, and judicial powers, he asserted that in the state that most effectively promotes liberty, these three powers must be confided to different individuals, or bodies acting independently.