Virtue and Virtu: A Debate in the Importance of Values and Justice for Leaders of State

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Abstract

In this paper, I will provide an analysis and critical commentary on the concepts of virtue and virtu. *I will examine their varying definitions through the lens of two historically acclaimed texts: Plato's* The Republic *and Nicolò Machiavelli's* The Prince. *The usage of these words in their respective texts are frameworks to how individuals should govern themselves. However, no assumptions regarding the similarities between these two frameworks should be made, as they differ vastly in their approach to both the concept of justice and acquisition of power. I will provide precise and careful comparisons between the two texts, flush with the authors' definitions and uses of virtue and* virtu. *I will demonstrate that Plato's usage of virtue hinges on the actions and participation of all members of society - a belief that the common good is solidified and maintained by individuals doing what is best for their peers and community, or a collective approach to decency. This will be contrasted with Machiavelli's obsession with and insistence on* virtu *as a means to acquire and control power. Machiavelli sees* virtu *as a key to respect, earned through one's actions and accomplishments in the political world, no matter the cost. Lastly, a comparison between the two authors' approach through the lens of justice will demonstrate that justice is the bedrock of Plato's definition of virtue, despite being practically nonexistent in Machiavelli's concept of virtu.*

Introduction

How could virtue, a word so commonly used, and with a definition with high regard in our daily lives, have such an expansive definition? The words virtue and "*virtu*" (an Italian word carrying the same meaning) are often used to describe those who have succeeded at critical aspects of life, and are respected, loved, admired, and to be modeled after. Specifically, in political literature or discourse, it is a descriptor that is desperately sought after by statesmen seeking to be "good" rulers. A virtuous leader is characterized by demonstrations of excellence, although conceptualizations of the term vary between individuals. In this analysis, I will compare Plato's *The Republic* and Machiavelli's *The Prince* in terms of the parameters set out in each text of who is deemed virtuous and why. It will be shown that on an extremely generalized basis, both Plato and Machiavelli agree on the importance and impact of virtuous behaviour in society.

To begin this process, I will first outline the values and goals attributed to both virtue and *virtu*. I will provide insight into how Plato viewed the importance of virtue as a means of constructing a fair and just society. Contrary to this, Machiavelli's concept of virtu revolves around power. This power is opposite of traditional political virtues, which are usually "strictly bonded with ethics" (Harrison 2011). I will demonstrate that there is a key moral tenet that separates these two texts and authors in their belief of what makes a "good" and virtuous leader: justice. Plato's determination of virtue is affirmed by the concept of justice, and that one cannot be virtuous without respecting the importance of justice. Conversely, Machiavelli's concept of *virtu* is lacking

the moral underpinning of justice, instead relying on an alternate selection of values which he deems to be crucial for a "good" leader.

Definitions of Virtue & *Virtu*

Plato's Definition and Conception of Virtue

Much of Plato's work in *The Republic* is designed to define and understand what constitutes virtue. The majority of the discussion of virtue occurs in Book Four of *The Republic*, which argues that in an ideal society, the city would be protected and maintained by "guardians". Guardians are deemed the highest rank in society, tasked with protecting "the city's citizens, laws, and customs" (Coumoundouros n.d.). As the ruling class, the guardians are to be masters in four "'Platonic virtues'- wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice" (Frede 2017). Plato deemed it critical that the guardians uphold these values in society, as then the youth of society will "grow up into well-conducted and virtuous citizens" (Plato 2008, 422). Specifically, the guardians being tasked with upholding the laws and decorum of the state speaks to the importance of justice in Plato's ideal society. While placing great importance on the functions and benefits of one's own behaviour, Plato also sees significant societal strength when applying rule of law to daily life. Despite the fact that guardians are to be the role models of society, Plato's definition of virtue is dependent on moral character. Plato does not specialize virtue for specific societal roles. Instead, virtue is a character-based quality, which is to be found within the city's structure as well as within individuals. There are no parameters placed upon who can and cannot be recognized for virtuous behaviour (Coumoundouros, n.d.). Because of this, the "city will be courageous in virtue" (Plato 2008, 431), demonstrating the macro-scale of Plato's vision for virtuous behaviour.

Machiavelli's Definition and Concept of Virtu

While Plato's conceptualization of virtue is based on the moral character of both the individual and the state, Machiavelli views *virtu* as qualities which are to be praised and respected by others. Machiavelli's concept of *virtu* is entirely focused on the "virtuosity of the individual leader" (De Bruyn 2003, 8), a quality which is highlighted by the "flexibility of the leader's mind" (De Bruyn 2003, 8). This flexibility is based on a leader's ability to demonstrate excellence in qualities that will help him acquire and maintain power. In Chapter XV of *The Prince*, Machiavelli notes that a prince must determine which qualities will bring either "blame or praise" (Machiavelli 2004, 84). He outlines a number of adjectives along with their antonyms — generosity and rapaciousness, bravery and cowardice— stating that a virtuous leader must understand the "vices which would lose him his state" (Machiavelli 2004, 84). This instruction is a playbook of Machiavelli's approach towards virtuous behaviour, instructing the individual how to act in order to maintain control of their state. Machiavelli's definition aligns closely with the historical root of virtue, using the Greek translation, "Aretè" (Marandi 2018). "Aretè" corresponds with a "role-related specific excellence" (Marandi 2018), a definition which Machiavelli follows with detail as he crafts his concept of virtu. In essence, Machiavelli views virtu as the art of mastering the acquisition and maintenance of power, being the "touchstone of political success" (Nederman 2019).

Analysis of Virtue & Virtu

Discussion and Debate

Both Plato and Machiavelli view virtue and *virtu* as the essential components of a good leader and society. However, it was demonstrated that both men have conflicting opinions on the applications of their definitions of virtue. In this sense, the two authors essentially have inverse opinions. While Plato does grant the guardians the duty of protecting and monitoring virtuous behaviour, he fantasizes of a "whole State" (Plato 2008, 430) in which virtuous behaviour is an

inherent expectation among citizens and the "ruling part" (Plato 2008, 430). On the contrary, both Machiavelli's text and opinions of virtu apply "only to principalities" (Machiavelli 2004, 24), and how these are to be "ruled and preserved" (Machiavelli 2004, 24). In short, Plato demonstrates a large-scale approach in regard to virtue within both the individual and the state, while Machiavelli portrays a small-scale and individualistic approach.

Realistic expectations of societal and citizen management are a major point of contention between Plato and Machiavelli. Machiavelli drafted *The Prince* as a text which could realistically be applied by any leader who wishes to maintain power, originally written for Lorenzo Di Piero De' Meidici, former ruler of Florence (Machiavelli 2004, 19). Machiavelli notes that many have written about "republics and principalities" (Machiavelli 2004, 84) which never came to fruition, a comment which seemingly could be directed at Plato's text. Despite Plato's thoroughly articulated and advanced text, Machiavelli is correct in observing that the ideal society in which Plato seeks has never truly existed.

Furthermore, Machiavelli and Plato disagree on how virtue and *virtu* are used in conducting the behaviour of individuals. In Plato's ideal society, citizens are expected to consistently follow the cardinal virtues, stating that the "same three principles in his own soul are found in the State" (Plato 2008, 443). These virtues were designed to place an element of obedience and control over the general population, which would thus allow for "peace with one another" (Plato 2008, 493). Machiavelli rejects this notion wholeheartedly. He does not see it reasonable or particularly necessary to place restraints on the behaviour of the citizens. Machiavelli's rejection is fueled by his belief that "how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live" (Machiavelli 2004, 84). Machiavelli uses this explanation of human behaviour to critique Plato's assumption that citizens will so gracefully and easily follow his "Platonic virtues" (Frede 2017).

Machiavelli would take issue with Plato's large-scale approach to virtue, as he instead applies a small-scale approach to *virtu*. In this sense, Machiavelli's perspective perceives *virtu* to only exist to acquire and maintain power. This is not to say that citizens of the state are not critical aspects of *virtu*. Instead, citizens are used as a means to garner favour and maintain power. For example, Machiavelli frequently uses the "audacious yet stunningly effective" (Wei Kee 2011) efforts of Cesare Borgia in his quest to sustain power. Borgia sustained control of the Romagna, however found it "under the rule of weak masters", with a civilian population that was wildly insubordinate (Machiavelli 2004, 49). In order to rectify it, Borgia instituted Messer Ramiro d'Orco, a "swift and cruel man" to restore "peace and unity" (Machiavelli 2004 49). However, d'Orco was incredibly cruel towards the citizens, and began creating a distaste for Borgia as leader. In order to regain the citizens' support, Borgia acknowledged that d'Orco was bringing him blame instead of praise, and promptly had him executed in the public plaza (Machiavelli 2004, 50). In this example, citizens are indeed an included aspect of a leader's *virtu*. Citizens themselves are not expected to act virtuously but are merely pawns to be led by a good leader, who must demonstrate excellence in leading and managing such pawns. It is clear that on the topic of citizen behaviour and control, Plato and Machiavelli disagree greatly. Plato's vision is exorbitant in both expectations of citizen and leadership virtues, while Machiavelli's concept of virtu is far more grounded in power dynamics and individual success.

Discussion of Justice

Justice is without a doubt the most critical topic of debate between Plato and Machiavelli's concepts of virtue and *virtu*, respectively. According to Plato, the soul has three main principalities or virtues: wisdom, courage, and moderation. Furthermore, he chooses to list justice as the fourth virtue. He believes it to be the only virtue that remains when the others are abstracted, while also insisting that justice is the "preservative" (Plato 2008, 438) of wisdom, courage, and moderation.

Due to the significance of justice towards the other three cardinal virtues, Plato asserts that it is impossible for an individual to be considered virtuous and just if they are lacking any of the three cardinal virtues. This is labelled as lacking a "virtue tout court" (Brown, 2017), as just individuals are supposedly in possession of all virtues, and unjust individuals have yet to master all three.

Alternatively, Machiavelli's opinion of *virtu* lacks any discussion of justice and moral behaviour. Machiavelli is an advocate for the "divorce [of] political from private morality" (Marandi 2018), believing that leaders are required to execute their power and will for the best interests of the state, regardless of law and justice. Machiavelli points to examples of "Marcus, Pertinax, and Alexander" as leaders who were "lovers of justice" and thus met a "sad end" (Machiavelli 2004, 103). He elaborates that these leaders were not able to control whether their civilians loved or despised them, and thus were unable to keep their state "stable and firm" (Machiavelli 2004, 107). In essence, Machiavelli is not generally interested in the moral code that justice imposes on society. In his mind, a "good" and productive leader must lead a state based on the objectives of maintaining power and security. Machiavelli would not be concerned by leadership that results in "unjust" actions or decisions, as that is not how he interprets *virtu*.

Conclusion

Future research should consider delving into the modern political applications of these two classical texts. An investigation into whether there are any classical or contemporary political structures that mirror Plato's vision and aspirations for a virtuous state would provide intrigue. On the contrary, a potential gap in Plato's findings could be demonstrated by a successful state that does not align with Plato's virtuous characteristics.

Furthermore, the acquisition and stability of power is a consistent and omnipresent theme in political studies. Machiavelli's text outlines a rather narrow and direct instruction manual for this goal. However, does history contain any further proof of his suggestions? Or is there evidence to suggest otherwise, and that his vision is not the singular way to achieve power and authority? In addition, an investigation into whether Machiavelli's concept of *virtu* has been localized and used successfully in other political contexts would provide insight into the validity of his arguments.

Plato's *The Republic* is an explanation of a utilitarian society bound by virtue and law, while Machiavelli's *The Prince* is an instruction manual towards acquiring and maintaining power by means of *virtu*. The two authors share similarities in the sense they both attribute a level of importance towards the concept of virtue and *virtu*. However, this is where the similarities meet their end. The difference in opinion regarding citizen roles and control, and the true usage of justice provides a wide range of possible, ongoing debates on this topic.

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