

ON STRIKING SIMILARITIES BETWEEN CHAPTERS XIV – XIX OF MACHIAVELLI’S THE PRINCE AND THE FIFTH BOOK OF ARISTOTLE’S *POLITICS*

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Abstract. In the article, I try to refute an old and widespread superstition according to which the new political philosophy created by Niccolo Machiavelli breaks with classical political philosophy by taking a novel position toward the political; that is, that classics were idle “idealists” while Machiavelli is a cold-blooded “realist”. To do that, I compare the most explicit part of *The Prince* (chapters XIV-XIX) with the end of the fifth book of Aristotle’s *Politics* and attempt to show that in the most pivotal chapters of his most famous work, the Florentine, in fact, often borrows Aristotle’s advice on how to preserve a tyrannical rule.

Keywords: Machiavelli; Aristotle; tyranny; political philosophy; ancients; moderns

It is universally accepted to think of Niccolo Machiavelli as the founding father of modern political philosophy. The reason for this is his proclaimed break with classical political philosophy due to its intentionally prescriptive, and not descriptive, character (Cochrane, 1961; Strauss, 1978; Zuckert, 2017a; Major, 2007; Rebhorn, 2010; Zuckert, 2017b). That is what the author of *The Prince* says himself, stating that the ancients created their political philosophy thinking “how one ought to live”, while he will bear in mind “how one lives” (Machiavelli, 2008: XV, 7 – 17).¹⁾ Yet, this claim is not as clearly true as it may seem at first glance. To anyone who has closely studied works of classics, this “break” becomes problematic almost instantly (Strauss, 1970; Rebhorn, 2010). And although *The Prince* mentions only one classical political philosopher by name (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV, 87), it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the role of classical political philosophy – and, in particular, Aristotle’s teaching – is, in fact, not insignificant to the treatise.²⁾

Of course, Machiavelli had been familiar with the works of Aristotle (primarily with the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics*) before he finished working on the *Discourses*: in chapter XXVI of book III, he not only quotes the *Politics* but

mentions Aristotle by name (Machiavelli, 1883: III, XXVI; Mansfield, 1998). But did he, in fact, use the *Politics* in *The Prince*? Some scholars believe the answer is yes (Cochrane, 1961; Machiavelli, 1891; Mulieri, 2020); others more or less reject the idea (Gilbert, 1938; Benner, 2009); and some are undecided (Atkinson, 2008). Now, there is no definitive evidence that Machiavelli was familiar with the *Politics* by the time he wrote *The Prince*, but this does not mean that he was not. In a letter to F. Vettori dated 26 August 1513, he states that he does “not know what Aristotle says about states made up of detached pieces” (Machiavelli, 1998), referring to the *Politics*. From this statement, it is often concluded that the Florentine did not read the book prior to this date.³⁾ He started working on *The Prince* somewhere in 1513 (Atkinson, 2008; Ridolfi, 2010) and polished it up almost until the end of 1516 (Atkinson, 2008; Ridolfi 2010; Capponi, 2010), at the same time as when most of the *Discourses* must have been completed (Atkinson, 2008). And Machiavelli surely was familiar with the *Politics* before that happened. So, there are at least three possibilities of that familiarity: The Florentine could have read the *Politics* after Vettori referred to it in his letter; he could have read the *Politics* during his work on *The Prince*; or he could have returned to *The Prince* after he had read the *Politics* during his work on the *Discourses*.⁴⁾ Now, all these possibilities would be empty without a significant number of coincidences between the books. And as I attempt to show here, at least in its “most scandalous section” (Rebhorn, 2010) (chapters XIV – XIX), *The Prince* has clear similarities to the Vth book of the *Politics*.

The first relevant coincidences between the texts appear even before Chapter XIV and the Vth book. Closer to the end of the IVth book, Aristotle states a general principle for the preservation of any regime: “it is essential that the part of the state that wishes the constitution to remain should be stronger than the part that does not wish it” (Aristotle, 1959: 1296b 13 – 14). He suggests measuring the strength of the parts using two different methods: by their quality and by their quantity. He is almost completely silent about the first one and makes two statements about the second. He says: “the encroachments of the rich ruin the constitution more than those of the people” (Aristotle, 1959: 1297a 11 – 13). Then he clarifies that thought: “For those who are poor and have no share in the honours are willing to keep quiet if no one insults them or takes away any part of their substance” (Aristotle, 1959: 1297b 6 – 8). In chapter IX of *The Prince*, Machiavelli twice makes a similar statement. The first version is: “The common people want to be neither governed nor oppressed by the rich, and the rich want to govern and oppress the common people” (Machiavelli, 2008: IX, 11 – 14). The second version repeats the first with slight variations: “The latter (the rich) want to oppress, the former (the common people) want only not to be oppressed” (Machiavelli, 2008: IX, 42 – 43). These claims look like a conclusion from, or a combination of, the Aristotelian view. Yet, when Aristotle speaks of a choice between reliance on the poor or the rich, Machiavelli,

it seems, decides unambiguously in favor of the latter (see Machiavelli, 2008: IX, 35 – 45 and XIX, 42 – 45; cf. XIX, 104 – 106). It is possible that, by doing so, he shows his own position to the readers who know the *Politics* well enough. This is because Aristotle's conclusion regarding the domination of the poor in the state is clear: "Where therefore the multitude of the poor exceeds in the proportion stated, here it is natural for there to be democracy" (Aristotle, 1959: 1296b 24 – 26).

At the beginning of the Vth book, when speaking about ways to preserve some kinds of aristocracies and oligarchies, Aristotle states a rule: These types of regimes are preserved because "those who get in the offices treat both those outside the constitution and those in the government well... (by) not wronging the ambitious ones in the matter of dishonour or the multitude in the matter of gain" (Aristotle, 1959: 1308a 5 – 11). The rule will be true in the case of tyrannies, although, in the corresponding passage on the preservation of tyranny, Aristotle will be much more prolix. Machiavelli's maxim that would appear in the chapter devoted to conspiracies sounds similar and has the same meaning: "Whenever they are not deprived of their property or their honor, most men remain satisfied" (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 12 – 13).

Another rule for preserving tyranny – against "conspiracies of one" – consists of the necessity of treating ambitious men gently. The corresponding section of the *Politics* contains two passages devoted to that issue. The first treats ambition as a cause for an assassination attempt on a tyrant and ends with the following words: "Those who make the venture from this motive are very few indeed in number, for underlying it there must be an utter disregard of safety, if regard for safety is not to check the enterprise" (Aristotle, 1959: 1312a 21 – 33). The second deepens the first by showing that it is exactly ambitious men whom a tyrant must watch out for in the first place: "Among those who make attempts upon the life of a ruler the most formidable and those against whom the greatest precaution is needed are those that are ready to sacrifice their lives if they can destroy him" (Aristotle, 1959: 1315a 24 – 31). Machiavelli also does not forget that there are men whose ambition is, in principle, unsatisfiable (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 14 – 16). He says of "conspiracies of one" from which there could be no escape: "If one man's mind is resolved upon such a killing, a prince can do nothing to escape it, since anyone who has no fear of death can harm him. But a prince certainly ought not to fear that kind of death unduly, because it is extremely uncommon" (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 298 – 303). Thus, Machiavelli almost repeats Aristotle, combining the two passages from the *Politics*. The next sentence of *The Prince* points out a certain problem connected to "conspiracies of one". Stating that the number of such conspiracies is minuscule, he tries to calm his addressee through the example of Caracalla, who was killed by his bodyguard out of fear for his own life (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 307 – 312). However, the context of the corresponding passage of the *Politics* is different. In it, Aristotle describes an attempt on a tyrant's life by one man not out of fear but

because of ambition. It would not be entirely unreasonable to assume that, through Aristotle, Machiavelli tries to show an unresolvable weakness of a prince's rule – its vulnerability to ambition.

In Aristotle's view, the main reasons for tyranny's falling apart, as distinct from the other regimes, are hatred and contempt: "There are two causes that chiefly lead men to attack tyranny, hatred and contempt" (Aristotle, 1959: 1312b 17 – 19).⁵⁾ Machiavelli repeats this formula: "Above all else a prince must protect himself from being despised and hated" (Machiavelli, 2008: XVI, 87 – 89).⁶⁾ Its elements – that is, a discussion of either hatred or contempt – are presented in all chapters of *The Prince* devoted to the question of how to preserve a prince's rule (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV – XIX). However, it could be said that through the citation of Aristotle, Machiavelli – among other things – makes altogether clear what the Florentine himself could not say, i.e., that *The Prince* is a book on tyranny, although the word "tyranny" and its derivatives do not appear in it at all (Stacey, 2007; Ranum, 2020). In the same passage, Aristotle notes that a tyrant is unable to avoid the hatred of his subjects and, therewith, must focus his efforts on not being despised (Aristotle, 1959: 1312b 19 – 21). Hence, it would seem that Machiavelli moves from Aristotle's view by saying that a prince can avoid both hatred and contempt. And, yet, it is not entirely true. Aristotle provides two methods to preserve tyranny (cf. Buekenhout, 2021). First, "traditional" consists of the weakening, dissociation, and depoliticization of the subjects (Aristotle, 1959: 1314a 14 – 25). Second, "innovational" leads to a tyrant not being hated (Aristotle, 1959: 1315b 4 – 8). It is exactly this method (even if in a somewhat changed form) that Machiavelli suggests to a prince.

Aristotle, as well as Machiavelli, thinks that there are two key elements for the preservation of tyranny which are linked together: the public image and the actual qualities of a tyrant. Aristotle and Machiavelli are in unison with each other when they speak of qualities that a tyrant must have or must be seen as having and in what way. Aristotle and Machiavelli agree about which positive quality a tyrant must have and must be seen as having. Also, Aristotle and Machiavelli agree about which negative quality a tyrant must have and must be seen as having. Both agree that there are some qualities that a tyrant must demonstrate, but that he could not and should not have. Finally, *The Prince* and the *Politics* have similar prohibitions connected to those qualities.

The first quality of a tyrant of which Aristotle speaks is thrift or frugality in regard to public funds (Aristotle, 1959: 1314a 40 – 1314b 18). The first negative quality of a prince of which Machiavelli speaks is frugality (Machiavelli, 2008: XVI). Both authors end the discussion of frugality with a question: How to avoid contempt caused by it? (Aristotle, 1959: 1314b 18 – 20; Machiavelli, 2008: XVI, 89 – 95). Both of them forbid any encroachment on the property of a tyrant's subjects, which is, in particular, caused by his generosity or wastefulness. Also, both of them say that a tyrant must be prohibited from being preda-

tory toward his subjects' women (Aristotle, 1959, 1314b 23 – 25; Machiavelli, 2008: XVII, 62 – 64 and XIX, 8 – 12).

The next quality of a tyrant of which Aristotle speaks is military valor: A tyrant must know the art of war and must be seen as such, for he could not be in power without it (Aristotle, 1959: 1314b 21 – 23). The art also helps him avoid contempt (Aristotle, 1959: 1314b 18 – 21). Machiavelli agrees with Aristotle on both points: Without this art, a prince could not cease and uphold his power (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV, 4 – 7 and 9 – 11) and it, by itself, helps to avoid contempt (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV, 17 – 19 and 27 – 29).

Finally, Aristotle points out several qualities that a tyrant must be seen as having. These are three classical virtues: moderation (Aristotle, 1959: 1314b 28 – 36; cf. 1312b 23 – 25), piety⁷⁾ (Aristotle, 1959: 1314b 38 – 1315a 3), and justice (Aristotle, 1959: 1315a 4 – 8). It is obvious that a tyrant is not wise; otherwise, he would not be a tyrant. Therefore, wisdom is replaced by modified piety: While appearing to be pious, a tyrant must never become a believer (Aristotle, 1959: 1315a 3 – 4). Machiavelli agrees: Piety is not simply one of the qualities that a prince must only demonstrate; it is the first among them (Machiavelli, 2008: XVIII, 63 – 65 and 82 – 85). Yet, it seems that, for him, piety is connected not to wisdom but to other qualities that a tyrant must be seen as having. (He mentions compassion, faithfulness, humanity, and frankness.) From the point of view of the many, who are the main audience of a prince's play, piety must make a man, on the one hand, good (compassionate and humane) and, on the other hand, honest (faithful and frank). That is why the demonstration of piety is the key element of the demonstration of the above-mentioned qualities.

Machiavelli's understanding of moderation differs from that of Aristotle, who sees it as abstinence from bodily pleasures. Machiavelli's moderation is a kind of "the third way", the ability of a politician to act according to circumstances. Yet, the author of *The Prince* partially agrees with the author of the *Politics* on the issue: "When princes have been more interested in personal pleasures than in arms, they have lost their states" (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV, 7 – 9).⁸⁾

As for being just, Machiavelli practically repeats Aristotle's formula: "and honours of this kind (to those who display merit in any matter) he (a tyrant) should bestow in person, but inflict his punishments by the agency of other magistrates and law-courts" (Aristotle, 1959: 1315a 6 – 8). Although, making the corresponding example, he ends up with a more general conclusion: "A prince must delegate to others those measures which entail blame, to himself those which cause pleasure" (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 108 – 132).

After having seen some similarities between Aristotle's and Machiavelli's formulas for the preservation of tyranny, it would not be unreasonable to compare the plans of corresponding passages of the *Politics* (Aristotle, 1959: 1314a 29 – 1315b 10) and *The Prince* (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV – XIX).

Aristotle starts the section on the “innovational” method of preserving tyranny by stating its essence: “Protecting one thing only, its power, in order that the ruler may govern not only with the consent of the subjects but even without it” (Aristotle, 1959: 1314a 34 – 36). Despite it, a successful tyrant must imitate a king’s rule to not cause hatred and contempt. This imitation includes: 1) frugality toward public funds; 2) concern with the military art; 3) self-restraint toward young males and females⁹; and 4) a demonstration of the three above-mentioned virtues. Then, after offering advice on how to preserve any monarchic rule, he turns to the problem of “conspiracies of one” and coups. To avoid “conspiracies of one”, a tyrant must not be cruel (or appear as such) with the youth and must not insult ambitious men. Being young and being ambitious are somehow connected (cf. Machiavelli, 2008: XXV, 125 – 138). To avoid coups, a tyrant must obtain the support of the two parts of the state: the poor and the rich; or, if one of them is stronger than the other, the strongest one. Finally, Aristotle sums up all that was said before. He repeats certain points: frugality, moderation,¹⁰ the obtaining of support from the poor and the rich. All this leads to the two desirable results: lack of hatred and fear from the subjects and creation, in their minds, of an image of the virtuous ruler.

Machiavelli starts his discussion on ways to preserve princedom in Chapter XIV with an assertion that a prince must care about the art of war. In doing so, he makes two points that, it seems, follow Aristotle. The first one: “The primary cause for your losing your princedom is neglect of this art” (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV, 9 – 11). The second one: “among the other ills that being unarmed brings you, it makes you despised” (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV, 16 – 17). Then he explains how to do it: by learning the art and imitating in it the great men of the past. Possession of the art must be accompanied by an appearance of such possession for the subjects (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV, 27 – 29).

In Chapter XV, he turns to the famous claim against the ancients: They were nothing but empty dreamers. Machiavelli, therefore, by breaking with them, will be neither empty nor a dreamer. In the same chapter, he enumerates a list of qualities that are important to a prince, as well as the opposites of those qualities, to later show which of them a prince must have and which he must only seem to have.

The first discussed quality – which alone has a whole chapter devoted to it (XVI) – is frugality. Frugality is the only negative quality named in the previous chapter that a prince must have and must be seen as having. However, as was shown above, it is not the only quality of this kind. Then Machiavelli provides corresponding historical examples and finishes the chapter with Aristotle’s formula (Machiavelli, 2008: XVI, 87 – 89; Aristotle, 1959: 1312b 17 – 19).

In the next chapter (XVII), he discusses ruthlessness, which a prince must show while at the same time being compassionate (Machiavelli, 2008: XVII, 12 – 18). The fame of a ruthless ruler leads to fear and hatred of a prince. That is why Machiavelli attempts to prove that “being feared and not being hated are sentiments

that readily go together" (Machiavelli, 2008: XVII, 60 – 62). The rule for reaching that goal, i.e., to not be predatory toward his subjects' property and women, repeats Aristotle's one (Machiavelli, 2008: XVII, 62 – 64; Aristotle, 1959: 1314b 23 – 25). Then he provides corresponding historical examples and concludes that a prince "should strive solely to avoid hatred" (Machiavelli, 2008: XVII, 12 – 132). This, it seems, contradicts Aristotle's formula that a tyrant cannot avoid hatred (Aristotle, 1959: 1312b 19 – 20). Yet, as was said before, the whole essence of the "innovational" method of preserving tyranny is to avoid hatred by imitating some elements of a kingly rule (Aristotle, 1959: 1315b 4 – 8).

Chapter XVIII is devoted to all the remaining qualities named in Chapter XV. However, in it there is only a discussion of honesty, for it must be treated like all the other remaining qualities: A prince must be seen as having them, but not actually have them.¹¹⁾

In Chapter XIX, Machiavelli turns to the question of how a prince should avoid "conspiracies of one" and coups. Initially, he does not separate these two themes, saying that a prince could avoid hatred if he would not be predatory toward his subjects' property and women (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 9 – 12), thereby repeating himself (Machiavelli, 2008: XVII, 62 – 64) and following Aristotle. Then he enumerates qualities that evoke contempt and respect for a prince. After this, Machiavelli (having repeated Aristotle's formula) (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 29 – 32; cf. Aristotle, 1959: 1307b 19 – 20) starts speaking about coups. His advice is: "not being hated by the people at large" (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 47 – 49) which, by a repeat, turns into "not to distress the rich and to satisfy the people" (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 105 – 106). By dividing the state into the people (the poor) and the rich, Machiavelli follows Aristotle. Although he previously said that the choice between them must be made in favor of the people (Machiavelli, 2008: IX, 17 – 57 and XIX, 43 – 45), he now says that "well-organized states and wise princes"¹²⁾ maintain a balance between the two parts of the state (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 104 – 105). Then he provides an example of a "well-organized state".¹³⁾ This is an example of an effective execution of Aristotle's formula (Aristotle, 1959: 1314a 31 – 35). After this, he starts discussing assassinations by using examples of Roman emperors.¹⁴⁾ Here, he again uses Aristotle's formula (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 298 – 301; Aristotle, 1959: 1315a 24 – 31). Before the end of the chapter, Machiavelli "diverts" (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 396): He provides examples of states in which rulers are, by definition, pious.¹⁵⁾ Finally, he ends the chapter by saying that "either hatred or contempt caused the downfall of the emperors I mentioned" (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 398 – 399). In doing so, he also asserts that of all his examples, a prince must imitate Marcus Aurelius and Severus. Marcus was a rightful successor (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 193 – 200) and had something that Machiavelli calls *virtù* (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 197).¹⁶⁾ Severus came to power through villainy (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 243 – 284), he excelled in rapacity and cruelty (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 226 – 229) (i.e., he was a tyrant and violated

all the above-mentioned rules, not concerning himself with his public image), and he had *virtù* (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 232 and 235).¹⁷⁾ Both of these successful rulers had one thing in common that no one else among Machiavelli's examples in the section on Roman emperors had: *virtù*. It is obvious that *virtù* is something without which a prince cannot be successful; and if he has it, he can disregard all other qualities. This conclusion reminds one about another of Aristotle's formulas: "Even if he (a tyrant) neglects the other virtues he is *bound* to cultivate military valour and to make himself a reputation as a soldier" (Aristotle, 1959: 1314b 21 – 23); and sends one back to Chapter XIV, in which Machiavelli says: "A prince, therefore, ought to have no object, thought, or profession but war... that is the *only* art expected of one who governs. It is of such great *virtù* that it not only keeps in power men who were born princes but frequently enables ordinary citizens to rise to that level... The *primary* cause for your losing your principedom is neglect of this art" (emphasis added) (Machiavelli, 2008: XIV, 1 – 6 and 9 – 11).

If, as I hope, it was shown that Machiavelli's *The Prince*, in fact, does lean heavily on the *Politics* (at least in its crucial chapters), what could that mean for the Florentine's proclaimed break with classics? How could one attempt to revalue it? First, it is clear that Aristotle was no less aware of the "realist" view on politics than was Machiavelli, i.e., that classical political philosophy was as aware of the cruelty and crudeness of politics as Machiavelli was and had at least foreseen – if not determined – a great part of the Florentine's approach to it. Second, for Aristotle, as well as for other classical political philosophers, this part of their teaching, devoted to the question of a regime's stability, of preservation of power, was obviously secondary. The goal of their philosophy was not a stable regime, but a good one, and stability of a particular regime was only a minor consequence of its goodness. However, for Machiavelli, stability became *the* goal (Rebhorn, 2010; Steiris, 2010). Hence, his view shifted to the instrumental technique of the regime's preservation (Ranum, 2020). Machiavelli did break with classical political philosophy, but that break consisted not of the sobriety of his approach to politics, but of the lowered standard of his political philosophy: Of course, every good regime is stable, but not every stable regime is good.

NOTES

1. For the convenience of the readers, I will use Atkinson's edition of *The Prince* (Machiavelli, 2008).
2. This has been noticed before. In the 16th century, L. Le Roy in his commentaries on Aristotle argued that the Florentine draws the fundamental principles of *The Prince* from the *Politics* (Severini, 2014). In the 17th century, K. Schoppe tried to write a book to prove that Machiavelli was actively using Aristotle's *Politics* and Thomas Aquinas' (or Peter of Auvergne's) commentary on it in *The Prince*, but it was not published (Almasi, 2016).

3. Of course, this conclusion depends largely on Machiavelli's sincerity, especially considering the fact that most of the letters were designed to be shared (Atkinson, 2008).
4. It is feasible that, initially, Machiavelli used not the *Politics* itself but some secondary sources. Yet, even in this case, after he had read the book, he did not change the content of *The Prince*, thereby agreeing with Aristotle.
5. It should also be noted that Aristotle considers fear to be a reason for tyrannies' falling apart. Yet, he starts by calling fear a reason for polities and monarchies to fall apart (Aristotle, 1959: 1311b 36 – 37). However, in the end, he advises a tyrant to not be fearsome to his subjects (Aristotle, 1959: 1314b 19 – 21 and 1315b 4 – 7).
6. Chapter XIX of *The Prince* is even named "How to avoid Contempt and Hatred".
7. The problem of piety as a virtue in Aristotle's philosophy goes beyond the scope of this paper (see Broadie, 2003; Aufderheide, 2016).
8. When he lists the basic qualities that a prince should have, should not have, and should appear to have, the desire for sexual pleasure, which can also be considered a manifestation of immoderation, is mentioned among the negative ones (Machiavelli, 2008: XV, 38).
9. It is worth noting that Machiavelli directly assigns the sentence ending this passage (Aristotle, 1959: 1314b 25 – 27) to Aristotle in the relevant chapter of the *Discourses* (Machiavelli, 1883: III, XXVI).
10. As a way to avoid contempt (cf. Aristotle, 1959: 1312b 17 – 21).
11. In this regard, too, Machiavelli pays special attention to piety, as does Aristotle.
12. As opposed to states and princes simply (Machiavelli, 2008: XIX, 43 – 45).
13. Prior to this moment, France was an example of a state that was easy to conquer but difficult to hold on to (Machiavelli, 2008: IV, 34 – 45).
14. Turning to the discussion of the third part of the state, which Aristotle did not know, the troops, as distinct from the people and the rich.
15. Prior to this moment, Turkey was an example of a state that was difficult to conquer but easy to hold on to (Machiavelli, 2008: IV, 38 – 42). Note that Turkey, unlike France, is not called a well-organized state. See note 13.
16. The meaning of *virtù* to Machiavelli's legacy is immense and could not be properly explained here (see Atkinson, 2008; Wood, 1967).
17. Notice the "doubling" of *virtù* compared to Mark. Perhaps the fact is that a tyrant needs more *virtù* than a king does (see Machiavelli, 2008: II, 7 – 13 and 22 – 25).

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