

# The concept of virtue in Machiavelli

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## 1 Introduction

Many deem the concept of virtue an important one in the thought of Niccolò Machiavelli. Few however have tried to analyze the ways he uses the concept in his writings, and fewer still have presented explicit arguments to show that it is such an important concept. This essay is an attempt to do a bit of analysis and provide some reasons to reconsider the importance of the concept.

The task is not always easy as it is often unclear what Machiavelli means. Virtue has many a meaning. First, it has a normative significance: virtue in itself is a part of the good life. This is the most important meaning of the concept in philosophy. In Machiavelli it is rare, but although difficult to recognize at times, it can be found. Second, virtue is skill, especially political ability: a virtuous man reaches his goals in political life. Third, virtue is physical strength, either potentially or as an actual force. Fourth, virtue is utility: something has virtue because it is useful.

In critical literature virtue is often paired with another famous concept, that of fortune. It is not uncommon for an interpretation to reduce the meanings and uses of these two concepts to a conflict or interplay between fortune and virtue, understood in various ways. Fortune thus personifies the accidental, the unforeseen and often the unfortunate things in life, while virtue is linked with man's capacity to understand the world and control it. This interpretation is tempting but simplistic. It is tempting particularly to those looking to schematize Machiavelli's ideas. But it is simplistic as it ignores the multiplicity of meanings conveyed by these two concepts, meanings sometimes in conflict if not in contradiction. John McCormick (1993, p. 888) writes that "the fortune-virtue distinction has become a kind of a 'set piece' in Machiavelli scholarship and, as

such, has come to convey a sense of order that actually defies the spirit of Machiavelli's approach to contingency". I think McCormick is right, and his point becomes even more important when one realizes that the use of the distinction is not limited to understanding the issue of contingency but other issues as well. As the topic would require a full discussion of fortune as well, I am unable to go into detail in this essay. However, my view is that when writing about the interplay between virtue and fortune Machiavelli might often be at his most dramatic, but at the expense of rational persuasiveness and logical coherence.

## 2 Senses of virtue

Machiavelli almost never talks about moral virtue. The best-known example is that of Agathocles from Syracuse, Sicily in *The Prince*, chapter 8. According to Machiavelli's (1985, p. 34) description, Agathocles "always kept to a life of crime at every rank of his career", but his crimes were accompanied by remarkable "virtue of spirit and body".<sup>1</sup> One of his most criminal and yet most successful actions was to kill all the senators and the rich of Syracuse. Machiavelli writes of Agathocles that

one cannot call it virtue to kill one's citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion; these modes can enable one to acquire empire, but not glory. For, if one considers the virtue of Agathocles in entering into and escaping from dangers, and the greatness of his spirit in enduring and overcoming adversities, one does not see why he has to be judged inferior to any most excellent captain. (Machiavelli 1985, 35.)

Agathocles thus does not have virtue and yet does have it. In this passage moral virtue and virtue as skill or an amoral quality can be distinguished from each other. Agathocles has virtue in some sense, but not in the sense of moral virtue. Moreover, to know what moral virtue means we need to look elsewhere.

In chapter 15 of *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1985, p. 62) clarifies things a bit: "if one considers everything well, one will find something appears to be virtue, which if pursued would be one's ruin, and something else appears to be vice, which if

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<sup>1</sup>In this essay I cite the Mansfield translation of *The Prince* and the Mansfield-Tarcov translation of the *Discourses on Livy*.

pursued results in one's security and well-being". There are several things that make this passage important for our analysis. First, we see that what is at stake are worldly things like security and well-being. Second, we see that we are talking about moral things, as there is a distinction between virtue and vice. Third, there is the possibility of error: something may appear something without being so. Fourth, there is a connection between the consequences of something and the question whether or not it is virtue: virtue, to be virtue, cannot lead to material ruin.

Let us try to understand the meaning of the passage. Why may something appear to be virtue or vice without being so? Why do we make errors in ethical judgment? One can just have limited cognitive abilities and not understand why something is wrong, or one can have been taught things that turn out to be mistaken. Machiavelli may be talking about both introspection and authority. We do not intuitively recognize virtue because our intuition is flawed, but we may have also had bad teachers. Thus, in thinking about what we should do it is not enough to think about what is morally right or to follow traditional authorities or rules. At least we can be sure that the religious authorities cannot be trusted in ethics, as they teach that moral virtue can lead to material ruin. Neither can we trust the philosophers, as for the most part they too agree that virtue can require significant material sacrifices. In contrast, Machiavelli presents quite openly a consequentialist, utilitarian conception of virtue: for something to be virtue in the moral sense, it cannot seriously compromise our worldly well-being. Thus, Machiavelli limits the scope of what moral virtue can mean. The question remains whether or not moral virtue has any significant meaning for him at all. But at this point it should be clear that Machiavelli does consider the topic in his writings.

Many leaders in Machiavelli's works are virtuous in that they have remarkable political skill. They know how to change the world according to their own designs, and this means they are virtuous. But unless Machiavelli can provide us with an analysis of this virtue, he runs the danger of meaninglessness. If virtue is something some people have, but we do not know in exactly what it consists or

how to cultivate it, does the concept have any meaning at all? Is it just empty praise heaped upon the heroes of history? If this were so, we could not find in Machiavelli's works a depiction of a remarkably virtuous person failing to achieve his most important goals. Yet such a depiction exists. In chapter 7 of *The Prince* Machiavelli (1985, pp. 25-26) writes about "new principalities that are acquired by others' arms and fortune". The basic idea is that if one acquires a principality by one's own virtue, the process of acquisition is difficult but retaining what one has acquired is easy. On the other hand, if the initial acquisition depends on something other than one's own virtue, one acquires without problems but runs into problems when one has to defend the acquisition. Machiavelli presents several reasons why it is difficult to maintain one's power for someone that has become powerful not because of his own virtue but something else: because he depends on the will and the fortune of someone else, which is an unstable thing, because he is accustomed to living in private fortune and does not know how to command, because he has no powerful friends to defend him and because as in nature what grows fast has no strong roots and therefore dies in the first bad weather. These reasons are obviously quite confusing, but they are used to justify the thesis that one that has become prince because of fortune has a need of great virtue to build strong foundations afterwards.

This is the backdrop to the explanation of why Cesare Borgia is relevant. Borgia rose to power because his father was a pope<sup>2</sup>: he "acquired his state through the fortune of his father and lost it through the same" (Machiavelli 1985, p. 27). Still, Borgia had his own virtue independent of this fortune, and he tried to prepare strong foundations for his power: he did "all those things that should be done by a prudent and virtuous man". In sum, Machiavelli writes that the best advice he can give to a new prince is the example of Borgia's actions. Even his eventual fall was not his own fault, as it was caused by the malignity of fortune.

After this Machiavelli tells the story of the duke's career. From start to finish he seems indeed to make no mistakes: Machiavelli's Borgia is infallible to the extent

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<sup>2</sup>Pope Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia.

that Mark Hulliung (1983, p. 192) calls him “an abstraction Machiavelli created by taking elements from both Greek and Roman thought and compounding them into a creation all his own”. Machiavelli does not tire of praising the “power and virtue” and the “great ferocity and great virtue” of the man. Effectively the first mistake Borgia ever made was also his last: he let one of his enemies become pope. Machiavelli closes the chapter by saying that Borgia “erred in this choice, and this was the cause of his ultimate ruin”.

It is not clear whether it was Borgia’s own error or bad fortune that caused him to fail. Machiavelli seems to present us with a case of overdetermination: Borgia’s failure was due to two causes, each of which would be sufficient to account for it. Yet this does not seem a plausible interpretation. It would seem more correct to talk about ambiguity: Machiavelli gives us two possible explanations for Borgia’s ruin and explicitly favors neither one.

Why the ambiguity? Gennaro Sasso (1980, p. 378) writes that Machiavelli had a “profound wish to cancel out a point that, if admitted, would have rendered vulnerable the construction of the Borgian virtue as exemplary”. In other words, Machiavelli wanted to craft an inspiring example out of historical material, but the problem was that he could not find an example with a happy end. This led to his wavering between the two possible causes of Borgia’s failure: Borgia had to be virtuous to be inspiring, but he also had to be ultimately recognized as a failure. Machiavelli could not find a way other than ambiguity to express these two ideas.

Viewed in this way, Machiavelli has two major preoccupations. The first is that a prince must never err. According to Sasso (1980, p. 382), this led Machiavelli to try and keep Borgia “pure of faults and errors”. The second is that this infallibility constitutes his virtue: virtue as skill is not just exceling in something, but doing it without errors. We can agree on the fact that Machiavelli does not seem to want to admit Borgia’s mistake. But I hesitate to accept that virtue means infallibility. Machiavelli talks of Borgia as an example three times in the chapter:

I do not know what better teaching I could give a new prince than *the*

*example of his actions* (Machiavelli 1985, p. 27); it seems to me he should be put forward, as I have done, to be imitated by all those who have risen to empire through fortune and by the arms of others (Machiavelli 1985, p. 32); whoever judges it necessary in his new principality to secure himself against his enemies [...] can find *no fresher examples than the actions* of that man (Machiavelli 1985, pp. 32-33).<sup>3</sup>

When Machiavelli talks about Borgia as an exemplary prince and one to be imitated, he does not refer to his virtue at all. Instead he says explicitly two times that what is to be imitated are his actions. Borgia is to be imitated not because he was virtuous, but because of what he did: he is to be imitated in a derivative way, only as the agent of his actions, and by trying to act like he did.

Sometimes virtue is physical force or strength. The clearest example of this is when Machiavelli talks about physical objects as physical objects. In *The Prince*, chapter 6, Machiavelli talks about one imitating men with greater virtue than one's own:

He should do as prudent archers do when the place they plan to hit appears too distant, and knowing how far the strength of their bow carries, they set their aim much higher than the place intended [...] (Machiavelli 1985, 22.)

In the original text, Machiavelli talks about the virtue of the bow instead of its strength. Even Harvey Mansfield, whose translations of Machiavelli are probably the most literal ones available and who criticizes other translators for using words other than “virtue” for *virtù* (Mansfield 1996, p. 7), has felt it necessary here to yield to the temptation of offering his own explanation to the reader.

Virtue as strength is not limited to bows or physical arms, but it is related to things that can be manipulated. Individuals like Manlius Capitolinus in book 3,

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<sup>3</sup>Emphasis mine throughout.

chapter 8 of the *Discourses on Livy* have much virtue of the body, but more importantly virtue of the mind (Machiavelli 1996, p. 237). In leaders, physical virtue thus seems secondary. If they need virtue, it is virtue as skill. This is what Machiavelli writes in the beginning of the *Discourses* (book 1, chapter 1):

Those should be imitated who have inhabited very agreeable and very fertile countries, apt to produce men who are idle and unfit for any virtuous exercise, and who have had the wisdom to prevent the harms that the agreeableness of the country would have caused through idleness by imposing a necessity to exercise on those who had to be soldiers [...] (Machiavelli 1996, 8-9.)

Machiavelli's prose is terse but clear. When the natural circumstances do not force men to cultivate their physical virtue, a skillful leader makes laws that makes it necessary for them to do so. Necessity makes men strong, drives them further and often against each other. Moral virtue has no place in this; as Mansfield (1996, p. 16) writes, "when virtue is sustained by necessity rather than choice, it is no longer clearly moral". The same could be said about skill: it too seems to require deliberation that necessity does not allow.

Virtue can also be just utility. This way of using the word causes problems for the reader, as it is so generic. In the sense of utility, almost anything can have virtue: if we take a look at book 2 of the *Discourses on Livy*, we find Machiavelli discussing the virtue of horses in chapter 18, of fortresses in chapter 24 and of arms in chapter 30 (Machiavelli 1996, pp. 170, 188, 199). How do we know this virtue must be utility? All these things are used as means. They can have neither moral virtue nor virtue as skill, as these virtues are only in the person who uses them as means. Some of these things can have force, but Machiavelli hardly seems to talk about this, as force is only good if it can be controlled, in which case force is utility.

### 3 Conclusion

The last two senses of virtue are trivial and I do not believe it is necessary to investigate them in detail. The other senses are more problematic. I will discuss them a bit and touch on the relation of virtue to fortune. I also want to comment briefly on some views in the literature.

If virtue in its normative sense had importance for Machiavelli, he would have to be seen as virtue ethicist of some kind. In virtue ethics, what is important is character, who we are. It is less important what kind of results our particular choices bring, or on which ethical principles we act. In virtue ethics virtue means a disposition to act in certain ways, react in certain ways and think in certain ways. For example, to have the virtue of generosity it is not enough to give to those in need, or to think it is right to give to those in need, or to feel like it is right. All these things are necessary.

Instead of character, Machiavelli has his focus always on results. Even when he talks about character, what he says can be reduced to speech about actions and their consequences. In what is perhaps the most famous part of *The Prince*, chapters 15-17, he writes about the qualities that bring praise or blame to a prince. In virtue ethics, these qualities would be thought of as good or bad in themselves—perhaps not exclusively, but to an important degree. Machiavelli never delves into such matters. In these chapters, he does not even stop to consider a prince actually having these qualities. Like we have already seen in the case of Borgia, Machiavelli talks about actions instead. In chapter 16, Machiavelli (1985, pp. 62-65) does not talk about *being* liberal: he talks about being *held* liberal and *using* liberality. The actual character of the prince is not

important here. What is important is how he is seen, and how he is using this or that quality as if they were masks of a sort.

This study of mine may leave a one-sided impression of Machiavelli's ethics because I only deal with virtue. I think moral virtue is rare in Machiavelli not because his recommendations are immoral but because he does not subscribe to a metaethical theory that emphasizes character. For Machiavelli it simply seems unimportant what kind of people we are as long as what we do brings good results in the moral sense. It would even seem consistent with Machiavelli's writings to claim that moral virtue itself is an error or an illusion.

What about virtue as skill? If my analysis of Machiavelli's description of Cesare Borgia's career is correct, the implications are interesting. Borgia's actions may be interesting as examples, but skill is more than just examples. We cannot learn to act in a similar way just by reading about his actions, unless we are faced with similar circumstances. We would need to find out exactly what in each of Borgia's actions is worthy of imitation to be able to imitate him. And in this regard Machiavelli seems to have little to offer.

The fact that Machiavelli recommends pretending to have certain qualities seems to pose a major problem for those who consider virtue itself a quality. Quentin Skinner (2000, p. 40), for example, says Machiavelli uses the term virtue with complete consistency, and "treats it as that quality which enables a prince to withstand the blows of Fortune, to attract the goddess's favour, and to rise in consequence to the heights of princely fame, winning honour and glory for himself and security of his government."

It seems strange to think that one quality would enable a prince to do all of these things anyway. What kind of quality would that be? Skinner (2000, p. 44) contradicts himself slightly when he begins to talk about virtue as a "congeries of qualities" instead of just one quality unlike before. Then he returns to talk about it as just one quality, "the requisite quality of moral flexibility in a prince". The virtuous prince does what is necessary to achieve his goals, even though

sometimes this requires him to act against what are generally considered moral principles. Further, Skinner (2000, pp. 44-45) thinks that Machiavelli is moving away from the Roman conception of virtue as manliness.

To Romans, virtue literally meant manliness. The word *virtus* is derived from *vir*, man. While Skinner rejects the idea that virtue for Machiavelli is the quality of manliness, Hulliung (1983, pp. 28-29) thinks that Machiavelli's conception is close to that of the Romans. Why the disagreement? The problem is that what constitutes manliness is not clear. Machiavelli wants men to be men in the sense that he does not want them to be effeminate. On the other hand, he does want men to be like animals sometimes. However, if we want to maintain that virtue can be a quality, we cannot say that it is an animal quality. Machiavelli does recommend the imitation of animals, but not in the sense of adopting permanently their qualities. Virtue, to be a quality, instead has to be more permanent. If it is to be a quality, it has to be manliness. But is virtue manliness? It seems difficult to find clear examples of this in Machiavelli. His work does have sexist overtones, but virtue, although sometimes associated with archaic ideals of what it means to be a man, does not seem in itself ever to mean manliness.

Let us however return to Skinner's claim that virtue is what helps a prince to oppose or combat fortune. Even though I do not agree with him on the interpretation of virtue, it is clear that Machiavelli uses the two concepts together. But while the sense of virtue changes from passage to passage in Machiavelli's writings, so does the sense of fortune, and it may not be possible to connect each sense of virtue to one sense of fortune. Virtue as skill can be linked to fortune as something beyond the reach of that skill. Virtue as force finds a pair in fortune understood as a rival force (Pitkin 1999, p. 156). However for moral virtue and virtue as utility things become more difficult. Anyway, we should ask if the relation of the two concepts is based only on rhetorical considerations, as trying to understand the politically relevant world with just two mythologically loaded key concepts seems an undertaking doomed to fail.

Even though some of my interpretations may be exaggerated, it seems justified to doubt the grounds of any claim that Machiavelli uses the concept of virtue consistently and clearly in one sense, and that the concept has a specific function in his writings. There seems to be, like J. H. Whitfield (1947, p. 95) put it, “no doctrine of *virtù* in Machiavelli”.

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