

Responses to Dow

#1. Fundamental Differences

Christine Dow, in her article “Virtú and Institutionalized Conflict in Machiavellian Politics,” argues that Machiavelli’s analysis of politics presented in his *Discourses on Livy* is based in a conception of human excellence. According to Dow’s read of Machiavelli, the aim of those who participate in democratic politics is to maintain freedom from domination by the elites. To maintain this liberty, the individuals participating must possess Machiavellian *virtú*. Thus, for Machiavelli, it is necessary for the people to possess *virtú* to protect their political liberties. This view, Dow argues, is in the tradition of Aristotle’s interpretation of “the aim of democratic politics and the fully human life” (173). She writes that Machiavelli’s democratic politics “requires an excellent human life not so unlike the one devoted to Aristotelian flourishing in that this concept of *virtú* is politically intertwined with a concept of the common good and the good life” (174).

Looking at their respective works, however, I do not think it is clear that Aristotle and Machiavelli are engaged in a similar discussion about the development of man’s excellence in the political sphere. For Machiavelli, the aim of the common people who are threatened by the concentration of power by the elites is to be free from that threat of domination (Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, ed. Bernard Crick, trans. Leslie J. Walker, S.J., rev. ed. [New York: Penguin Classics, 2003], 116). Recognizing the people’s fear of domination, Machiavelli describes his idea of a republican government: a system of government that gives the people an institutionalized outlet for their frustrations, thus giving them opportunities to respond to the acts of the elites. This institutional outlet would require the people as a whole to come together and act as a check on the elites. This requires a lot of faith, for Machiavelli; as a group, the people would have to temper their naturally self-interested tendencies in order to act for the common good. How does this suggest a belief in man’s ability to achieve excellence though? Isn’t Machiavelli merely trusting that man’s base nature can be overridden by his neighbors’ wishes?

For Aristotle, human excellence is itself the aim of the individual, while politics is the way to accomplish this aim. The community comes together to fulfill two purposes: satisfying basic communal needs and putting the citizens of the community on the path to the good life. The way to achieve this is by creating laws that cultivate the good life for the citizens. Dow seems to be arguing that Machiavelli believes that laws are essential as well, but they serve more as a limit on man's naturally bad tendencies than as a guide to help cultivate good men. This does not seem to suggest a common belief in the excellence of man—rather, it seems to show that Aristotle and Machiavelli's similarities come from opposing viewpoints of man's character.

How can Dow reconcile these fundamental differences in Aristotle and Machiavelli's opposing views? Her article seems to be suggesting that the two thinkers, in their discussion of "republican" politics, arrive at similar conclusions about human nature. Does it matter that they are opposing views, so long as they appear to be pointing to the same conclusion? How similar, ultimately, is that conclusion?

~Alexa Fee

