



***Virtú* revisited**
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Introduction

It is notorious that Machiavelli did not mean by *virtú* what we standardly mean by “virtue”. But what did he mean by it? According to one influential interpretation, Machiavelli’s *virtú* is simply the *virtus* of pagan antiquity, now openly distinguished from its Christian counterpart. “He is indeed rejecting Christian ethics”, writes Isaiah Berlin, “but in favour of another system, another moral universe – the world of Pericles or of Scipio, or even of the Duke of Valentino.”¹ In a similar vein, J. G. A. Pocock describes the outlook of Machiavelli and his circle as “a basically Aristotelian republicanism from which Machiavelli did not seem to his friends ... to have greatly departed.”²

This view of Machiavelli – and it is still widespread – overlooks what is deepest and most troubling in his thought. Machiavelli’s *virtú* is not the *virtus* of Cicero and Sallust, though it shares some of its surface features. Its essential attribute is not beauty or nobility but utility for the advancement and maintenance of state power. This was something new and seminal. Machiavelli himself did not grasp its full implications. It fell to later thinkers, including Hobbes, Locke and Hume, to spell them out systematically. Machiavelli’s friends were very much mistaken if they saw him as a run-of-the-mill Aristotelian republican. His enemies had a better measure of the man.³

Recent years have seen many attempts to resurrect a “politics of virtue”, to quote the title of a recent book by John Milbank and Adrian Pabst.⁴ I am sceptical of such endeavours. Whatever its intentions, a “politics of virtue” must end up promoting the same kind of instrumentalism discernible in Machiavelli, for the modern state’s interest is not and cannot be in virtue itself, but

¹ Isaiah Berlin, “The Originality of Machiavelli”, in Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. 299.

² J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 316.

³ See Felix Raab, *The English Face of Machiavelli* (London: Routledge, 1964), p. 31: “Pole condemned *Il Principe* and its author not because he failed to understand them, but because he understood them very well.”

⁴ John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Post-Liberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

only its consequences. There is no point trying to breath warmth into that “coldest of all cold monsters”.⁵ Rather, we should seek out and create forms of community within which the life of virtue might still be lead *despite* the political organisation of our age.

***Virtus* in the Republican Tradition**

To appreciate the originality of Machiavelli’s conception of *virtú*, we must look very briefly at the prior history of term.

The Latin word *virtus* derives from *vir*, meaning “man” or “politically active man”. Originally, it meant little more than “manliness”, or “courage in war” – war being the chief testing-ground of manliness in the Roman republic.⁶ Caesar, for instance, recounts how he put off punishing two Gallic commanders convicted of embezzlement in consideration of their outstanding *virtus*. Clearly for him the word was not a moral accolade.⁷ However, from the second century BC, by the process known to linguists as “semantic calque”, *virtus* acquired many of the connotations of the Greek word *arete*, or “excellence in general”.⁸ This new usage was popularised above all by Cicero in his philosophical works. Elsewhere, however, *virtus* continued to be used in a narrowly martial sense, or in the somewhat wider but still not entirely general sense of political courage or “public spirit”.

Christianity put a freeze on this semantic fluidity. For Jerome, Augustine and their medieval successors, *virtus* was simply the genus of which justice, prudence, courage and temperance were the four main species; its original civic meaning all but disappeared from view.⁹ It was only in the fifteenth century, in the hands of humanists such as Bruni and Alberti, that *virtus* again became what it was in the age of Cicero: the specific virtue of strenuous devotion to the public weal, with overtones of manly energy and strength. “I am the great Aristotle”, runs a not

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1.11.

⁶ See Myles McDonnell, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1-71.

⁷ McDonnell, pp. 7-8.

⁸ McDonnell, pp. 72-141.

⁹ *Virtus* was very occasionally used in its original meaning of manliness in secular medieval literature. See Joanna Huntington, “The quality of his *virtus* proved him a perfect man: Hereward ‘The Wake’ and the representation of lay masculinity”, in P.H. Cullum and Katherine J. Lewis (eds.), *Religious Men and Masculine Identity in the Middle Ages* (Boydell Press: 2013), pp. 77-93.

untypical inscription on the wall of the Palazzo Pubblico, Sienna, composed in 1414, “and I tell you in hexameters about the men whose *virtus* made Rome so great that her power reached to the sky.”¹⁰ *Virtus* in this humanist tradition was the quality by means of which rulers and citizens might, with fortune’s favour, increase the power and honour of their native land. With it, great things were possible. Without it, all was lost.

This very brief history of the term *virtus* bears out a point well made by philosopher Sophie-Grace Chappell: thin concepts “are like the higher-numbered elements in the periodic table, artefacts of theory which do not occur naturally and which, even once isolated, are unstable under normal conditions”.¹¹ Philosophers tend to forget that their uniquely thin conception of “virtue” is a theoretical abstraction from that term’s original “thick” meaning, which even now is liable to surface in non-philosophical contexts. Here, for instance, is Lionel Trilling on the aptness of referring to George Orwell as a “virtuous man”:

There are few men who, in addition to being good, have the simplicity and sturdiness and activity which allow us to say of them that they are virtuous men, for somehow to say that a man “is good,” or even to speak of a man who “is virtuous,” is not the same thing as saying, “He is a virtuous man.” By some quirk of the spirit of the language, the form of that sentence brings out the primitive meaning of the word “virtuous,” which is not merely moral goodness, but also fortitude and strength in goodness.¹²

One could put this observation to the test by commenting, in the course of casual conversation with non-philosophers, on the “virtue” of such-or-such a man or woman. I wager that the word will be taken to signify something more concrete than Aquinas’ *virtus* or Aristotle’s *arete* – if indeed it is taken as a straightforward approbative at all.

¹⁰ See Nicolai Rubinstein, “Political Ideas in Siennese Art: The Frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Taddeo di Bartolo in the Palazzo Pubblico”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 21.3/4 (1958), pp. 179-207.

¹¹ Timothy Chappell, “There Are No Thin Concepts”, in Simon Kirchin (ed.), *Thick Concepts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 182.

¹² Lionel Trilling, *The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent: Selected Essays* (Northwestern University Press, 2008), pp. 261-62.

Machiavelli's Innovation.

All writers in the civic republican tradition could agree that *virtus* was a quality supremely useful to the civic body. “With this *virtus* your ancestors conquered all of Italy first, then razed Carthage, overthrew Numantia, brought the most powerful kings and the most warlike people under the sway of this empire”, declared Cicero in his fourth Philippic.¹³ “*Virtus* is the quality by means of which it is possible to maintain a stable and lasting political society” wrote the Renaissance humanist Patrizi.¹⁴ But *virtus* was not *just* useful. It had an intrinsic lustre or beauty, signified by the terms *kalon* in Greek and *honestas* in Latin. Cicero was at pains to demonstrate that nothing is truly useful which is not also honourable, or at least not dishonourable. Properly understood, the *utilis* can never conflict with the *honestus*.¹⁵ His Renaissance followers tirelessly repeated the point, insisting again and again that no good can come to a prince who kills the innocent, breaks his faith, and so forth.

Machiavelli followed humanist convention in identifying *virtú* as that which promotes the power and glory of the state. He added, however, that *virtú* so understood has no necessary connection with *honestas*, for what is useful in matters of state may patently also be dishonest, cruel, miserly etc.. In *The Prince*, for instance, he praises the *virtú* of Roman emperor Septimius Severus in maintaining internal peace and order over his eighteen-year reign while freely acknowledging his cruelty and trickery.¹⁶ In the *Discourses on Livy*, his focus is on the character of the citizen body, not the ruler, yet his analysis follows the same general lines: *virtú* in citizens is whatever promotes civic greatness, whether or not it is intrinsically valuable. It can be instilled, for example, by the calculating use of religious rituals – oaths, auspices and the like – though behaviour procured in this way is clearly not virtue in Aristotle’s sense, which proceeds from a firm and unchanging love of “the fine”.¹⁷

Machiavelli is often praised for what is seen as his tough-minded jettisoning of ancestral pieties – a view encouraged by his own statement that it is “more appropriate to pursue the real truth of

¹³ Cicero, *Philippics* 4.13. Quoted in McDonnell, p. 3.

¹⁴ Patrizi, *The Institution of a Republic*, Bk. IV. Quoted in Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 175.

¹⁵ Cicero, *On Duties* III.11.

¹⁶ *The Prince*, Chapter 19.

¹⁷ *Discourses on Livy*, Bk. 1, chs. 11-15.

the matter than to repeat what people have imagined about it”.¹⁸ But mere tough-mindedness is hardly adequate to explain such a revolution in values. Are we really to suppose that men like Aristotle and Cicero were just too woolly-headed or soft-hearted to see that lies and crimes sometimes pay? No – the real explanation of Machiavelli’s new morality lies in the emergence of a novel form of political organisation, the state, which he was one of the first to identify and analyse. Let me explain.

The *polis*, in Aristotle’s classic account, is an association of friends, dedicated like all such associations to the achievement of a common good. The difference between the *polis* and other associations – dining or boating clubs, say – is simply one of scope; these latter aim at some specific, partial good, whereas the *polis* “takes regard to the whole of life”.¹⁹ Political morality is an extension of personal morality, differing from it only in generality, not in kind.

All this is a way of saying that the *polis*, for Aristotle, is not a *thing* distinct from the political activity of the citizen body, any more than friendship is a thing distinct from the mutual activity of friends. Conversely, political activity does not aim at the production of some entity external to itself. It belongs, in Aristotle’s terminology, to the sphere of *praxis*, doing, not *poesis*, production. As Aquinas puts it in his commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics*:

Reason can operate about things either as *making something*, in which case its action passes on to some external material, as we see in the mechanical arts of the smith and the shipwright; or by *doing something*, in which case the action remains intrinsic to the agent, as we see in *deliberation, making choice, willing*, and all that pertains to moral science. It is clear that political science, which is concerned with the ordered relationship between men, belongs, not to the realm of *making* or factitive science, or mechanical art, but rather to that of *doing* or the moral sciences.²⁰

There can be, on this view of politics, no distinctly political morality, no *raison d’état*. Bad actions cannot in principle benefit the political association, since (as Aristotle puts it) “it is for the sake of actions valuable in themselves ... that political associations must be considered to

¹⁸ *The Prince*, Chapter 15

¹⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1160a24.

²⁰ Quoted in Charles S. Singleton, “The Perspective of Art”, *The Kenyon Review* 15/2 (1953), 172.

exist”.²¹ Consider the following analogy. Sam and John are workmates and best friends. One day Sam reads about a job vacancy in distant Ohio. Knowing that John would jump at this opportunity, Sam deliberately conceals it from him. His aim, as he puts it to himself, is to “preserve the friendship” – a paradoxical ambition, since he has, by his action, already destroyed the friendship. “Friendship” is nothing distinct from friendly action, so cannot be preserved by means of unfriendly action. Similarly, the *polis* is nothing distinct from the collective activity of its citizens, so cannot be preserved by schemes that undermine such activity.

This interpretation of ancient political life may seem wildly idealistic. The Athens of the thirty tyrants and the Rome of Pompey and Caesar were not exactly “associations of friends”. Nonetheless, the ideal was close enough to reality to appear a plausible guide and aspiration. Greece in the classical period was divided into some 1500 city-states, most of them home to fewer than a thousand citizens. Athens, the largest by far, had between thirty and forty thousand citizens. It had “virtually no permanent officialdom whatever, administrative positions being distributed by sortation among councillors, while the diminutive police force was composed of Scythian slaves.”²² There were no palaces, no administrative headquarters, no garrisons – nothing that could be pointed to as a physical embodiment of state power. Societies of this type might be prey to all kinds of factionalism and corruption, but not that specific form of immorality which has as its goal the health of “the state”, for there was no such formation. “Machiavellianism” could find no foothold here.

The modern conception of “the state” as an abstract entity distinct from any individual or group of individuals emerged only much later. When exactly is a matter of dispute. Some have traced it to medieval monarchy, with its symbolism of the king’s second spiritual body, or “body politic”.²³ Others have seen the first glimmerings of it among the professional diplomatists of Renaissance Italy, anxious to bind their often erratic political masters to courses of action

²¹ *Politics* 1281a2.

²² Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 39.

²³ See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

advantageous to the interests of *il stato*. Machiavelli (himself of course a Florentine diplomat) frequently used the word *stato* in something close to its modern sense, thereby helping to establish it as the standard term for that form of political organisation.

Corresponding to this new conception of the state as something abstract and thing-like we find a new conception of statecraft as a productive activity, akin to sculpture or architecture. Again, Machiavelli sounds the characteristic note:

Without doubt, anyone wishing to establish a republic at present would find it much easier among mountain people, where there is no civil society, than among men who are used to living in cities, where civil society is corrupt; a sculptor will more easily extract a beautiful statue from a rough piece of marble than he can from one badly blocked out by others.²⁴

And in examining their [Moses, Cyrus, Romulus and the like] life and deeds, it will be seen that they owed nothing to fortune but the opportunity which gave them the matter to be shaped into whatever form they thought fit.²⁵

For as we have said, he who does not lay his foundations beforehand may by great ability do so afterwards, although with great trouble to the architect and danger to the building. If then one considers the procedure of the Duke [Cesare Borgia], it will be seen how firm were the foundations of his future power.²⁶

This image of the statesman as a great artist, carving his state out of the unformed matter of humanity, has become such a cliché that we overlook its radical novelty. What it signifies, in effect, is that henceforth politics is to be regarded as a form of *poesis*, not *praxis*.²⁷ Machiavelli's immoralism is a straightforward consequence of this shift of perspective, for to regard an activity

²⁴ *Discourses on Livy*, 1.11.

²⁵ *The Prince*, ch. 6.

²⁶ *The Prince*, ch. 7.

²⁷ This point is well made in Charles S. Singleton, "The Perspective of Art", *The Kenyon Review* 15/2 (1953), pp. 169-189.

as *poesis* is to refer it to standards which are not moral, which may conflict with and even displace moral standards. St. Petersburg is no less beautiful for having been built by conscripted serfs, nor is a glorious state any less glorious for having been brought into being using the methods of Cesare Borgia. (Both may be deplored for other reasons, of course, but that doesn't take away from the specific excellence that is theirs.) If politics is *poesis*, a potential gulf opens up between the honourable and the politically useful – a gulf that cannot arise so long as the polity is seen in Aristotelian terms, as an association of friends. Machiavellianism was not a product of unique tough-mindedness or unique wickedness. It was a logical implication of the new state system, and as such would have come into existence sooner or later even without Machiavelli.

***Virtú* domesticated**

Machiavelli was not a consistent Machiavellian. Apart from his original and idiosyncratic use of *virtú*, his ethical vocabulary remained conventional. Thus he frequently extols as *virtuoso* conduct that is, by his own admission, cruel, avaricious, impious, dishonest and even wicked. It is hard to gauge the tone of such remarks. Is this the anguish of a man forced to choose between the greatness of his native city and the salvation of his soul? Or the flippant irony of someone deploying – in inverted commas, as it were – a language that has become alien and empty to him? The debate continues to this day.

One thing is clear: Machiavelli's ambivalence was intolerable to his successors. Most responded with a vehement reassertion of classical and Christian morality, condemning Machiavelli as a satanic innovator. But the most forward-looking and influential of his successors sought harmony in the opposite direction, by bringing morality as a whole into line with civic imperatives. Hobbes, for instance, defined virtue as any habit of mind and action conducive to civil peace and defence:

By a precept of reason, peace is recognised to be good, from which it follows by the same reason that all the courses of action necessary for the preservation of peace must be good. So *modesty, equity, trust, humanity* and *mercy*, which we

have demonstrated to be necessary for peace, must at the same time be good practices or habits of mind, that is to say, they must be *virtues*.²⁸

This *looks* on the surface like a vindication of traditional morality against Machiavellian cynicism. In truth, of course, Hobbes has avoided the appearance of cynicism only by being more consistently Machiavellian than Machiavelli himself. All the virtues, and not just *virtú* in Machiavelli's special sense, are now defined in terms of political utility; thus modesty, equity, humanity etc. regain their categorical force only by being emptied of their traditional content. To be sure, Hobbes had very different political ideals to Machiavelli, from which he derived a correspondingly different set of virtues (he did not think highly of physical courage, for instance). But the structure of argument is the same in both cases: first a state of affairs is identified as good; then those traits necessary for its production are defined as virtues. Here is the root of a position – “virtue consequentialism”, we can call it – which remains powerful to this day, even among philosophers who might consider themselves free of such influences. When Peter Geach, for instance, writes that “men need virtues as bees need stings” he reveals himself to be more a disciple of Machiavelli and Hobbes than of Aristotle and Aquinas.²⁹

The modern Machiavellians

Recent years have seen a number of attempts to put virtue on the political agenda, including the UK government's Character Innovation Fund and the Templeton Foundation's Character Development project. These initiatives have garnered support from across the political spectrum; concern with character is no longer a preserve of conservatives. But common to all such projects, right- and left-wing, is a characteristically Machiavellian emphasis on the *effects* of virtuous action, as distinct from its intrinsic quality. Virtue is commended as a means to economic growth, social justice, class mobility, etc.. The Aristotelian thought that it is only for the sake of actions fine and beautiful in themselves that political society exists at all has been entirely forgotten.

As a not untypical illustration of this tendency, consider an article by political commentator Richard Reeves, “A Question of Character”, published in *Prospect* in 2008. Reeves starts by

²⁸ Hobbes, *De Cive: The Latin Version*, III.XXXI. Quoted in Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 322.

²⁹ Peter Geach, *The Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 17.

defining “character” in a narrowly technical sense, as “a sense of personal agency or self-direction; an acceptance of personal responsibility; and effective regulation of one’s own emotions, in particular the ability to resist temptation or at least defer gratification”. Thus understood, character is both an effect and a cause of economic position; low-income homes are more likely to turn out children with “bad characters”, who in turn are more likely to end up in low-income jobs. Inequality of character perpetuates inequality of income. To reduce the latter, we must redress the former, if necessary by “compelling failing mothers and fathers to attend parenting classes”.

Reeves’ concern with character is, it is clear, instrumental through and through. Economic equality is what ultimately matters to him; character formation is a means to this end. A string of crassly mechanical metaphors serves to underline the point. “The ‘stock of equipment’ which makes up character is of vital importance in the construction of a successful life.” “The family is the main ‘character factory’.” “Consistent parental love and discipline is the motor of the character production line.” Machiavelli drew his imagery from the atelier. Reeves draws his from the factory floor. The metaphors have changed, but their implication is the same: virtue is nothing but a tool for the production of politically desirable states of affairs.

Now why should this matter, one might ask. Why shouldn’t those of us who have virtue “at heart” accept the support of those whose use for it is purely political? After all, we need what help we can get. I am not so sure. The truth is that virtue commandeered for political ends is not really *virtue* at all. It is an ersatz, a false coin, a trap for the unwary and an abomination to the wise. (“Confusion of tongues of good and evil; this sign I give you as the sign of the state”, wrote Nietzsche.³⁰) Think of the discredit into which the Victorian language of patriotism, loyalty and self-sacrifice fell after the First World War, particularly among intellectuals, who perceived that this language had been used to dupe people into giving up their lives for an unworthy cause. Or – to take a contemporary example – consider a friend of mine who runs a charity for the rehabilitation of ex-offenders. This man is a devout Christian: he wants to save souls. But as far as the state is concerned, his job is to turn troublesome ex-cons into docile, law-abiding, wage slaves. The ex-cons know this, which makes them wary. Who is he really working for – them or “the man”?

³⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1.11.

This raises perhaps the deepest question about virtue in the modern world – a question which, to my knowledge, no modern virtue ethicist has so much as broached. “Virtue”, declared Paul Valéry in 1934, “is a dead or at least a dying word.” It is rarely uttered except with ironic intent, or in special academic or religious settings.³¹ What was true then is still more true now. I dare say that it is impossible today for a thinking person to use the words “virtue” or “virtuous” outside the seminar room without a hint of irony. Even Lionel Trilling’s sincere acknowledgement of George Orwell as “a virtuous man” is inflected with a certain ironic relish in the appositeness of the word’s “archaic simplicity” to the character of Orwell, “in whom there was indeed a quality of an earlier and simpler day”.

But why has virtue become a dead word? It was the French Revolution, suggests Valéry, which by turning “virtue” into an instrument of party passion made it loathsome to thinking people. There follows a general reflection on the politicisation of ethical language, which I cannot resist quoting in full:

But this, too, you know, gentlemen – we know all too well and through repeated experience – that the political use made of our most beautiful nouns, of the noblest intentions that language can express, degrades them until, at length, they become stale, worn, and exhausted. We know all too well what happens to these ideal values, these superior creatures of the abstract language and of detached thought, in the violence of debate, in the tragicomedy of party politics, in the agony of dissention. *Order, Reason, Justice, Fatherland, Truth, Virtue*: these august words, prostituted for factional ends, are shouted into the public ear, disgracefully bandied about and garbled by the ranters while the majesty of their venerable meanings is degraded by the cynicism of leaders and the credulous simplicity of the led. As a result, great words, thus tainted, fall into disrepute and the man of integrity – above all, the man who thinks – will ultimately abandon them to their wretched fate; he shuns them as mere means of manipulating passions, of exciting men to behave in herd-like fashion.³²

³¹ *Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 11. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 106.

³² *Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, vol. 11., p. 109.

All this is true and important. But Valéry casts his gaze too narrowly. The corruption of ethical language which he associates with the French Revolution and the mass politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries began in truth much earlier, in the age of absolutism. It was the emergence of the state itself, considered as an entity separate from the citizen body, which made it possible to think, first of *virtú*, then of virtue in general, as a means to an end beyond itself. That, at any rate, is the thesis of this paper.