

## Praktinė filosofija

### VIRTUE AND POLITICS: AN ARISTOTELIAN READING OF NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI

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*The paper discusses Niccolò Machiavelli's conception of virtue (virtù) and republican politics from the point of view of Aristotelian virtue ethics. Machiavelli's emphasis on civic virtue and the support of republican politics bear similarity to Aristotle's conception of politics. Against two competing interpretations of Machiavelli's legacy (the Cambridge contextual historians school and Joseph V. Femia), this paper argues that while Machiavelli moves away from the classical conception of aretē / virtus, he also, at the same time, shares with an Aristotelian practical philosophy the concept of the republican common good. Machiavelli's modified conception of classical virtus and his republican rhetoric allows us to interpret his position as proto-nationalist. Finally, this paper argues that Machiavelli's cynical advice and observations can be partly explained by the gap between the Renaissance education of studia humanitatis and the ruthlessness of Realpolitik.*

**Keywords:** Machiavelli, Aristotle, republican politics, virtù, virtue ethics, common good, studia humanitatis.

It has become customary to read the history of European political thought through classic Platonic and Aristotelian conceptualizations of political life while considering Niccolò Machiavelli as the first among modern political theorists to break with this tradition (e.g., Sabine and Throson 1989, Skinner 2000, and Ramsay 2002). The tradition of *studia humanitatis*, with which Machiavelli was well acquainted, drew on intellectual resources from classical authors, including Plato and Aristotle. Although Machiavelli never discussed Aristotle in detail, his emphasis on virtue in politics, which was one of the most important aspects in Aristotle's political

philosophy, was essential to his thought. Granted the concept of virtue means different things in Ancient Greece than in Renaissance Florence, it is precisely the notion of *virtù* that allows us to trace a conceptual line between Aristotle, as the pinnacle of the classical tradition of political philosophy, and Machiavelli, one of the founders of modern political science. Yet, it is necessary to distinguish Machiavelli's conception of politics, as *arte dello stato*, from Aristotle's classical political philosophy informed by virtue ethics, compelling a closer examination of this conceptual shift and its significance for the development of modern political theory.

One of the aims of this paper will be to compare Machiavelli's understanding of *politics* as the art of ruling the state and *virtù* with Aristotle's understanding of *politikē* and *aretē*. The philosophical-methodological approach of this essay follows Alasdair MacIntyre's (1988) conception of tradition-constituted and tradition-constitutive enquiry. Tradition is to be understood as a set of moral and philosophical arguments extended through time that serve both as a linguistic-conceptual background to nurture our understanding of a given philosophical problem or a particular philosopher *and* as an open ended-process whereby our arguments are shaped and developed largely through engagement with them<sup>1</sup>. Thus, philosophical enquiry is constituted by and constitutes tradition. Such conception of philosophical enquiry, besides other things, requires us to reflect on and acknowledge our philosophical commitments to a given philosophical tradition. In doing so, it may also require us to establish a critical position vis-à-vis another important philosopher or school of thought. As regards this paper, it will be an attempt to read Machiavelli through the eyes of a convinced Aristotelian. Although there are dangers in engaging in this type of philosophizing – namely an unjustifiable bias towards a particular philosopher – there are also important advantages to such an approach. First, it fosters a lively philosophical debate between competing philosophical positions, and second it aims to resolve, as far as possible, conceptual disagreements

through the development of a more convincing philosophical argument.

Without attempting to resolve conceptual disagreements, I will primarily aim to ask Aristotelian questions of Machiavelli and fairly compare Aristotle's and Machiavelli's conceptions of virtue and politics by trying to understand them both on their own terms. In light of this approach and despite the apparent differences between Aristotle and Machiavelli, I contend that important continuities exist in their writings, especially with regard to the republican idea of politics.

## Two Different Readings of Machiavelli

Maurizio Viroli (1998) and Quentin Skinner (1978, 2000) have argued that Machiavelli's political theory should not be read as constituting a radical break with the classical tradition and thus as the initiation of modern political science, but rather as the continuation of the Roman tradition of *scientia civilis*. This so-called republican reading of Machiavelli, initially represented by such prominent scholars as Hans Baron (1955) and John G. A. Pocock (1975) and later by Skinner and Viroli (that is, by so called Cambridge contextual historians school), portrays Machiavelli as a thinker who understood *scientia civilis* (or *studia civitatis*) in line with the classical notion of political wisdom, drawing its resources both from the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle *and* from Roman history and Roman rhetoricians<sup>2</sup>. Central to this notion of

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth discussion on MacIntyre's conception of tradition see Christopher Lutz (2009: 33–64), Thomas D. D'Andrea (2006: 327–340), and Andrius Bielskis (2005: 95–144).

<sup>2</sup> Viroli (1998: 4), however, argues that the conceptual resources of Machiavellian *scientia civilis* come not from Plato and Aristotle but first and foremost from Roman history and Roman rhetoricians.

*scientia civilis* was the idea of political virtue in the life of the republic.

There is, however, another reading of Machiavelli's work. Joseph V. Femia (2004) has argued recently that Machiavelli not only inverted the conventional medieval genre of writing advice-books to monarchs but also radically changed the meaning of the classical notion of *virtus* (which was, by and large, Aristotelian and Christian *and* was endorsed by "civic humanists" such as Leonardo Bruni) by detaching the concept from its traditional connotation and forming a new idea called *virtù*. The crux of Femia's argument is as follows:

Machiavelli's deviance is nicely illustrated by his redefinition of the pivotal concept of *virtù*. For the humanists, *virtù* was essentially equivalent to 'virtue' as we understand it – a moral good, indicating a humane, prudent, wise form of behaviour. For Machiavelli, *virtù* was more like a force of nature, including in its meaning such things as 'ambition', 'drive', 'courage', 'energy', 'will-power' and 'shrewdness'. (...) By divorcing the prince's *virtù* from the conventional catalogue of Christian virtues, Machiavelli constrained the ruler's behaviour only by political necessity (2004: 32).

Without question, there is more novelty in Machiavelli's conception of *virtù* than in the more traditional (i.e., classical) notion of *virtus* of the leading "civic humanists" of *quattrocento* Florence. In this sense, Femia is right to argue that Skinner and Viroli tend to be too generous to Machiavelli in portraying him as a traditional defender of traditional republican values (*ibid*: 34). Furthermore, he is also right to argue that Aristotelian teleology, as it will be shown below, was alien to Machiavelli. However, Pocock, Skinner and Viroli are also right in arguing that in as much

as Machiavelli linked the idea of republican politics with his modified notion of virtue, his political thought continues the tradition of classical political thought. Thus, the position in this paper navigates between the two: Machiavelli does break with the classical and conventional (including Christian) conception of *aretē/virtus*, while at the same time sharing with Aristotle's practical philosophy the concept of the republican (or *politeian*, to use the Aristotelian term) common good.

### **Machiavelli versus Aristotle: *virtù* against *aretēs*?**

One of the key premises of Machiavelli's political thought lies in his moderate pessimism. Machiavelli was never interested in speculative normative theorizing on what ideal human society should be about. The need to be realistic about political praxis, that is, to observe the *Realpolitik* of *quattrocento* Florence, was rooted in his personal experience of survival against the vicissitudes and deprivations of the human life. Viroli (1998: 12) quotes Machiavelli's correspondence where he states, "I was born in poverty and at early age learned how to scrimp rather than how to thrive". Machiavelli further reinforces this thought in his reflections on human condition when, in numerous places in *The Prince*, he proclaims the solitary and frail conditions of men. Humans are wicked, dangerous, insolent, ready to betray one another as well as to break rather than keep their promises (Machiavelli 2005: 61). It is not surprising that one of Machiavelli's earliest insights is that if a ruler is to be successful, he should not blindly follow the conventional Christian principle of humility:

It is often seen how humility not only does not help but hurts, especially used with insolent men who, either by envy or by another cause, have conceived hatred for you (Machiavelli 1996: 156).

The principle of self-esteem and self-pride, of conferring benefits and being proud of doing so (rather than being humble), is also present in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. The aim of ethical life, so Aristotle argues in the forth book of his *Ethics*, is to become a magnanimous person, someone who possesses "greatness of soul" (*megalopsychia*). The "great-souled person" is someone who aims at great things and is worthy of those things in being able to achieve them, someone who is both blessed with external goods (wealth, health and beauty) and is fully virtuous. Thus, this "great-souled person" is able to look "down on others with justification" (i.e., because he has, as it were, a "right" to do so rather than because of his vanity) (Aristotle 2004: 68–70)<sup>3</sup>. However, while Aristotle stresses the "greatness of soul" as an ethical principle, Machiavelli sees pride and ability to assert one's power over others as a political principle. Indeed, Machiavelli shifts the understanding of virtue from its traditional ethical meaning to *virtú*, locating its meaning solely within the political. His reservation towards the virtues of humility, piety and Christian meekness, as famously expressed in the second book of *Discourses*, illustrates this thesis well<sup>4</sup>. Machiavelli treats them as

a political liability and weakness, especially when a ruler is surrounded by corrupt, envious and insolent people.

The essential point I want to advance here is that the shift from the ethical meaning of virtue to its political meaning is the key aspect in understanding Machiavelli's conception of *virtú*, although its core retains a modified classical understanding of the common good. Though we will discuss Machiavelli's idea of the common good in the next section, it is important to mention its main (not crucially significant) difference from Aristotle's conception of the common good. When Machiavelli emphasizes the common good, he does so in order to reiterate his belief that it is through the common good (*bene comune*) – through the principle of *res publica* – that the greatness of the city, be it Florence or his admired Rome, can be achieved. Of course, Machiavelli was not alone in commending the idea of civil glory which was deeply rooted in the tradition of *studia humanitatis*<sup>5</sup>. For example, Leonardo Bruni, who, among other things, translated Aristotle's *Politics* into Latin, Marsilio Ficino, who introduced Plato to the Medici court, and Machiavelli's contemporary Angelo Poliziano, all emphasized the splendid glory of republican Florence. What is instructive

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highest good in humility, abjectness, and contempt of things human (...). And if our religion asks that you have strength in yourself, it wishes you to be capable more of suffering than of doing something strong" (Machiavelli 1996: 131).

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<sup>3</sup> The ethical principle of a magnanimous person has been criticized by a number of ethical theorists who argued that Aristotle's principle of self-sufficient magnanimity is at odds with his notion of *zoon politikon* as the principle of acknowledged dependence. See, for example, MacIntyre (1999: xi) and Bielskis (2005: 140).

<sup>4</sup> "Our religion has glorified humble and contemplative more than active men. It has then placed the

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Skinner (2000) and Gintautas Mažeikis (1999) define *studia humanitatis* as consisting of studying classical literature, rhetoric, ancient history and classical practical philosophy, some key Medieval texts as well as learning Classical Greek, and modern languages. The purpose of *studia humanitatis*, as Mažeikis (*ibid.*: 152) puts it, was to disclose the essence of human existence through studying ancient texts of Ovid, Virgil and others.

is that such conception of civil greatness had also an aesthetic aspect to it. The splendor of the city, the eloquence of public speaking, and the nobility of actions of virtuous citizens were often invoked to stress the importance of the common good<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, the idea of *bene comune* was linked to the principle of republican patriotism: active citizens should always be able to put the interest of their city, of the fatherland (*patria*) ahead of one's own interest. This is how, ultimately, virtue and *bene comune* were understood by those who, like Machiavelli, were educated in *studia humanitatis*: the highest form of virtue is to sacrifice one's life in defending one's city. Machiavelli, in a letter to his friend Vettori, famously claimed: "I love my country more than my soul" (cf. Viroli 1995: 37).

Although Machiavelli departs from the full endorsement of the conception of *virtus à la* Cicero and Bruni, *Discourses* and *Florentine Histories* show him to be loyal to the general humanist idea of virtue as faithfulness and loyalty to one's city. However, Machiavelli's understanding of *virtù* is far more radical than the *virtus* of his predecessors. His is solely a political conception of virtue: not only its defining component as the subordination of one's individual interest to the common interest of *patria* but also as the expression of courage and manliness (hence its semantic affinity with *vir*) even at the expense of the "salvation" of one's soul<sup>7</sup>. In so conceptualizing civic

virtue and because of his repeated urge for the unification of Italy so that it would be able to withstand foreign aggression, Machiavelli's position can be described as a proto-nationalist. If so, then Machiavelli's *virtù* is different from Aristotle's conception of *aretēs* in several respects.

First, for Aristotle, the members of a political community need virtues so that its citizens are able *rationally* to understand how their own individual interests contribute to the common good as well as how the structures of the common good benefit each individual. Alasdair MacIntyre, commenting on Aristotle's understanding of the politics of the common good, argues that an Aristotelian *polis* "is always, potentially and actually, a society of rational enquiry, of self scrutiny" (MacIntyre 1998: 241). There are no elements of the rhetoric of civil glory nor is there a pathos of proto-nationalist patriotism in Aristotle's conceptualization of *aretēs* and their role in the life of the *polis*.

Another important difference between Aristotle's conception of virtues and that of Machiavelli's lies in the fact that Aristotle wrote about virtues in plural rather than in singular form as Machiavelli predominantly did. As an ethical theorist, Aristotle provides a systematic, theoretical account of virtues and their importance for human flourishing. *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* explain the nature of *aretē* and provide a detailed

<sup>6</sup> For example, Leonardo Bruni, while writing about justice and common liberty, boasted that Florence 'is of such a nature that a more distinguished or more splendid city cannot be found on the entire earth' (c.f. Groffiths 1987: 169). Compared to Bruni's mythologized rhetoric, Machiavelli himself was far more critical towards Florentine civic pride than Bruni (Viroli 2005: 29).

<sup>7</sup> Maurizio Viroli (1995: 36) argues that the love of

liberty as love of the republic defines Machiavelli's conception of civic virtue most accurately. Inverted commas here mean that Machiavelli was extremely skeptical not about Christianity as such, but about the teaching of the Catholic Church that salvation was possible only through meek piety. For the relationship between Machiavelli's conceptions of republican politics, civic virtue and religion, see Viroli (2010).

account of different virtues. Aristotle also distinguishes between two types of virtues – intellectual *and* moral virtues (or the virtues of character). In the sixth book of *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle (2004) argues that there are no less than five intellectual virtues: art (*techne*), scientific knowledge (*episteme*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), philosophical wisdom (*sophia*), and intuitive reason (*nous*)<sup>8</sup>. It is not our aim here to spell out what these virtues are, but to point our attention to the fact that Aristotle considered these virtues as essential for our *rational* well-being. Additionally, although he never claimed that these intellectual virtues are more important than moral virtues, it is plausible to argue that they were of the greatest importance to Aristotle in as much as he believed that the most *eudaimonious* human activity was philosophical contemplation. Hence, this distinction between intellectual and moral virtues delineates the fundamental difference between Aristotle and Machiavelli.

As it is well known, Machiavelli started his career as a young Florentine ready to serve his city as a leading politician. At the age of only twenty-nine, Machiavelli became second chancellor of the republic of Florence. No doubt, this was possible partly due to the connections that his father Bernardo Machiavelli had, but also, and more importantly, because of his education in *studia humanitatis* (Skinner 2000: 5). By the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, *studia humanitatis* became essential for those who had any ambition to play a vital role in the political life of Florence. The aim of this sophisticated education, as

briefly mentioned, was very different from that which we find in Plato's Academy or in Aristotle's Peripatetic School. *Studia humanitatis* was geared almost exclusively towards active political life rather than to philosophical contemplation as it was certainly the case with Plato and Aristotle. This, of course, does not mean that "civic humanists" in Florence or Venice considered philosophical contemplation as unimportant, far from that. However, ever since Coluccio Salutati, the emphasis was always on *vita activa* rather than on *vita contemplativa* (Baron 1955: 7, 89).

Consequently, one of the main differences between Aristotle's and Machiavelli's conceptions of virtue/s lies in their different understandings of the final good, shaped, in part, by their different historical and educational contexts. For Aristotle, a philosopher educated in Plato's Academy, the ultimate human good was embodied in the rational life of philosophical contemplation, while for Machiavelli it was embodied in the glorious life of republican politics, in successfully ruling one's own city, and maintaining the political power in it. Yet Machiavelli was far from alone in so understanding the human good. His predecessors Leonardo Bruni, who, among other things, was an excellent scholar of Aristotle, and Francesco Piccolomini, a Venetian 16<sup>th</sup> century Aristotelian philosopher, saw the importance of studying philosophy primarily because of its alleged usefulness for the public life<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> For an excellent account of Aristotle's intellectual and moral virtues, see C.D.C. Reeve (1992).

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<sup>9</sup> My interpretation of Leonardo Bruni and especially Francesco Piccolomini are greatly influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre's excellent account of Renaissance Aristotelianism originally delivered at the Brian O'Neil Memorial Lectures "Rival Aristotles", re-published in MacIntyre (2006).



According to MacIntyre, this may be one of the reasons why, for example, Francesco Piccolomini, who may be considered as one of the greatest Italian Renaissance followers of Aristotle, read Aristotle's practical philosophy in a way that allowed him to envision philosophical education as useful in itself. Yet, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued (Book X, 1179a & 1180a) that practical philosophy can be useful only to those who already have virtuous character; or, as Aristotle puts it, only to those who had "the right kind of habituation into virtue". Consequently, Piccolomini misread Aristotle's emphasis on philosophical education and believed that philosophical arguments themselves can morally educate and improve the young. Hence, Piccolomini's interpretation of Aristotle's relationship between theory and practice was rather different from Aristotle's own conception of this relationship (MacIntyre 2006: 22–40). After all, the nature of (moral) *aretē* explained in the second book of *Nicomachean Ethics* is that of habit and habituation (*ethos*), on the one hand, and that of right practical reasoning, on the other. A right kind of practical reasoning may direct us towards correcting certain habits that compromise our ability to flourish as *zoon politikon*. However, once a certain point is reached in the time of an individual's life, when our (both good and bad) habits are fully formed, no philosophical arguments or right kind of reasoning will be able to change them. Furthermore, Aristotle's ethical theory teaches that once dysfunctional or corrupt habits are formed they will necessarily influence our reasoning as well. So, following the Aristotelian account of virtues and rationality, no honest rational debate on the nature of justice will be possible with a bunch of thieves.

Hence, there is a reciprocal relationship between habit and reasoning: they influence one another in a circular, one may even say, hermeneutic structure<sup>10</sup>.

The peculiarity of Renaissance Aristotelians (as well as other Renaissance philosophers) lies, then, in that they read Aristotle (and other classical philosophers) far too optimistically and, we may add, superficially, thinking that highly stylized *studia humanitatis* would be sufficient preparation for a more or less harmonious and successful political life in the republic. Without any attempt to argue for it, my intuition is that Machiavelli's Machiavellianism<sup>11</sup> – those passages in *The Prince* and *Discourses* where Machiavelli calls rulers to be ruthless in their pursuit of political power and civil glory – is partly due to the inadequacies and failures of the education of *studia humanitatis*. While placing too much emphasis on rhetoric and on civil glory and not enough on serious, critical reflection, which could have provided them with a sobering theoretical account of major political events and struggles, a self-gratifying Florentine rhetoric of the likes of Leonardo Bruni, on the one hand, and the bloody struggle for political power, on the other, prompted Machiavelli to write his sober, yet often cynical, account of Italian political praxis.

<sup>10</sup> It is not an accident that Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) in *Truth and Method* used Aristotle's conception of ethics to explain the hermeneutic circle constitutive of every act of human understanding.

<sup>11</sup> On the different readings and misreadings of Machiavelli during the age of Reformation and Counter-Reformation see Gintautas Mažeikis's (1999) essay "N. Machiavellis ir makiavelizmas" ("N. Machiavelli and Machiavellianism"), where he juxtaposes the so-called original Machiavelli with the subsequent pejorative interpretations of his thought, which later became known as Machiavellianism.

However, it is not only Machiavelli's conception of the ultimate human good that is different from Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia*. Machiavelli's conception of *virtù* breaks with the Aristotelian conception of virtue as the mean between the two vices of excess and deficiency too. So, for Aristotle, to be courageous one has to be able to distinguish between cowardice and rashness, between the deficiency of courage and the excess of impertinent "courage". There are many passages in *The Prince* where Machiavelli criticizes Cesare Borgia for his rashness and over-confidence. In those cases, Machiavelli implicitly followed Aristotle, suggesting that to practice true courage one needs political wisdom whereby an impertinent leader, no matter how courageous he or she is, will bring about his or her own destruction. This however, is not the message one finds in *The Prince*, chapter 25. Here, Machiavelli famously compares *Fortuna* with a woman, claiming that she is attracted to men who are not only bold, but also rough, impetuous and even vulgar:

I certainly believe this: that it is better to be impetuous than cautious, because Fortune is a woman, and if you want to keep her under it is necessary to beat her and force her down. It is clear that she more often allows herself to be won over by impetuous men than by those who proceed coldly. And so, like a woman, Fortune is always the friend of young men, for they are less cautious, more ferocious, and command her with more audacity (Machiavelli 2005: 86–87).

Therefore, Machiavelli seems to suggest that a virtuous man is someone who is almost indifferent towards the whims of *Fortuna*. He is indifferent because he is extremely confident in his ability to maintain power

and achieves glory. Accordingly, those who rely on good fortune in the unsettling life of politics are bound to lose political power and leadership when fortune turns away. Of course, a virtuous political leader ought to be wise, but the wisdom Machiavelli has in mind is once again different from that of Aristotle and other classical thinkers like Cicero. For Machiavelli, wisdom requires extreme moral flexibility and cunning rather than an ability to choose the proper means to the proper ends guided by classical moral virtues. And, it is the latter that is essential in Aristotle's conception of *phronesis*.

Further differences come to the fore when we consider Aristotle's conception of justice and truthfulness in the fifth book of *Nicomachean Ethics*. Justice for Aristotle requires from us to be 1) well predisposed towards others, 2) to treat others fairly and equally, and 3) to be law-abiding citizens (Aristotle 2005: 81–87). As such, justice is the most important or the greatest virtue because it is the complete virtue since someone who has acquired it will also act courageously, temperately and wisely, which is why good laws, Aristotle argues, require us to act in such ways. Yet justice, according to Aristotle, also contains apophatic elements, for justice forbids certain actions as always culpable and wrong. For example, adultery, murder and falsehood are always wrong and shameful (*kakos*) and thus the principle of mean does not apply to them. This, of course, is not the case with Machiavelli as he, similarly to Plato's Glaucon in *the Republic*, argues that if it is impossible to be just and generous to people then it is far better to appear to be just and generous. Certainly, there are no culpable actions as such in the world of politics since



what matters for Machiavelli is precisely human flexibility and our ability to adapt to the changing circumstances. For Machiavelli, as Quentin Skinner observes, “the clue to the successful statecraft lies in recognizing the force of circumstances, accepting what necessity dictates, and harmonizing one’s behavior with the times” (2000: 43).

In these respects, Machiavelli’s conception of *virtù* is radically different from Aristotle’s as it is primarily linked to the prince’s ability to maintain political power in an unsettling world of deceit, malice, and mutiny.

### **Republican Politics: Machiavelli against Aristotle?**

The remainder of this paper will briefly examine the first book of Aristotle’s *Politics*, which, in large part, became the blueprint for many European political theorists. Let us first briefly consider Aristotle’s conception of political community and politics. In the first pages of *Politics*, Aristotle argues that self-sufficiency in human life can be achieved only through living politically. Further on, he argues that even if “the state came about as a means of securing life itself, it continues in being to secure the good life” (Aristotle 1981: 1252b). Ontologically speaking, the *polis* is teleological in nature as it is essentially primary to the individual, the household or the village. The *polis* retains this ontological status because it exists by nature as an end in itself<sup>12</sup>. It follows, then, that the political community is an end of human existence and that it is its highest good, for “the end is perfection; and self-sufficiency is both end and

perfection” (*ibid.*). To substantiate this claim Aristotle introduces the functional argument of the household, the village, and the state. There is a clear hierarchical (functional) order between the three of them. The household is for the reproduction and satisfaction of our daily needs while the function of the village is more than the satisfaction of daily needs and serves in supplying our social needs. The good of the *polis* is higher than the goods of the household and the village combined and so it is only in the polis that freedom and the best possible life can be achieved:

A state is an association of similar persons whose aim is the best life possible. What is best is happiness, and to be happy is an active exercise of virtue and a complete employment of it (*ibid.*: 1328a).

Thus, the *polis* in Aristotle’s political thought is the highest political community without which the flourishing of its citizens would be impossible. It is also the place where the intellectual and ethical virtues such as justice, courage, and wisdom can and should be practiced. It follows that political community is the surplus of the ordinary life of necessities, that is, its cause is the good life, since it is only the community of free and virtuous people that enable individual and communal well-being<sup>13</sup>.

Is there anything like this in Machiavelli? The immediate answer is “No”, since there is, as mentioned above, not a hint of Aristotelian teleology in Machiavelli’s political philosophy. Furthermore, Machiavelli rids his political philosophy of the classical conception of the cardinal virtues – that is, wisdom, courage, temperance and justice – the virtues first

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<sup>12</sup> “[T]he end-product of the coming into existence of any object (...) we call its nature” (*ibid.*)

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<sup>13</sup> For a more detailed account of Aristotle’s *Politics*, Book I, see Bielskis (2005: 148–150).

articulated by Plato and Aristotle and then transmitted to Neo-Platonic and Christian ethical thought. Nevertheless, the Machiavelli of *Discourses*, similar to Aristotle in *Politics*, emphasizes the fundamental importance of common liberty in the state:

And truly it is a marvelous thing to consider how much greatness Athens arrived at in the space of a hundred years after it was freed from the tyranny of Pisistratus. But above all it is very marvelous to consider how much greatness Rome arrived at after it was freed from its kings. The reason is easy to understand, for it is not the particular (individual) good but the common good that makes cities great. And without doubt this common good is not observed if not in republics (...). [A]s soon as tyranny arises after a free way of life, the least evil that results for those cities is not to go ahead further nor to grow more in power or riches, but usually – or rather always – it happens that they go backward (Machiavelli 1996: 129–130).

Political liberty, then, is essential in Machiavelli's thought and it should be understood as freedom from external and internal oppression and tyranny. Republican liberty requires its citizens their full commitment to the common cause of defending liberty against the enemy. It also requires patriotism, which, as noted above, Machiavelli understood in terms of a citizen's ability to put the common interest of the city before one's own personal interests. And, although, as previously mentioned, Aristotle's conceptualization of the *polis* has none of Machiavelli's proto-nationalist rhetoric, it shares the same general principle of the common good, namely the idea that the political life and aim of any community should be based on the common interest of the *whole* community. Following this principle, Aristotle

conceptualized the distinction between good and bad political constitutions, arguing that the qualitative difference between flourishing political communities (i.e., monarchies, aristocracies, and polities) and corrupt/dysfunctional political constitutions (i.e., tyrannies, oligarchies, and democracies) lies in that the former aim at and serve the common good while the latter serve only the interest of the rulers. In this respect, Machiavelli, as well as many other republican theorists before and after him, followed Polybius and Aristotle (*Discourses*, I, 2). That is, one can speak about republican politics only if its institutions serve the principle of common liberty and the public good. Consequently, Machiavelli also followed Aristotelian political theory regarding political corruption. In *Discourses*, he argues that political corruption starts when free citizens lose the sight of the common good and the interest to defend and maintain the institutions of liberty and civil equality (*ibid.*). Finally, Machiavelli followed Aristotle's idea that the most practical and stable states are mixed constitutions:

So those who prudently order laws having recognized this defect, avoiding each of these modes by itself, chose one that shared in all, judging it firmer and more stable; for one guards the other, since in one and the same city there are the principality, the aristocrats, and the popular government (Machiavelli 1996: 13).

Based on these aspects of Machiavelli's understanding of republican politics, there appears to be a strong similarity with Aristotle's political theory. Yet, it is Machiavelli's republicanism rather than his notion of *virtù* that allows us to trace the conceptual continuity between classical political philosophy and Machiavelli's thought.

## Conclusion

Isaiah Berlin, of course, was right when he pointed out that Machiavelli, while being a well read literati, was not a philosopher (1995: 216). Machiavelli never wrote nor did he have an ambition to develop a speculative and highly hierarchical philosophical system. He was far more interested in historically informed analysis of the workings of real politics.

However, looking at Machiavelli's thought from an Aristotelian point of view one needs to ask a fundamental question: why is it that Machiavelli saw political praxis in a rather narrow way? Aristotle asks the normative question of what it is to live a flourishing and meaningful life as well as how a thriving *individual* life is linked to the life of a political community. Aristotle's practical philosophy is a systematic attempt to answer this question teleologically. Thus, the question of what it is to live a human life well or badly – the life which is always political – was a part of Aristotle's wider philosophical scheme. Aristotle's teleology, developed in *Physics* but also elsewhere, allowed him, and those who subsequently followed his metaphysical biology, to ask this question without any moralistic hypocrisy. There is no doubt that Machiavelli was also asking this question, but the absence (whether intentional or not) of an Aristotelian teleology *and* the evident mismatch between the ideological pathos of *studia humanitatis* and the bloody political reality of *quattrocento* Florence, the reality which he saw himself as being part of, made

his theoretical analysis very different from the classical texts of practical philosophy. Machiavelli saw his task in describing and conceptualizing political life *as it was* – the politics of the turbulent world of 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy. Aspiring first to be a leading politician and only then a critical literati, Machiavelli articulated what everyone knew, but never had the courage openly to acknowledge. In doing so, Machiavelli became a revolutionary.

One of the most fundamental lessons Machiavelli learned quickly was that if a ruler wants to *survive*, he must hold on to political power in any way possible. When the choice is between life and death, then conventional morality becomes another mask to be worn in order to survive. Thus, the problem with Machiavelli was not that, in many respects, he broke from the classical conception of virtue and politics, but that he was not able to distance himself, when it was most needed, from the life of Florentine politics. Yet, such inabilities lie not only with him but also with his predecessors, those “civic humanists” such as Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni who contributed to creating an illusion whereby a sophisticated education such as *studia humanitatis* would naturally ennoble citizens and become the source of civic pride such that the only possible way to achieve glory is through politics. What Machiavelli needed, indeed what Florence needed, was not a forced exile to a secluded villa in Tuscany, but a voluntary exile to a philosophical school where collective critical reflection on political praxis could be advanced – to do what Plato did in humiliated Athens.

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## DORYBĖ IR POLITIKA: ARISTOTELIŠKA NICCOLÒ MACHIAVELLI'O INTERPRETACIJA

Andrius Bielskis

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje Niccolò Machiavelli'o dorybės (*virtū*) ir respublikoniškos politikos sampratos analizuojamos Aristotelio dorybių etikos požiūriu. Machiavelli'o pilietinės dorybės akcentavimas bei respublikoniškos politikos idealų gynimas turi panašumų su Aristotelio politikos koncepcija. Atsispiriant nuo dviejų konkuruojančių Machiavelli'o interpretacijų (t. y. Kembridžo konteksto istorikų mokyklos ir Josepho V. Femia), straipsnyje teigiama, kad Machiavelli nutolsta nuo klasikinės *aretė* / *virtus* sampratos, tačiau išlieka konceptualus ryšys tarp Machiavelli'o

respublikoniškos bendrojo gėrio sampratos ir Aristotelio praktinės filosofijos. Machiavelli'o modifikuota klasikinė *virtus* samprata ir respublikoniška retorika leidžia jo teorinę poziciją interpretuoti kaip protonacionalizmą. Sykiu straipsnyje teigiama, kad Machiavelli'o ciniški patarimai ir apibendrinimai gali iš dalies būti paaiškinti renesanso *studia humanitatis* edukacinės tradicijos, kurioje jis buvo išlavintas, ir brutalsios *Realpolitik* neatitikimu.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** Machiavelli, Aristotelis, respublikoniška politika, *virtū*, dorybių etika, bendrasis gėris, *studia humanitatis*.

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