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Virtue

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of citizenship seriously, to the point of putting the common good ahead of his or her personal interests, is thus said to display *civic virtue*. Political theorists have frequently warned that such virtue cannot be taken for granted, however, and many of them have urged that steps be taken to promote or foster civic virtue. This concern for the fragility of civic virtue is a clear theme in ancient (or classical) political thought, but it has also played an important part in modern and contemporary political theory.

The Concept of Virtue

The English word *virtue* derives from the Latin *virtus*, but scholars typically trace the concept of virtue to the Greek idea of *aretē*, which may be translated as either “virtue” or “excellence.” To ancient thinkers, virtue was not so much a matter of holding and following the right beliefs as it was a matter of outstanding ability—that is, of excellence. A great warrior, such as Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad*, would exhibit the virtues of courage and strength; a great philosopher, such as Socrates, would exemplify the virtues of wisdom and justice. But virtue was not something confined to human beings. Anything that was excellent in the appropriate way, including animals and tools, would be virtuous. Traces of this way of thinking are still with us, as when someone speaks of the virtue of a watch being its accurate time keeping, or of a knife that has the virtue of cutting cleanly. Such usages, though, are likely to seem quaint, and perhaps even archaic, in a time when virtue is usually regarded as *moral* goodness.

Ancient philosophers and poets concerned themselves more with the virtues of people than with those of animals and implements, of course, and in this regard it is important to note the connection between the Latin words *virtus* and *vir*, or man. Women could be excellent in their own way, but for the Romans virtue largely consisted in the kinds of excellence expected of men. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, for example, the hero Aeneas is a leader of men, a mighty warrior, and a model of piety who shows proper reverence for both his father and the gods—a paragon of all that a man should be. Aeneas also put his love of country and devotion to duty above his own happiness and pleasure, and in doing so he served as an exemplar of *civic* virtue.

VIRTUE

In political theory, the word *virtue* usually refers to the disposition or character traits appropriate to a citizen. Someone who takes the responsibilities

This connection between virtue and manliness persisted into modern history, as the next section will indicate, but the rise of Christianity presented a powerful challenge. For ancient philosophers, the cardinal virtues were courage, wisdom, temperance (or prudence), and justice. These are not exclusively military or “manly” excellences, to be sure, but it was easy to think of them as being more appropriate to men than to women, who were largely confined to domestic life. To these classical virtues, however, Christians added the “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and love (*agapē* in Greek, *caritas* in Latin)—virtues that are neither martial nor particularly manly, in the classical view.

The growing emphasis on the theological or Christian virtues in late antiquity may also have contributed to the tendency to think of virtue as a matter of moral goodness rather than excellence or outstanding ability. This tendency is reflected in the distinction that we have come to draw, at least implicitly, between a *virtuoso* and a virtuous person. A *virtuoso* is someone who possesses and displays outstanding ability of some sort—usually outstanding musical ability—but there is no reason to think that a *virtuoso* will also be a virtuous, or *morally* admirable, person. In this respect, the modern conception of virtue is quite different from the ancient.

Civic Virtue in Ancient Political Thought

For the classical political philosophers of the ancient world, civic or political virtue was largely a matter of putting aside private desires and personal interests in order to do what is best for the public at large. In his *Republic*, for example, the Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 BCE) argues that ruling, or statesmanship, is a craft that aims at what is best not for the ruler, but for those who are ruled. Plato’s student Aristotle (384–322 BCE) went on to say, in his *Politics*, that the citizen is someone who both rules and is ruled—that is, someone who has a say in determining what policies and laws should be enacted, but who also has a responsibility to obey those policies and laws. For Aristotle, the conditions that foster a virtuous life, including the life of the virtuous citizen, are those of the middle class, for the people in this class are neither so rich as to be spoiled by a life of luxury nor so poor as to be ground down by poverty.

Those in the middle class are prosperous enough to be able to devote some time to politics, and to think and speak independently when they do, but not so wealthy as to lose respect for the value of work and thrift. The most fortunate political society, then, is the one in which people of middling means dominate, for there civic virtue is most likely to thrive. For Plato and Aristotle, moreover, education is of fundamental concern, for the proper education will cultivate the proper dispositions and traits among those young people who are to become citizens.

Similar attitudes prevailed among Roman political thinkers, especially Cicero (106–43 BCE) and other champions of the republic. As its derivation from the Latin *res publica* indicates, the republic is the “public thing,” or the public business of all citizens. The good citizen, therefore, will be the one who distinguishes himself—and citizens were exclusively men—by his devotion to the good of the republic. Civic virtue, in other words, was *republican* virtue, and the most virtuous were those who would bear arms or otherwise risk life and fortune to preserve the republic. One celebrated model of the republican citizen was the general Cincinnatus, who left his farm to lead the Roman army in the fifth century BCE, only to relinquish his command and return to farming once victory had secured the survival of the republic.

Civic Virtue in Modern Political Thought

Virtue has remained an important concern of modern political theorists, and nowhere more plainly so than in the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), a citizen of Florence. Machiavelli wrote in Italian rather than Latin, but his frequent references to *virtù* indicate that virtue remained for him very much a manly and martial quality. In his most famous book, *The Prince*, he finds virtue not only in those who are bold and brave, but also in those who are deceitful and cruel, at least when deceit and cruelty will help to preserve the state. In his *Discourses on Livy* and other writings, moreover, Machiavelli praises republican virtue and advocates a militia composed of arms-bearing citizens, which he took to be a better safeguard of the citizens’ liberty than reliance on mercenaries or a standing army of professional soldiers.

Like other republicans, Machiavelli tended to think of *corruption* as the enemy of civic virtue. If civic virtue is the disposition to put the public good ahead of one's own, then corruption is what ensues when people think first and foremost of their private or personal interests. In order to promote and sustain civic virtue, then, it is necessary to be on guard against ambition, avarice, and luxury—that is, against the love of power, of money, and of the soft, easy life. Establishing a citizen militia would be one way to cultivate devotion to the common good while combating corruption.

This opposition of virtue to corruption continued to play an important part in modern political theory, but less obviously so as virtue came to be associated as much with commerce—in the form of such bourgeois virtues as thrift, industry, and far-sightedness—as it was with citizenship or piety. This desire to promote both commercial and civic virtues appears, for example, in the works of the French philosopher the baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755) and some of the founding fathers of the United States.

Montesquieu placed so much emphasis on virtue as love of one's country and "love of equality" in his *The Spirit of the Laws* that he found it necessary, in a foreword to the second edition, to assure church authorities that his concern was with "political" rather than "moral" or "Christian" virtue. For Montesquieu, political or civic virtue is the "principle"—that is, the main-spring or motivating force—of republican governments. What moves people to act in a monarchy, he said, is the love of honor; in a despotic regime, it is fear; and in a republic, it is virtue, understood as love of a country where the citizens are equal under the law. The problem is how to preserve this political virtue in an increasingly commercial, profit-driven world.

One answer to this question is to design political institutions in such a way as to make reliance on virtuous citizens less necessary, if not altogether unnecessary. Montesquieu thought that the British had hit on one way of doing this by the separation of powers in their government, with executive power vested in the crown, legislative power in the parliament, and judicial power in the courts. By separating power in this way, self-interested or ambitious attempts to advance private interests would be frustrated by their inability to gain control

of all the branches of government. To this device other political thinkers added the checks and balances that enable those who control one branch of government to thwart the designs of those in the other branches.

Separation of powers and checks and balances are key features of the U.S. Constitution, and there is no doubt that the framers of the Constitution intended these devices as safeguards against ambition, avarice, and other vices. As James Madison wrote in *The Federalist*, number 51, the need for government is itself a reflection on human nature; and just as government must control the governed, so must it also control itself. That is why "[a]mbition must be made to counteract ambition" in a system of checks and balances. Yet Madison also held, in *The Federalist*, number 57, that every constitution ought to aim first at placing power in the hands of those who possess "most virtue to pursue, the common good of society," and then aim at "keeping them virtuous whilst they continue to hold their public trust." Like the ancient philosophers, Madison and other early modern thinkers remained convinced of both the importance and the fragility of civic virtue.

A similar concern seems to have led Alexis de Tocqueville (1804–1859) to warn in his *Democracy in America* against the threat of "individualism," which he took to be a withdrawal from public life in favor of life in the narrow circle of family and friends. Part of the remedy, Tocqueville said, is to educate people to see that self-interest properly understood requires them to bear a share of the responsibility for democratic government. His English contemporary, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), went on to argue against the secret ballot on the grounds that voting is not a right but a public trust—a trust that is best fulfilled by casting one's vote openly. Mill seldom spoke explicitly of civic virtue, however, and in that regard he seems typical of political theorists throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century.

The reasons for this neglect are no doubt manifold and complicated. According to some scholars, the emphasis that social-contract theorists and others gave to natural rights and individual liberties drew attention away from civic duty and virtue—and perhaps fostered the kind of individualism that Tocqueville deplored. Virtue may also have seemed unimportant to thinkers who believed that

a proper grasp of human nature or history would provide the key to the proper arrangement of political society. For the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), for example, the knowledge that desire for pleasure and aversion to pain govern our actions leads quickly to the conclusion that the business of government is to promote social happiness by punishing those who cause pain and rewarding those who give pleasure. This was a step, moreover, that required no attention to civic virtue. For Karl Marx (1818–1883) and many other socialists, virtue and other moralistic terms were ideological vestiges that would be left behind once class conflict and technological growth had brought about a new historical epoch in which every individual will be equally free to develop his or her potential. To the extent that it still carried aristocratic connotations as a celebration of excellence, virtue may also have seemed hostile to the egalitarian ethos that motivated not only socialists but all advocates of democracy.

Civic Virtue Today

Whatever the reasons for its neglect in the nineteenth century, political theorists' interest in civic virtue clearly began to revive late in the twentieth century. This revival is likely related to the renewed interest in "virtue theory," with its long look backward to Aristotle, on the part of moral philosophers. Another contributing factor is the growing sense that liberal democracy requires some significant degree of virtue among its citizens if it is to survive. As societies have become more populous, the state or government seems to be more remote from the citizen; and as societies have become more diverse ethnically and culturally, the bonds that draw citizens together seem to be weaker than in decades past. In conditions such as these, a virtuous citizenry cannot be taken for granted; nor is it clear that institutional arrangements and incentives can sustain liberal democracy in the absence of civic virtue. As a consequence, many political theorists are once again asking how this fragile virtue can be fostered and protected. One result is a renewed interest in civic education; another is increased attention to the question of what it means to be a citizen in a multicultural society and an increasingly cosmopolitan world. Yet another is the question of whether the concept of civic virtue

is irretrievably tied to the idea of the arms-bearing male citizen, or whether it is capacious enough to accommodate women.

How these questions are or ought to be answered is the subject of lively debate in the early twenty-first century. The fact that the debate goes on, however, and that it is so lively, testifies to the continuing importance of virtue to political theory.

Richard Dagger

See also American Founding; Aristotle; Bentham, Jeremy; Cicero; Citizenship; Civic Humanism; Civic Republicanism; Machiavelli, Niccolò; Marx, Karl; Mill, John Stuart; Montesquieu, Baron de; Plato; Republicanism; Roman Commonwealth; Socialism; Standing Armies; Tocqueville, Alexis de

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