

Machiavellian virtu



The concept of virtu is central to Machiavellian political theory in *The Prince*. The problematic nature of this term makes a concise definition difficult to formulate. Varying definitions often lead to different interpretations of Machiavelli. In order to understand the implications of Machiavelli's writing it is important to explore this concept and how it shapes his political theory. This essay will be divided into two parts. The first will deal with the definition of virtu and an examination of all the ideas that are included in this term. Examples of historical and contemporary counterparts will be investigated and compared to the Machiavellian model. Next, the implications of this idea on Machiavelli's political theory will be discussed in detail. Before beginning the examination of the term virtu it is first necessary to explain the context of this essay with regard to *The Prince*. Many scholars have suggested that *The Prince* was written with a less than obvious intent. At face value it appear to be no more than a manual for ruling, written in hope that Machiavelli might find employment with the Medici family. A different interpretation sees the text as a offer of bad advice, or at the very least ambiguous advice, written with the intention of bringing down the Medici family that had left Machiavelli banished from the city he loved and destitute. Both interpretations are accepted as possibilities, however for our uses we will be taking *The Prince* at face value and assume his advice is given in earnest. If it were the case that he was writing with less than truthful intent it would dramatically change the context of his virtu. The unscrupulous, deceitful and vicious activities required of proper statesmanship, according to Machiavelli, can be regarded as a scheme for a ruler's downfall. *The Prince* deals with the various questions of policy as they pertain to new ruler, or one taking control of a new territory. From this

context the idea of virtu emerges. Virtu is a collection of characteristics that make a ruler great. The tides of fortune (fortuna) can wash away any ruler with ease. The ruler who possesses Machiavelli's virtu, while not completely free from the possible negative effects of fortune, is in far better position to deal with whatever may arise. Virtu must not be confused with the modern concept of virtue. Machiavellian virtu differs greatly from the present moral model commonly associated with virtuosity. Similarly most historical interpretations of virtue do not agree with Machiavelli. Christian virtue, once described by Nietzsche as "slave morality" has very little in common with Machiavellian virtu. The Christian version includes characteristics such as meekness, humility, charity, piety, and forgiveness. None of these ideas are present in Machiavelli's princely virtue (virtu). While not an outright atheist, Machiavelli was far from a religious man and held a certain disdain for the Catholic Church. He never voices these views and pays respect to the power of religion in his writings, since it would be the equivalent of political suicide to do otherwise, but a secular air does surround his writings. The Platonic model of virtue is similarly out of sync with Machiavelli's virtu. The emphasis on truth and justice that characterizes Platonic virtue is nowhere to be found in Machiavelli's conception. Similarly, Roman virtue, which places the highest importance on honesty and honor, is a poor equivalent to virtu. From this one could make the argument that Machiavelli is amoral, or without a moral code. This is not the case. A moral code is defined as a set of standards, by reference to which conduct can be praised or criticized. Machiavelli is very vocal in his praise and condemnation of various courses of action. We have examined what virtu is not, now we will move on to clarifying what this term does mean. If Christian, Platonic and Roman

conceptions of virtue do not equate to Machiavelli's princely virtue, what then can we use to help clarify this troubling concept? The answer lies in the heroic ideas of virtue present in writings of Homer. The Homeric version of virtue found in Iliad and Odyssey is far more in tune with virtu. Emphasis is placed not on truth, justice, and similar concepts. Instead the hero is required to be an ingenious survivor, sacrificing all with self-preservation as the only goal. Where other models of virtue fail to measure up to Machiavelli's, the Homeric characteristics of virtue are more closely related. The linguistic grounding of the term virtu is not without relevance. Virtu is derived from, but not exactly related to the Italian word virtus. Formed from the root vir, which means man, or more precisely free male citizens, virtus refers to the characteristics displayed in the free male citizen class when fulfilling roles and obligations. In this sense only the vir aspect is truly applicable. Contemporaries of Machiavelli have also utilized the term virtu. D'Vinci used this term with a strictly scientific definition. He used it to designate, in a physical sense, motive power. Another connotation of the term, and most widely used is found within the medical community of the Italian Renaissance. This form of the word describes the vitality giving force upon which the life and strength of all organisms rely. Some authors have suggested an echo of this medicinal grounding in Machiavelli's use of the term. A letter written some years later refers to a king who has recently recovered from illness as having "his virtu once again become strong". Despite any evidence and similarities very little importance has been attached to this theory. The use of this term in *The Prince* is widespread and includes numerous connotations. No one word can properly express the idea, and the long list of variations makes applying the term difficult. The result is

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an array of different possible interpretations in each instance of its use.

Some Ideas within the term virtu are desirable in a modern sense. Intellect is a key aspect of the concept. A ruler should be knowledgeable and utilize this knowledge in the affairs of his state. A keen intellect will aid a ruler in search of greatness while ignorance will allow for misfortune and poor decisions.

History should be studied rigorously and the actions of great men mimicked.

A smart ruler has advantages in all respects of political life. Confidence also plays a role in the formulation of virtu:" I do think, however, that it is better

to be headstrong than cautious, for fortune is a lady. It is necessary, if you want to master her, to beat and strike her. And one sees she more often submits to those who act boldly than those who proceed in a calculating

fashion." A proper ruler will be sure of himself and command the respect of

those below him. Machiavelli gives the example of Maximilian who often

undoes his decrees after they meet criticism. The result is no one knows

what his intentions are, and his decisions are unreliable. Talent, intelligence

and confidence are all required by Machiavelli if a ruler is to possess virtu.

Machiavelli also demands that his ruler of virtu be pragmatic. He must be

prepared for every circumstance and able to apply his knowledge to

whatever endeavors he embarks upon. He must be attentive to those around

him and weigh their opinions wisely taking into account all that may be

gained and lost for each party involved. Attention should always be paid to

activities abroad as they may affect the state or convey useful information.

The ruler must be alert and perceptive as people may plot against in a bid

for power. Decisiveness play a role as well. Uncertainty is unacceptable for a

ruler and shows weakness. This pragmatism will serve the ruler well in times

of crises and help to ensure his reign is long. This brings us to the negative

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moral aspects of Machiavelli's virtu. These beliefs led to his fall from popularity as they portrayed him as a tyrant with little heed for so-called moral imperatives. While Machiavelli believes that whenever possible the upstanding road should be taken, there are situations that may require that a leader set aside traditional morality in favor of cunning and trickery. The example of Agathocles, who made bold and deceitful moves to gain sole possession of power, such as the slaughter of Syracuse's senators and richest citizens, gains praise from Machiavelli: "He was the son of a potter, and from start to finish lived a wicked life; nevertheless his wicked behavior testified to so much strength (virtu) of mind and body...there seems to be no reason why he should be judged less admirable than any of the finest generals." Although Agathocles receives praise from Machiavelli, the evilness of his character does garner much deserved attention: "...his inhuman cruelty and brutality, and his innumerable wicked actions, mean it would be wrong to praise him as one of the finest men." The distinction between being a good general and being a good man is clear. Positions of power sometimes require of men actions, which under other circumstance would not gain you praise. Circumstance seems to be the main determinant of whether wicked actions are to be employed or not. A ruler must be able to act against his good nature if it is required of him: "For anyone who wants to act the part of the good man in all circumstances will bring about his own ruin, for those he has to deal with will not all be good. So it is necessary for a ruler, if he wants to hold onto power, to learn how not to be good, and to know when it is and when it is not necessary to use this knowledge." Machiavelli is all too aware that sometimes wickedness will profit a ruler far more than acts that are supposedly virtuous: "Above all do not be upset if you are supposed to have

those vices a ruler needs if he is going to stay securely in power, for, if you think about it you will realize there are some ways of behaving that are supposedly virtuous, but would lead to your downfall, and others that are supposed to be wicked, but will lead to your welfare and peace of mind.”

Integrity and truth have always been praised as characteristics of great men.

However, careful observation has taught Machiavelli that in affairs of power and statecraft the honest man is not necessarily the one to mimic:”

Everybody recognizes how praiseworthy it is for a ruler to keep his word and live a life of integrity, without relying on craftiness. Nevertheless, we see that in practice, in these days, those rulers have thought it not important to keep their word have achieved great things, and have known how to employ cunning to confuse and disorientate other men. In the end they have been able to overcome those who have placed great store in integrity.” Virtu has little to do with justice and more to do with opportunism. Traits that are virtuous for the everyday citizen do not apply to princely virtu. A Ruler, due to his position in a society, is subject different standards. It is due to Machiavelli’s disdain for the masses that he acknowledges the ruler must be above common morality:” They are ungrateful, fickle, deceptive and deceiving, avoider of danger, eager to gain. They promise you their blood, their possessions, their lives, and their children, as I have said before, so long as you seem to have no need of them. But as soon as you need help, they turn against you.” If people were not so wicked and undesirable things would be different. However the nature of man, as Machiavelli sees it does not allow for traditional virtue:” So you see a wise ruler cannot, and should not, keep his word when doing so is to his disadvantage, and when the reasons that led him to promise to do so no longer apply. Of course, if all

men were good, this advice would be bad: but since men are wicked and will not keep faith with you, you need not keep faith with them." It is now clear how the concept of princely virtue differs with traditional notions of virtue.

How then does this conception of virtu affect Machiavelli's political theory?

The answer is that virtu shapes almost all aspects of Machiavelli's formulations and dominates the text of *The Prince*. From the preeminence of military power and strategy in a ruler's life to theories of which type of ruler is the most suited to overcoming the force of fortune, virtu takes front seat in almost all of Machiavelli's discussions. Perhaps the most important aspect of virtu and its relation to political power, according to *The Prince*, is military superiority. In fact, Machiavelli suggests this be the sole area of concern for a ruler: "A ruler, then, should have no other concern, no other thought, should pay attention to nothing aside from war, military institutions, and the training of his soldiers...It is of such importance that military prowess not only keeps those who have been born rulers in power, but also often enables men who have been born private citizens to come to power." While this may be a slight overstatement, this section is written to impress upon the reader the importance of military strength. Machiavelli does address non-military issues in his text, but none are given the high regard that issues of war receive. Another issue discussed in *The Prince* is the nature of rule and the role virtu plays in bringing one to power. Rulers may come to power in different ways some, such as ecclesiastical rulers, are chosen amongst a group of like minded men. These rulers face little challenges as their assumed relationship with God prevents ill from coming to them. Similarly. Rulers who are in power based upon Birthright don't face many challenges, as they are often seen as figureheads, and expectations for them are usually

low. The Citizen ruler, however, who gains power through good fortune or of his own virtu, faces the most challenges. In these circumstances the ruler must rely on his virtu to remain in power. Those who were cast into the role of ruler based on the good graces of fortune, without continued luck, will quickly fall from power. It is the ruler who has struggled his way to power, overcoming obstacles and gaining experience, that possess virtu. He is the most skillful ruler yet must contend with the fiercest opposition. He must rely on his wits and strength to both woo, and control the masses, crushing any opposition where he sees fit. While wickedness may be appropriate and acceptable in order to achieve goals and where it is necessary, extended use of cruel means will create a hateful populace who resents your rule. He must manipulate or, if completely necessary, liquidate the elite in order to ensure his position is safe. A strong military is the most important thing to consider, composed of native troops due to the unreliability of mercenaries and auxiliaries. He must be self-sufficient relying on himself alone, save a few well-paid and trustworthy advisors. The ruler who has gain his position through virtu alone faces the most challenges, but is the most capable to handle them. Machiavelli's position on boastful generosity is negative. As he sees it, it will only drain resources, and while a reputation may aid new rulers, those settled should ignore any discomfort from being regarded as a miser. Generosity can be misplaced and often enriches your enemies while harming your wealth. It is preferable to have your population to fear you rather than love you, if both aren't possible: "...as far as being feared and loved is concerned, since men decide for themselves whom they love, and rulers decide whom they fear, a wise ruler should rely on the emotion he can control, not on the one he cannot. But he must take care not to be hated..."

Machiavelli also advises to garner a reputation. He notes that rulers who undertake great tasks command the respect of their public and military. Public loyalty, however, is always subordinate to military loyalty. The military ensures security, and although the public is powerful and should not be abused, it is of the utmost importance that the military remains under control. The leader who possesses virtu is regarded with fear and awe by his public and respected by his military. Rulers who avoid war and are unwilling to enter into disputes are soon disposed of by other bolder leaders. A ruler should admire talent and skill and honor those who excel in all fields. At appropriate times he should lift the spirits of his people with festivals to gain admiration. While he is not required to be honest at all times, he must demand it of his advisors and avoid flattery. It is clear that the concept of virtu plays a fundamental role in shaping Machiavellian political theory. Primarily concerned with the politics of power and warfare, *The Prince* expresses in detail how important virtu is to a ruler. Strength, cunning, confidence, intelligence, and pragmatism are central to virtu and the primary source of Machiavelli's. While many societies have had models of virtue few can be equated with Machiavellian virtu. Sometimes viewed as a manual for tyranny, *The Prince* is a survival guide for the 16th century Italian ruler.

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