

# THE MACHIAVELLIAN CONCEPT OF CIVIC VIRTUES

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**ABSTRACT.** *The Machiavellian moment seems to be more and more influent in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Machiavelli’s legacy, once associated with an immoral way of thinking, is, nowadays, more and more interpreted and appreciated. This paper tries to argue that Machiavelli created a new concept of virtues, civic virtues, and this concept is not completely opposed to the traditional Greek concept of virtue, in fact, virtù and arete are two concepts with common origins.*

**Key words:** *virtù, the second reason ethics, prudence, savio, phronesis, civic virtues*

## Introduction

Machiavelli’s legacy has been incorrectly interpreted and associated with the religious wars of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. Following this key of interpretation, Machiavelli appears to be the victim of a time when the fire of religious intolerance consumed all the works of thought and reclaimed certainties based on faith. (Lefort 1986). One of the first interpreters of Machiavelli’s works in this key of interpretation is Innocent Gentillet who associates Machiavelli’s legacy to massacre on Saint Bartholomew’s Day (*Discours d’etat sur le moyens de bien gouverner et maintenir en bonne paix un Royaume ou autre principauté... Contre Nicolas Machiavel, florentin* (1576) by Innocent Gentillet. Gentillet’s book had a lot of reprints by the end of the Seventeenth century, creating the pejorative terms of *Machiavellianism* and *Machiavellian*). Today, one cannot read Machiavelli without having in mind these nefarious interpretations.

Other interpreters considered Machiavelli to be in complete contradiction with the Greeks’ classical way of thinking. Machiavelli claimed that actions are considered to be right or wrong according to their consequences and not

according to the personal character or intentions of the person involved in that specific action. The aim of this paper is to argue that Machiavelli's ethics is not completely opposed to classical Greek ethics, in fact, *virtù* and *arete* are two concepts with common origins.

### **The second reason ethics**

Machiavelli had and developed a specific type of ethics, *the second reason ethics* (Gabriel Liiceanu classifies ethics in the *first reason ethics* or Achilles' ethics, due to which is preferably to lose one battle than to win it through an unfair mean and the *second reason ethics* or Odysseus ethics, a type of ethics instrumented by its own efficacy, not paying attention to the action rightfulness in itself. Liiceanu 2006: 17-25) and more than that, he transformed this second reason ethics in political ethics. Plato did the same thing when he allowed and insisted on the philosopher kings to lie, he established the second reason ethics as political ethics (*Then if anyone at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the State should be the person; and they, in their dealings either with their enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good.* Plato 2004: 389b). The aim for both philosophers is a common one: the city's safety, the state's safety and the citizens' welfare (the common good). The common good is not a utilitarian concept, but the moral and political condition of human life. According to Machiavelli, men are not good or bad, but longing for security and personal achievement that can be gained only by the union of them all. This idea is common with Aristotle's idea of common good. The development of an educational pattern for the rulers (the philosopher kings and the prince) such as to provide the common good represents the method designed by both thinkers.

But, as with Plato, the ethical side of the educational process aims to achieve the higher goal of educating the citizens. The difference between the two authors comes as a consequence of the fact that Plato suggested an educational pattern inspired from the Eternal World of Forms, whereas Machiavelli's method was based on empirical observation of the facts, as they were, without any kind of distortions, sterile speculations, only by reclaiming the wisdom of the past. Machiavelli's method is a scientific method applied in the field of politics, dictated by the premises on which he developed his work on: the precise and systematic description of the public facts, the effort of correlating these facts and establishing laws of action and, by these, to predict future facts, to a certain extent of probability.

At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the conventional image of a prince was designed as follows: a man who never abandons the task of searching the common good for the community/the state he rules and who possesses all the necessary virtues in order to accomplish this task. He is a RECTOR and a MODERATOR. If the state is corrupt, the prince's task is

even harder; he will have to reform the constitution and the laws such as to re-establish peace and security. A prince should possess the following qualities: the art of oratory (charisma, the capacity of mobilizing citizens), power of conviction and prudence. And when the state should be reformed, the prince, as an architect, should be able to empower new political institutions (Skinner 2000: 67). There is no greater achievement than this and due to an achievement like this, the prince will gain glory.

In *Discourses*, Machiavelli tried to reawaken his contemporaries' passion for the ancient virtues and to redefine politics as *the art of ruling a good state*. This was Machiavelli's intention when he designed the prince's portrait. If you wish to attain glory, you have to dedicate your life to the sole purpose of ruling a good state. His greatest desire was to design a state where the civic spirit would be at its utmost. The possibility of creating a good state depended only on the citizens' and the prince's capacity to use all the necessary means to achieve that goal.

Machiavelli explains that a good society may be enforced by the *virtù* of the leader but it necessitates the sharing of civic virtues by the people (Machiavelli 1983). Institutions are necessary as educators of civic virtues and to sustain the pursuit of the ideal of the good society when those virtues are no longer alive within the spirit of the leader and within the people. The aim of Machiavelli's politics is not theoretical knowledge, but action, a practical knowledge, a probabilistic knowledge, an accurate deliberation regarding what is good and useful.

*The Prince* is at the same time a recruiting document for a new prince as well as a handbook which can be used in the process of governing. The structure of power is paradoxical: its exigencies are contradictory, divided between logical necessity and historical imperative. According to circumstances, the prince has to act fairly but still has to have the capacity to dissimulate; he has to be generous and still cruel, good and bad, honest and cunning, generous and greedy, friendly and distant, loved and feared. His advisors have to tell him the truth but he is not bound to do the same. The ethics of power has an adequate content, it has to be mobile and functional.

### **Virtù, arete and the concept of the good state**

Politics is an activity which allows the leader to accomplish a superior form of good, the common good (Bock, Skinner and Viroli 1999: 146). In the Aristotelian way of thinking, politics is a practical science which has a defining, practical and ultimate purpose that subordinates all the other practical sciences, all of them having different defining purposes but all of them being included in the supreme purpose of politics. From Machiavelli's point of view, politics isn't just about decreeing laws; a final goal of politics is to educate the citizens, to shape their civic conducts.

If a prince wants to maintain his position, he has to learn how not to be good. But a prince's purpose to be bad is that to maintain his state or to reform a corrupt state. The goal of achieving the common good comes from the highest authority, God. Machiavelli does not plead for tyranny because he has the following motivation: one single ruler is more susceptible to be corrupted by power and wealth than the people who have less from each one; a single ruler is less susceptible to promote his own interests than those of the entire state. The corruption of the state is the result of the rulers' and peoples' corruption. In Machiavelli's words, corruption does not have the modern meaning, but is the disappearance of civic virtues. Machiavelli thinks there is a distinct connection between great majority of virtuous citizens and the proper functioning of a state. If people are devoted to the common good, then the state will be a strong one. If people are corrupted and many of them lose their sense of civic values, then the state will be facing disorder and disturbances (*Also virtue and corruption spread from top to the bottom*. Ledeen 2004: 144). The future of the republic depends on the vitality of the political life and the sharing of civic virtues among citizens. For Machiavelli, there are three important elements in the development of a society: *virtù* of the leader, civic virtues shared by the citizens and the capacity to face corruption (Pocock 1975).

Machiavelli's advice continues to be of actuality. He always aims for the essence, wishing leaders to play for the highest stake: promoting and protecting the common good. He believes that if the advice he gives is systematically followed, the possibility of crises is reduced and drastic measures won't be necessary. Machiavelli's rules are based on an accurate knowledge of the human nature. Machiavelli's world is populated by people who are more inclined to do bad than good things (*If men were entirely good, this percept would not hold, but because they are bad, and will not keep faith with you, you too are not bound to observe it with them*. Machiavelli 2001: 93). The efficient use of power is the only way to control your enemies and to convince your friends to collaborate with you. The ways of success are not identical and not always in accordance with traditional ethics. The one who governs can attract peoples' hatred both through good deeds as through bad ones. And then, *a wise prince ought to adopt such a course that his citizens will always in every sort and kind of circumstance have need of the state and of him, and then he will always find them faithful* (Machiavelli 2001: 61). The goal of every man who is in charge with the state's rule is maintaining the power, the security of the state by gaining people's approval. This is the moral rule to which all other conduct reasons submit. Machiavelli says that the art of governing demands prudence in decisions, actions and alliances. A clever prince does not look only for present disorders but also for future ones and, using all his skills, he tries to successfully prevent them. *Savio* or *sagio* seems to be the equivalent for the Greek *phronesis* (practical reason) the condition without which the virtue of prudence cannot be

acquired/attained. And the statesman who has *savio/phronesis* will be able to develop and to cultivate the ethical, practical virtue of prudence (an algorithm inspired by the Aristotelian ethics). The concept of *virtù* seems to be inspired by the Greek concept of *phronesis*. A ruler is suitable for his job when he is capable of varying his conduct from good to evil and back again as fortune and circumstances dictate (Pocock 1975).

The Machiavellian concept of prudence can be described as the power of reason to predict the effect, always choosing the lesser of two evils as the right solution. Aristotle suggested a morally correct way of living having a virtuous conduct as a *prima facie* argument whereas Machiavelli used the virtue of prudence for higher goals. If, for Aristotle, the concept of *arete* designated a desired way of living, a virtuous life being a purpose in its essence, Machiavelli considers virtue as a means of achieving other goals. Machiavelli removes himself from the Aristotelian ethics, pleading for the use of ethical virtues as a means of attaining the purpose of common good. The spirit of common good is victorious everywhere, it cancels any barrier imposed by the antiquity's ethics. The common good is the reason which will also motivate the use of cruelty by the prince (*Besides the reasons mentioned, the nature of the people is variable, and whilst it is easy to persuade them, it is difficult to fix them in that persuasion. And thus it is necessary to take such measures that, when they believe no longer, it may be possible to make them believe by force.* Machiavelli 2001: 41; *Therefore a prince, so long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal, ought not to mind the reproach of cruelty; because with a few examples he will be more merciful than those who, through too much mercy, allow disorders to arise, from which follow murders or robberies; for these are wont to injure the whole people, whilst those executions which originate with a prince offend the individual only.* Machiavelli 2001:88-89).

As in Plato's *Republic*, the Machiavellian prince can tell lies, and is even recommended to do so, when state reasons claim it (*Nor will there ever be wanting to a prince legitimate reasons to excuse this non-observance. Of this endless modern examples could be given, showing how many treaties and engagements have been made void and of no effect through the faithlessness of princes; and he who has known best how to employ the fox has succeeded best. But it is necessary to know well how to disguise this characteristic, and to be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are so simple, and so subjects to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived.* Machiavelli 2001:93-94). A prince should not be corrupt but he has to know every means he has at his disposal in order to achieve the state's common welfare. The prince should not be without virtues, on a contrary, they are necessary; but when the welfare of the state imposes another type of conduct, it is imperious for him to use all the necessary means in order to accomplish the higher task at hand (the only moral criteria for judging a prince's

actions, for that matter) (...and in the actions of all men, and especially of princes, which it is not prudent to challenge, one judges by result. For that reason, let a prince have the credit of conquering and holding his state, the means will always be considered honest, and he will be praised by everybody. Machiavelli 2001: 96).

The virtuous prince will embed the same character upon his subjects, even if the latter were not gifted with these qualities (*But the basic contention is that the virtù of an outstanding leader will always take the form, in part, of a capacity to imprint the same vital quality on his followers, even though they may not be naturally endowed with it.* Skinner 2000: 67). Leaders should personify the virtues they expect from others (or, at least, be perceived as virtuous) (*Nothing makes a prince so much esteemed as great enterprises and setting a fine example.* Machiavelli 2001: 115). The inadequacy between Christian virtues and the Machiavellian ones is motivated by the same state reasons. Some virtues, such as kindness, telling the truth won't always be compatible with the task the prince has to accomplish, that of promoting the common good. Even if this task has an inner Christian value, it cannot be attained only by using means which the Christian ethics considers to be virtuous, although Machiavelli insists on the virtuous conduct of the prince (*So he has no hesitation in concluding that any attempt to employ a Christian scale of values in judging political affairs must be altogether given up.* Skinner 2000: 183).

Machiavelli sends an unequivocal, clear message: if the prince wants the state to be strong, its citizens should be involved in public life and, moreover, the prince must take into account the citizens' opinions (*But who reaches sovereignty by popular favour finds himself alone, and has none around him, or few, who are not prepared to obey him. ... Therefore, one who becomes a prince through the favour of the people ought to keep them friendly, and this he can easily do seeing they only ask not to be oppressed by him.* Machiavelli 2001: 58-60). Machiavelli considers that a good state is the one in which citizens are actively involved from a political point of view and understand that the only way of having an authentic state is that to put the common good above all personal interests. In other words, the functioning of a good and strong state involves the practice of civic virtues (ethical, practical virtues) both by officials and simple citizens. The corrupt state is the state in which citizens put their own interest in front of the common one and such a state cannot last (Bock, Skinner and Viroli 1999: 156). The real political man cannot rule in a despotic or unjust manner. If they want to live in a fair and strong state, the ruler and the citizens have to practice the same virtues.

The idea according to which Machiavelli imposed a certain type of ethics which has nothing to do with the concept of virtue is somewhat inconsistent (Skinner 2000: 41). According to Machiavelli's opinion, if the prince wants to achieve the virtues of honour and glory he has to be *as virtuous as possible* (Skinner 2000: 41). Machiavelli's ethics is directly linked to the concept of

reason (opinion which has its origins in Aristotelian and the stoical way of thinking). The prince has to find the most suitable means to accomplish his goals and this thing does not exclude moral rectitude. Aristotle speaks about the ethical virtues of courage and moderation whereas Machiavelli imposes the civic virtue of prudence. Machiavelli's innovation is having virtù freed in action from Christian ethics. If the Christian ethics speaks about the virtues of charity and humility, Machiavelli imposes the civic virtues of honour and glory. He is the one who created this concept of *civic virtue*. The civic virtues involve practical reason (*sagio* or *savio* seeming a lot like *phronesis*), the condition without which they cannot be achieved, but they do not represent a way of living as a final end, being a means to accomplish the second reason ethics, the only type of ethics which can produce common good.

Machiavelli's approach is not immoral, but imposes the second reason ethics which, sometimes, is contradictory with the traditional (Aristotelian ethics) and Christian ethics. ...*for a man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil. Hence it is necessary for a prince wishing to hold his own to know how to do wrong, and to make use of it not according to necessity* (Machiavelli 2001: 84). Machiavelli disputes a certain and convincing image of ethics. According to this image, one can understand what it is to lead a just and virtuous life and which are the moral obligations imposed by a moral code. Such an understanding offers final guidance, regarding the validity of someone's moral actions. Moral reasoning should prevail beyond any other opposing considerations. This traditional image is questioned and disputed by Machiavelli because he believes that moral reasoning depends on the effects which a certain type of action produces.

Machiavelli did not question the virtues' thesis unity, but he invented a new concept of virtue, the *civic virtue*, a concept which gained a completely different meaning and connotations. Following the Platonic way of thinking, Machiavelli develops the unity of the virtues' thesis, initiating a new concept. *Civic virtues* are conditioned by reason (according to Aristotelian philosophy, *phronesis* – practical reason- is the main condition for achieving ethical virtues) and they fit together as a whole (as in Aristotelian philosophy); a courageous person is also a prudent one, otherwise he would be a rash person, prudence implies moderation, otherwise it would be cowardice (Bock, Skinner and Viroli 199: 164). Although Machiavelli does not dispute the unity of the virtues, he submits civic virtues to the second reason ethics. The concept of civic virtue gains a completely different meaning. Its aim is to lead to positive consequences for the community. The second reason ethics is based more on consequences than it is on the agent. If Aristotle had led a way of life based on the practice of virtues, a way of life which produces, foremost, positive effects on a personal level, the practice of civic virtues produces positive effects at the community's level. That is why the Machiavellian concept of civic virtue encloses some

qualities rejected by the Aristotelian ethics and by the Christian ethics. The concept of civic virtue also encloses the quality of being bad and telling lies because it does not designate an ethics of the agent, but a consequences ethics (a consequentialist ethics).

Even if Plato did not speak in terms of civic virtue, while he was telling the Founding Myth - the Myth of Metals - and while he was advising the philosopher king to administer lies as a medicine man would to his patients, he did not aim towards a personal ethics, this suggestion being opposed to the theory of virtues developed in *The Republic*, but rather towards a consequences ethics. Plato spoke about lies used as *medicine* precisely because people are *sick*. This *sickness* refers to the human nature which is bad and evil, without access to the Eternal World of Truth and which must be treated by any means necessary in order to guide it towards the Truth (*I mean, I replied, that our rulers will find a considerable dose of falsehood and deceit necessary for the good of their subjects: we were saying that the use of all these things regarded as medicine might be of advantage.* Plato 2004: 459d; 389b). The assumption of the political role invariably implies the second reason ethics precisely because of the human condition. Human nature is the one that generates the usage of the second reason ethics in politics, because politics implies an aspect of educating the citizens, and this process is a moral one due the consequences it generates. It is not the political algorithm which appeals to the second reason ethics, but rather the necessity of correcting human nature through an educational process which will produce moral consequences.

## Conclusions

Machiavelli's dilemma was to answer the question regarding how was it possible for man, with his imperfect nature, to be determined to cultivate civic virtues? How can people be prevented from adopting corrupted conducts? How can, the great goal of educating citizens in such a way that their main focus would be on achieving the common good and maintaining it, be realized? People, mostly unable to have virtuous conducts can hope to find a ruler who could impose and cultivate virtuous behaviours through his actions, regardless if this implies from his part a conduct which goes in conflict with the first reason ethics. This is the answer found by Machiavelli, the same found by Plato centuries before. However, according to Quentin Skinner, Machiavelli's innovation lies in the creation of *vivere politico* (Skinner 2000; Skinner 2002). The Aristotelian philosophy celebrates *virtù* as a supreme end of a man, an end that can be achieved through civic activity (*vivere civile*). The Machiavellian *vivere politico* is not an end but a means to defend and maintain the stability of the state.

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