

On Mercy

Emily Seeber • February 2017

Machiavelli

“Because I know that many others have written about [how to rule], I am afraid that by writing about it again I shall be considered presumptuous, especially since in discussing this material I depart from the procedures of others.”

Seneca

“Controlling the mind when one has the power to take revenge [...] the inclination of the mind towards mildness when exacting punishment [...] the moderation that removes something from the due and merited punishment.”

Machiavelli

“Every Prince must desire to be *considered* merciful and not cruel.”

Machiavelli's argument

1. A ruler should aim for the best for the community.
2. A ruler can act with either mercy or with cruelty towards misdemeanours.
3. Excessive mercy permits disorders to arise.
4. Disorder harms the whole community.

Conclusion: So the ruler should not be excessively merciful and, instead, be willing to act with cruelty when necessary.

Machiavelli

“Something which appears to be a virtue, if pursued, will result in his ruin; while some other thing which appears to be a vice, if pursued, will secure his safety and well-being.”

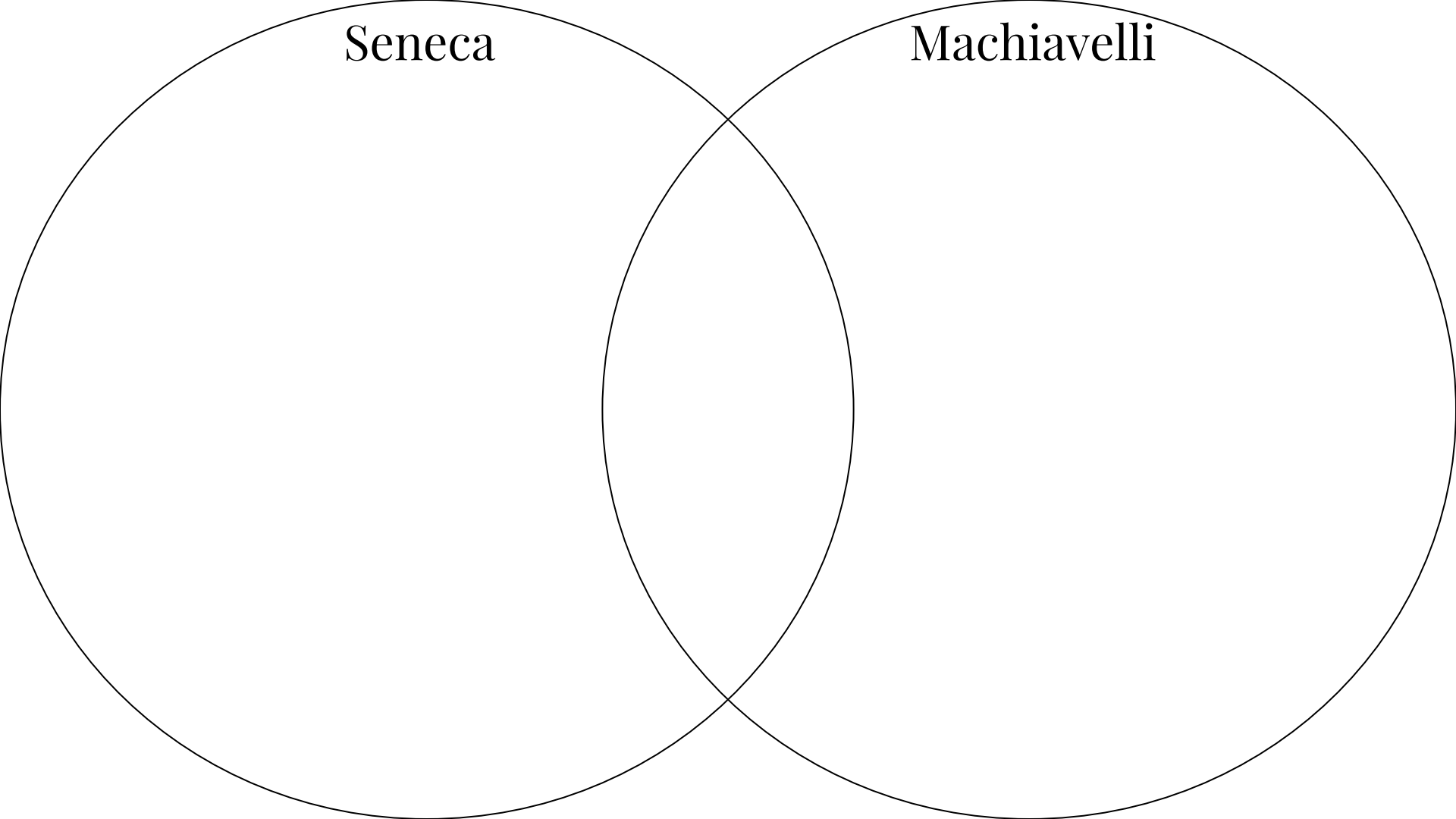
Machiavelli's argument

1. A ruler should aim for the best for the community.
2. A ruler can act with either mercy or with cruelty towards misdemeanours.
3. Excessive mercy permits disorders to arise.
4. Disorder harms the whole community.

Conclusion: So the ruler should not be excessively merciful and, instead, be willing to act with cruelty when necessary.

Seneca

Machiavelli





A Venn diagram consisting of two overlapping circles. The left circle is labeled 'Seneca' and the right circle is labeled 'Machiavelli'. The intersection of the two circles is empty. The text 'End goal of a stable state' is located within the right circle, overlapping with the intersection area.

Seneca

Machiavelli

End goal of a
stable state

The Prince

What means are morally permissible in order to create a stable, prosperous state?



A Venn diagram consisting of two overlapping circles. The left circle is labeled 'Seneca' and the right circle is labeled 'Machiavelli'. The intersection of the two circles is empty. The text 'End goal of a stable state' is located within the right circle, overlapping with the intersection area.

Seneca

Machiavelli

End goal of a
stable state



A Venn diagram with two overlapping circles. The left circle is labeled 'Seneca' and the right circle is labeled 'Machiavelli'. The intersection of the two circles contains two lines of text: 'End goal of a stable state' and 'It is morally permissible to act cruelly to have a stable state (the ends justify the means)'.

Seneca

Machiavelli

End goal of a
stable state

It is morally permissible to
act cruelly to have a stable
state (the ends justify the
means)

Seneca

Machiavelli

End goal
of a stable
state

It is morally permissible to
act cruelly to have a stable
state (the ends justify the
means)

Seneca

There are no secrets in a
palace so a ruler cannot
be cruel in secret

Machiavelli

End goal
of a stable
state

It is morally permissible to
act cruelly to have a stable
state (the ends justify the
means)

Seneca

There are no secrets in a
palace so a ruler cannot
be cruel in secret

Machiavelli

The ruler is hidden away
in his castle, so can act
cruelly in secret

End goal
of a stable
state

It is morally permissible to
act cruelly to have a stable
state (the ends justify the
means)

Seneca

There are no secrets in a
palace so a ruler cannot
be cruel in secret

Cruelty is never morally
permissible

Machiavelli

The ruler is hidden away
in his castle, so can act
cruelly in secret

It is morally permissible to
act cruelly to have a stable
state (the ends justify the
means)

End goal
of a stable
state

Machiavelli

“[Men are] ungrateful, fickle, simulators, and deceivers, avoiders of danger and greedy for gain [who] forget the death of the father more quickly than their loss of inheritance.”

Seneca

There are no secrets in a palace so a ruler cannot be cruel in secret

Cruelty is never morally permissible

Machiavelli

The ruler is hidden away in his castle, so can act cruelly in secret

Human nature is selfish and greedy

It is morally permissible to act cruelly to have a stable state (the ends justify the means)

End goal of a stable state

Seneca

“[Mercy is] the greatest of the princely virtues.”

Seneca

“All right-minded people regard public interests as more important than private, it follows that the man to whom the whole state turns for guidance will also be held dear”

Seneca

There are no secrets in a palace so a ruler cannot be cruel in secret

Human nature is to put the interests of the society ahead of one's own desires

Cruelty is never morally permissible

Machiavelli

The ruler is hidden away in his castle, so can act cruelly in secret

Human nature is selfish and greedy

It is morally permissible to act cruelly to have a stable state (the ends justify the means)

End goal of a stable state

Seneca

“[The opposite of] inflict[ing] unjust punishments by anger, or by a young man’s impulse, or by the rashness and stubbornness of men which have frequently wrested tolerance from even the most placid souls, or even by that pride in status that uses terror to display authority.”

Seneca

“With the greatest reluctance [...] spill even the meanest blood; no one is deprived of favour [from the great ruler].”

Seneca

1. To improve the person who is punished
2. To make the rest of the people better
3. To enable the population to live without fear

Seneca

There are no secrets in a palace so a ruler cannot be cruel in secret

Human nature is to put the interests of the society ahead of one's own desires

Punishment for improvement

Cruelty is never morally permissible

Machiavelli

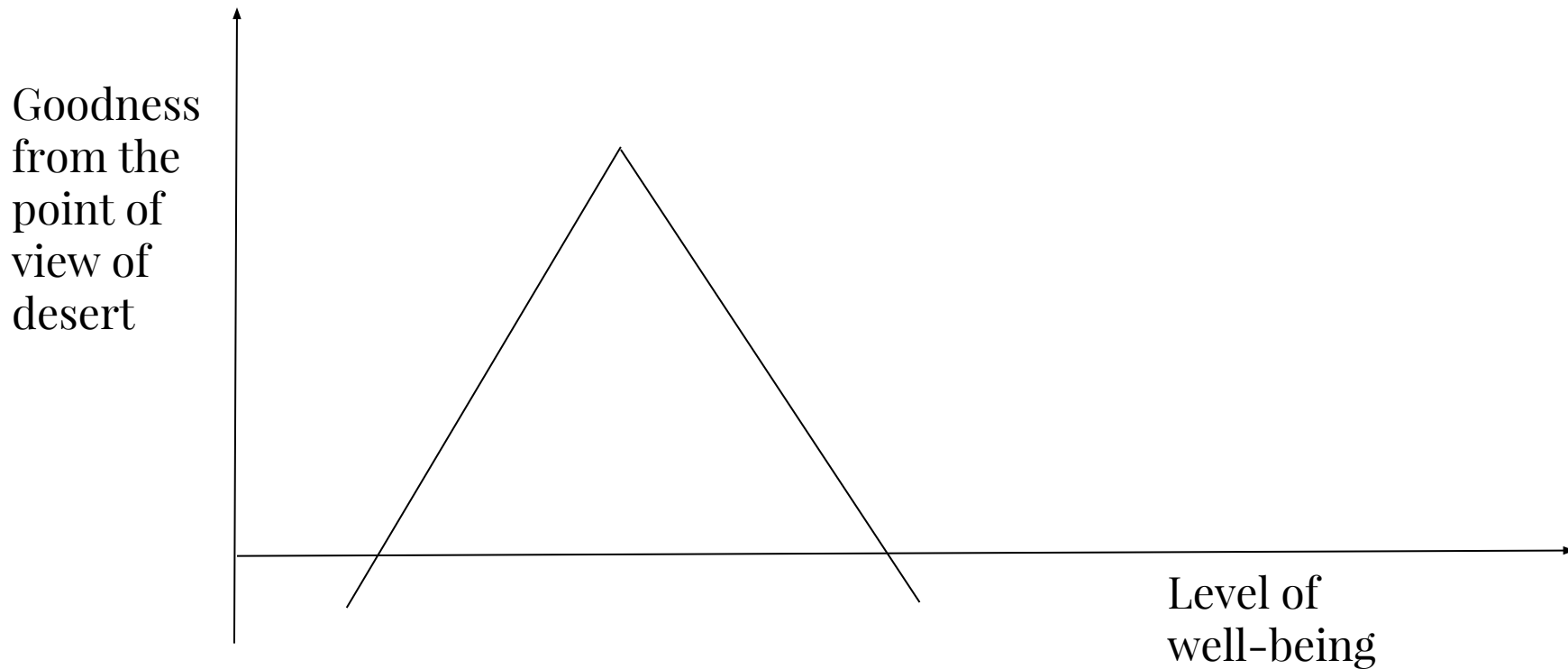
The ruler is hidden away in his castle, so can act cruelly in secret

Human nature is selfish and greedy

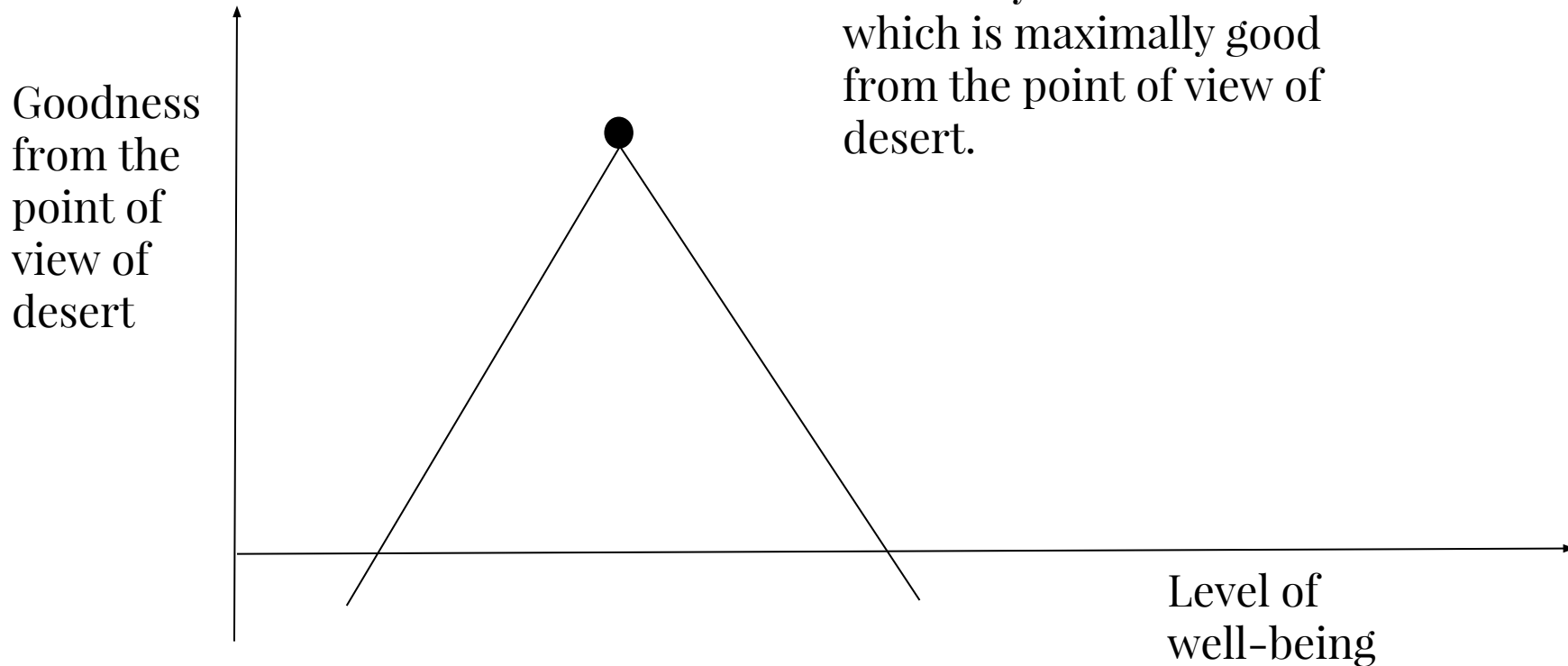
It is morally permissible to act cruelly to have a stable state (the ends justify the means)

End goal of a stable state

The Geometry of Desert



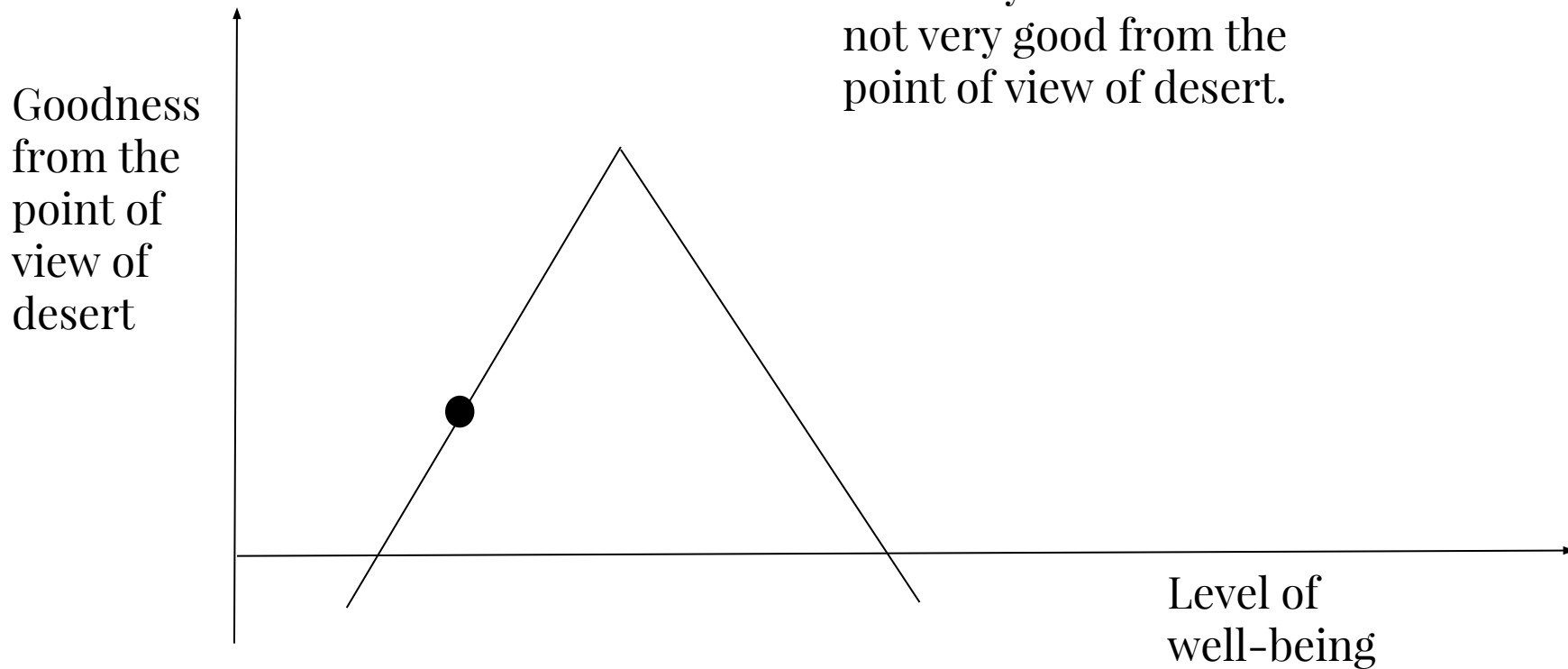
The Geometry of Desert



This person has exactly what they deserve from which is maximally good from the point of view of desert.

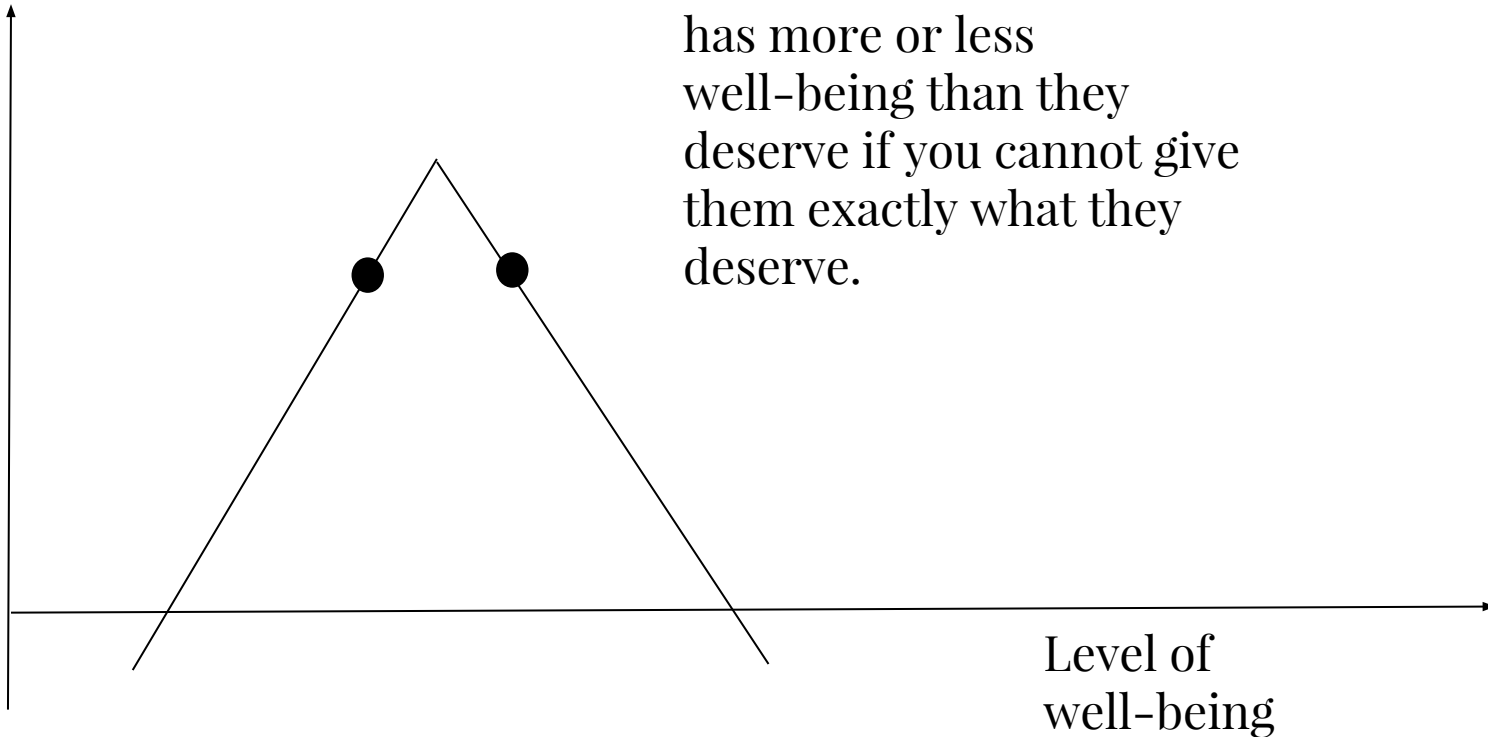
The Geometry of Desert

This person has much less than they deserve which is not very good from the point of view of desert.



The Geometry of Desert

Goodness
from the
point of
view of
desert

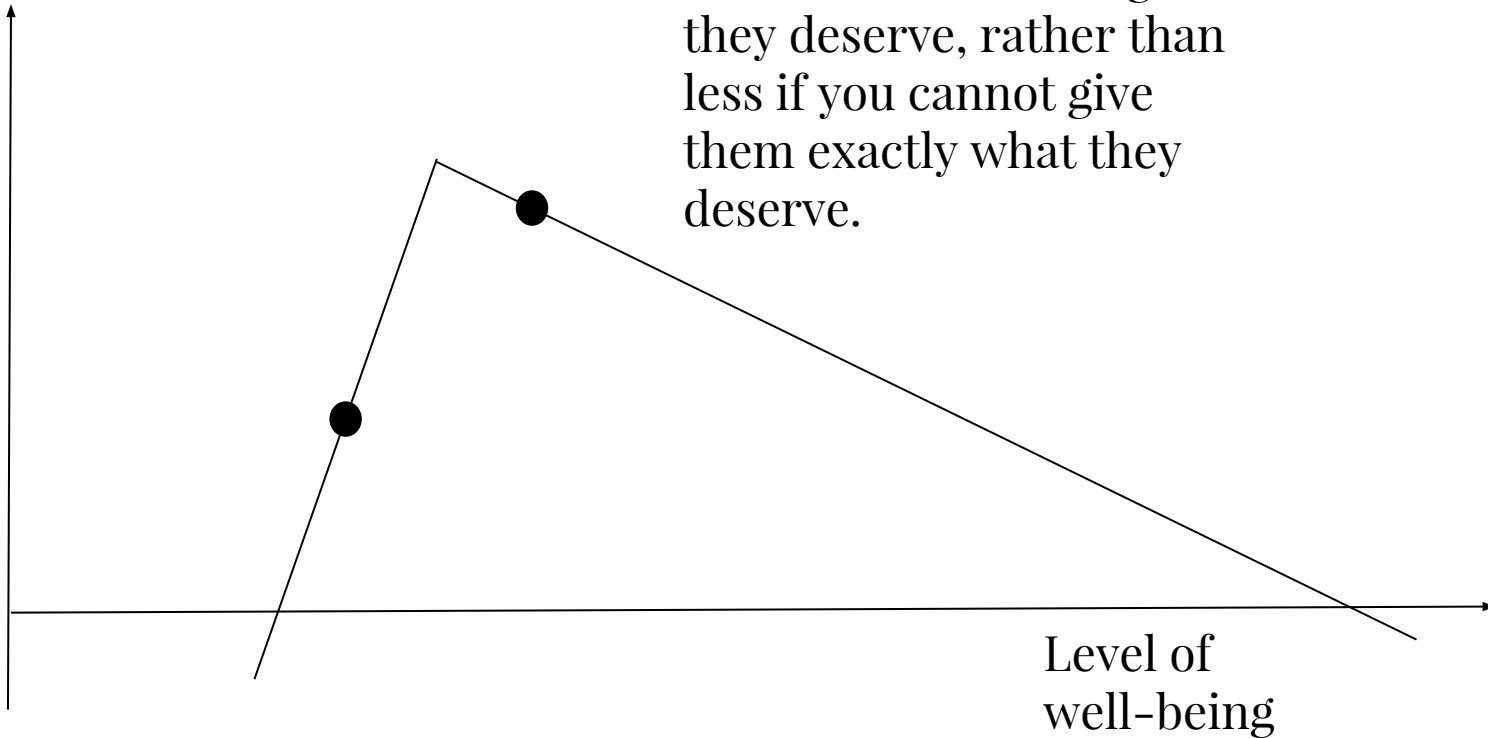


It is **does not matter**
whether or not someone
has more or less
well-being than they
deserve if you cannot give
them exactly what they
deserve.

The Geometry of Mercy

Goodness
from the
point of
view of
desert

It is **better** for someone to
have more well-being than
they deserve, rather than
less if you cannot give
them exactly what they
deserve.



Seneca

There are no secrets in a palace so a ruler cannot be cruel in secret

Human nature is to put the interests of the society ahead of one's own desires

Punishment for improvement

Cruelty is never morally permissible

Machiavelli

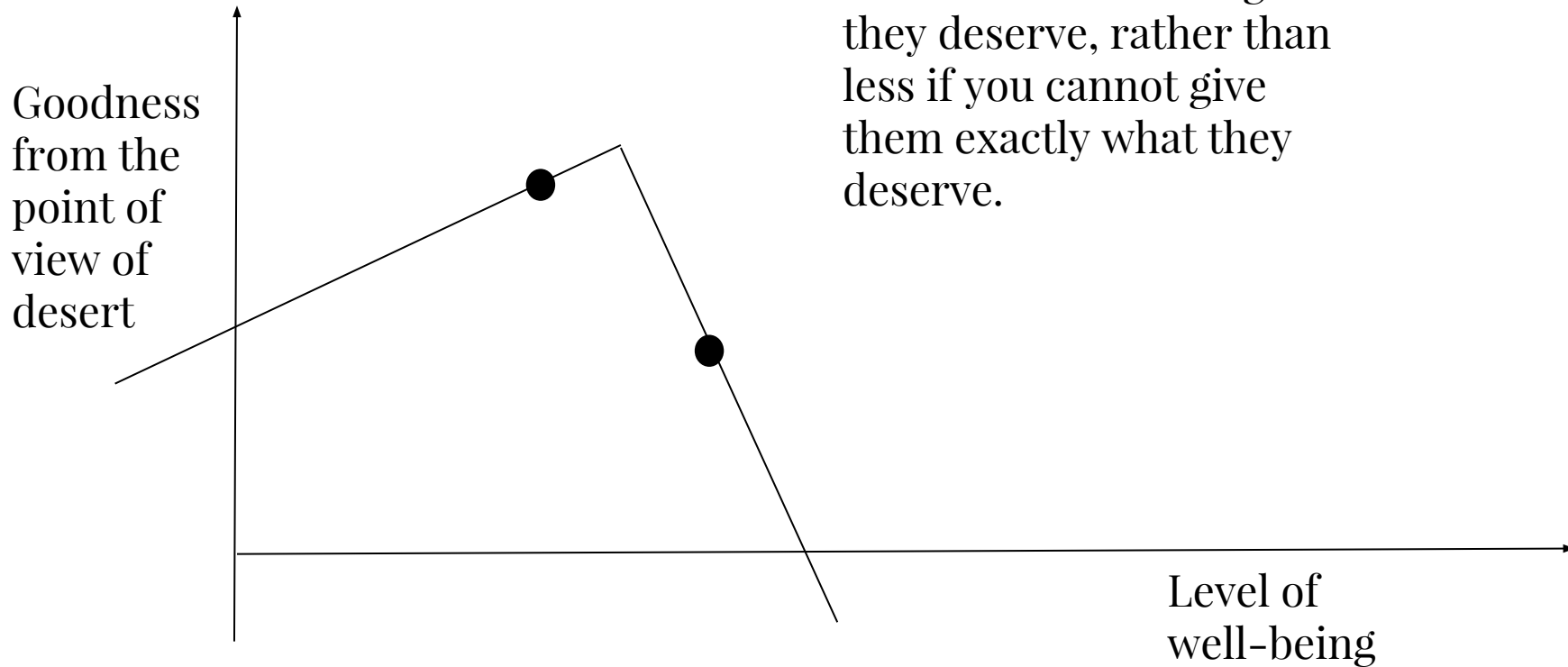
The ruler is hidden away in his castle, so can act cruelly in secret

Human nature is selfish and greedy

It is morally permissible to act cruelly to have a stable state (the ends justify the means)

End goal of a stable state

The Geometry of Cruelty



It is **worse** for someone to have more well-being than they deserve, rather than less if you cannot give them exactly what they deserve.

Seneca

There are no secrets in a palace so a ruler cannot be cruel in secret

Human nature is to put the interests of the society ahead of one's own desires

Punishment for improvement

Cruelty is never morally permissible

End goal of a stable state

Machiavelli

The ruler is hidden away in his castle, so can act cruelly in secret

Human nature is selfish and greedy

Punishment for deterrence

It is morally permissible to act cruelly to have a stable state (the ends justify the means)

