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Islamic and Arab Perspectives on Machiavelli's *Virtù*

DAN STOENESCU

For centuries the notion of virtue generated much debate from ancient Greece and the Roman and Arab Empires all the way to Medieval Europe. This paper argues that although the concept of virtue is an ambiguous concept rooted in ancient Greek philosophy and remarkably developed by Machiavelli, the Islamic view of this term deserves more attention since it might provide a useful insight to a deeper understanding of how this concept is used in Eastern philosophies. This paper also argues that the concept of virtue in Islamic philosophy has many commonalities with Machiavelli's concept of virtue although the last has certain revolutionary attributes for the European Middle Ages. The first part of the essay will discuss the various interpretations of the concept of virtue from the perspectives of Islamic scholars and that of Machiavelli. The second part will analyze the commonalities and the major differences between Machiavelli and two important Islamic scholars such as Ibn Zafar and Ibn Khaldun, both precursors of Machiavelli.

Compared to other cultures around the world, the Arab culture emphasizes certain types of distinctive vigorous virtues such as the sense of honor and sensitivity about anything that touched this honor. Furthermore, hospitality was also considered a virtue and practiced to an exaggerated extent. Even notions of chivalry were many times carried to extraordinary lengths among Arabs, while audacity and gallantry were called for and were displayed in every part of their severe and austere life. It is even more important to take into consideration the Arab and Islamic venue of virtue since the Islamic philosophers are closer to the philosophers of classical Greece, where the concept of virtue was born, rather than the ones of Christianity¹.

In the development of Islamic ethics, the adoption of the Platonic table of virtues plays a key role. According to this table of virtues wisdom, courage and temperance correspond to each of the three parts of the soul and of which justice is the harmony (*ittifaq*) or equilibrium (*ittidal*)² To this respect Arab philosophers such as Ibn Miskawayh and al-Ghazali give detailed accounts of specific virtues or subdivisions of the generic virtues. In his *Manual of Ethics*, Ibn Miskawayh (d. 1030) enumerates certain virtues (*fada'il*) and their opposite vices (*radha'il*). According to him, whenever there is a movement of the "bestial soul" (*al-nafs al-bahimiya*) that is moderate and in obedience to the "rational soul" (*al-nafs al-aqila*) the virtue of purity (*'iffa*) occurs followed by generosity (*al-sakha*). Moreover, Ibn Miskawayh observes that from the virtues of knowledge, purity, and courage, the virtue of righteousness (*'adala*) appears³.

¹Remi BRAGUE, "Athens, Jerusalem, Mecca: Leo Strauss 'Muslim' Understanding of Greek Philosophy", *Poetics Today*, vol. 19, no. 2, Hellenism and Hebraism Reconsidered: The Poetics of Cultural Influence and Exchange II, Summer 1998, p. 252.

²Majid FAKHRY, *Ethical Theories in Islam*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1991, p. 64.

³Dwight M. DONALDSON, *Studies In Muslim Ethics*, S.P.C.K, London, 1953, pp. 125-126.

According to logician and moral philosopher Ibn 'Adi (d. 974), true virtue depends on the excellence of the rational soul. Through it a person can acquire virtues such as high-mindedness, nobility, benevolence, mercy, right thinking and prudence in the conduct of private affairs. In spite of that man is not free from disposition to evil and vices such as trickery, meanness, deceit envy or duplicity¹. Moreover, another Islamic philosopher Ibn Hazm accepts the fourfold division of principal virtues derived from Plato: justice, intelligence (*fahm*), courage and generosity².

Compared with the Islamic scholars Machiavelli's virtue is framed in the concept of *virtù*. This notion is hard to translate and even many scholars do not translate it in order not to lose the value this term used to have in the 16th century. Most of the times, when analyzing the question of evil, they use a few words referring to immorality such as vigor, ingenuity or boldness. In this context the term *virtù* is seen as the means to an end. These unauthorized interpretations of Machiavelli demonstrate the problems that this term creates. In spite of this, Machiavelli does not limit its vision of this term to his life time and even talks about *virtù* from a trans-historical perspective as an integral part of human nature³.

Virtù and *fortuna* are essential terms in Machiavelli's political thinking because they represent a foundation for the human experience. According to this way of thinking *fortuna* controls half of our life and needs to show *virtù* as a counterbalancing force proving profound moral and political implications. Furthermore, this way questions arise about political virtue, the right behavior in order to attain political success or about what kind of leadership can support the concept of *virtù* or vice-versa. Although this term is the essence of the Machiavellian thought, the term itself is indeed a problematic one⁴.

In chapter VIII of *The Prince*, Machiavelli talks about those who gained power in a principality through crimes. His view denotes not only the fact that those lacking morality prosper but also that their success could come together with virtue if not even caused by it⁵.

Machiavelli sees his notion of virtue as a revival of ancient virtue (*antica virtù*) and this exact concept is the theme of his *Discourses*. In *The Prince* and *Discourses* Machiavelli refers to the virtue of ancient Romans rather than the Greek or Christian virtues⁶. In spite of that, the source of Machiavellian virtue is Aristotle's notion of moral and intellectual virtue. From Aristotle's perspective moral virtue is a habit and voluntary while intellectual virtue requires a virtuous nature⁷. From the standpoint of ancient Roman and Greek philosophy, virtue carries many connotations of virility, with which it is etymologically linked since *vir* means man in Latin⁸. In Machiavelli's view, the strong ancient virtue of the ancient Roman Empire was defeated by weak modern Christian virtue of the Catholic Church⁹.

¹ Majid FAKHRY, *Ethical Theories...cit.*, p. 101.

² *Ibidem*, p. 173.

³ Harvey. C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 7.

⁴ Maureen RAMSAY, "Machiavelli (1469-1527)", in Alistair EDWARDS, *Interpreting Modern Political Philosophy: From Machiavelli to Marx*, Palgrave Macmillan, Gordonsville, VA, 2002, p. 29.

⁵ Harvey. C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, cit., p. 6.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 8-9.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁸ J.G.A. POCOCCO, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1975, p. 37.

⁹ Harvey. C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, cit., p. 49.

Machiavelli as preeminent Renaissance man tries to revive the ancient virtue and in the same time alters the concept according to his own world view. In spite of that, Price argues that *virtù* encompasses

"traditional Christian moral virtue, purely militaristic virtue, purely political virtue, a combination of political and military virtue, an instrumental virtue and a cultural virtue as well as ancient and moral virtue"¹.

Machiavelli's ideas have been considered by popular culture as immoral, abandoning morality in the quest for power². In reality the concept of virtue is much more complex. According to Machiavelli virtue is a concept that is hard to understand. In *The Prince*, in passage of chapter VIII on the criminal Agathocles, he says "one can not call it virtue to kill one's fellow citizens, betray one's friends, to be without faith, without mercy, without religion"³. However in another sentence Machiavelli talks about "the virtue of Agathocles".

Taking into consideration the permeability of ideas in the Mediterranean space it is most likely that Islamic philosophers had a certain influence over Machiavelli and influenced his political thought. Geographically some of the greatest Arab philosophers even lived in Europe, in regions such as Sicily or Andalusia. Although some of these influences come still from the Hellenistic philosophy, Arabic culture and Islam put their touch on Arabic scholars and thus tangentially could have influenced Machiavelli in many areas of his thinking. An important notion that was born from this syncretism of Greek and possibly Arab ideas was the Machiavellian concept of *virtù*, a term that many mistakenly consider as being purely European related more to middle ages chivalry rather than ancient Greek or Arab philosophy.

Both Ibn Zafar and Ibn Khaldun could be considered worthy precursors of Niccolò Machiavelli, who was born only in 1469, decades and even centuries after these famous Arab scholars died. Both adopted certain views over the term of virtue, views that worth to be compared with Machiavelli's concept of virtue (*virtù*).

Abu Abd Allah Muhammad ibn Zafar al-Siqilli, was born in 1104. This twelve century scholar wrote the famous *Sulwan al-Muta'*, a Machiavelli-style book in which he advises the prince. Ibn Zafar dedicated his *Sulwan al-Muta'* (1150-1159) to al-Kurachi, the Arab *cadi* (ruler) of Sicily, where he used to live for a while. Abu Zaid Abdalrahman ibn Mohammad Ibn Khaldun Wali-ad-Din al-Tunisi al Hadrami, known to the world simply as Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis in 1332 and died in 1404⁴. Although these two Arab scholars were almost contemporary with Machiavelli, they lived in very different cultural, political and intellectual environments⁵ and thus their philosophical concepts of virtue although is inspired by ancient Greek philosophers still carries a uniquely Islamic weight.

In his volume called *Salwan*, Ibn Zafar advises the ruler emphasizing the essential attributes of the virtuous prince and the means he needs to use in order to

¹ Maureen RAMSAY, "Machiavelli...cit.", p. 30.

² *Ibidem*, p. 27.

³ Harvey. C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, cit., p.184.

⁴ Fuad BAALI, Ali WARDI, *Ibn Khaldun and Islamic Thought-Styles: A Social Perspective*, G.K. Hall and Co., Boston, Massachusetts, 1981, pp. 1-4.

⁵ Barbara FREYER STOWASSER, *Religion And Political Development: Some Comparative Ideas On Ibn Khaldun And Machiavelli*, Georgetown University-Center For Contemporary Arab Studies, Washington D.C., 1983, p. 3.

maintain stability in his domain. The princes should outshine all other human beings by displaying the following five critical virtues: paternal affection for all subjects, vigilance over the populace, courage to defend the people, sagacity to delude foes, prudence to take advantage of every opportunity¹.

This exact prudence we also find in Machiavelli's virtue which is guided by prudence and experience. Furthermore, he sees virtue as an instrument not an end in itself. For example every person uses virtue to attain glory while every prince or republic always uses the virtue of its subjects or citizens². Furthermore, Machiavelli's *virtù* is a concept that represents different qualities at different times, taking into consideration what is necessary to achieve goals in certain circumstances³ thus taking advantage of every opportunity, exactly like Ibn Zafar suggests.

In difficult times Ibn Zafar recommends the ruler to have virtues such as patience, execute strict justice, not to give away to depression, protect people seeking refuge, secure the roads, show generosity and compassion and conciliate alienated subjects⁴. Ibn Zafar also advises his prince to have quick witted wisdom, strength of mind, a correct eye, vigor and bravery⁵. The same kinds of qualities are also suggested by Machiavelli. According to him the notion of *virtù* also implies cleverness, valor and courage, greatness of mind, manliness, without any "admixture of moral virtue – although the reputation for possessing the latter can be indispensable"⁶. *Virtù* can also be seen as a concept of masculinity symbolizing "energy, effectiveness, virtuosity, force combined with ability"⁷.

According to Ibn Zafar, *sabr* (patience) is the most important of all virtues and rules over understanding, caution, knowledge, benignity and piousness. The virtue of *sabr* in rulers is composed of three groups of concepts and their effects: long suffering, which creates compassion, watchfulness and foresight, which cause wealth in the dominion, and bravery, which gives birth to determination in the ruler and warlike vigor to defend the State. This warlike vigor could be compared with one of the most important features of Machiavelli, his notion of virtue and almost his slogan to achieve goals through "one's own arms", not depending on others⁸. Furthermore, Machiavelli always used the term of *virtù* in the sense of bravery and energy for both good and evil⁹.

The connotation of *virtù* as energy could be found at Ibn Khaldun. The equivalent of Machiavelli's *virtù* in the writings of Ibn Khaldun is *asabyya*, a basic creative force which underlines all political action. *Asabyya* is a group feeling, social solidarity, or group solidarity and is etymologically related to the word *asaba* (kin). This term represents "the cohesive power at work among individuals that endows them with strength and forges them into healthy, strong, and politically active groups"¹⁰.

¹ R. HRAIR DEKMEJIAN, Adel FATHY THABIT, "Machiavelli's Arab Precursor: Ibn Zafar al-Siqilli", *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, November 2000, p. 133.

² Harvey. C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, cit., p. 41.

³ Maureen RAMSAY, "Machiavelli...cit.", p. 37.

⁴ R. HRAIR DEKMEJIAN, Adel FATHY THABIT, "Machiavelli's Arab Precursor...cit.", p. 133.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

⁶ Barbara FREYER STOWASSER, *Religion And Political Development...cit.*, p. 15.

⁷ Maureen RAMSAY, "Machiavelli...cit.", p. 30.

⁸ Harvey. C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, cit., p. 16.

⁹ Maureen RAMSAY, "Machiavelli...cit.", p. 27.

¹⁰ Barbara FREYER STOWASSER, *Religion And Political Development...cit.*, p. 6.

Like Machiavelli's virtuous prince, *asabyyya* can be awakened by a capable leader among his non-related supporters and followers. According to Ibn Khaldun a foreign follower can be included into the *asabyyya* of his master and conversely this concept does allow to a leader to rule over a foreign group if he "puts on the skin of the new followers and thus appears as one of their skin"¹.

Just like Machiavelli's *virtù*, the concept of *asabyyya* results in superiority and it is incomprehensible as the workings of nature itself. Moreover, *asabyyya* leads to the leadership of an individual over the members of the group and taking into consideration the feeling available to him he establishes kingship through destruction of all other loyalties and appealing to force. Furthermore, Ibn Khaldun's *asabyyya* leads to conquest since the group that has the strongest *asabyyya* subdues the lesser group feelings and rules over them. Moreover, in battles *asabyyya* is more important than numerical power².

Machiavelli considers that religion can be a virtue or part of virtue. The necessity of using religion exposes the need of politicizing virtue, which means reducing it for the sake of its political consequences. Politicized virtue in this context is the kind of virtue that brings success and is willed by God³. Stowasser argues that although Machiavelli considers individual *virtù* not strictly linked to religion, collective *virtù* is always linked to religion. Furthermore religion is actually the source for collective morality and virtue in the political community⁴. This exact view of religion is also embraced by Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabyyya*, and this notion comes from the traditional Islamic *ummah* (community of believers).

Machiavelli and Ibn Khaldun alike considered personal and collective moral virtue as an imperative condition to create a basic creative political force. Moreover, moral virtue itself is a clear indication of this force's existence. According to both scholars groups and nations that have this creative political force are unspoiled, healthy and dedicated, living in freedom and equality⁵. Ibn Khaldun's *asabyyya* is always a collective force, compared to Machiavelli's *virtù* which can be collective as well as an individual quality.

Scholars such as Plamenatz, see the difference between the individual quality called heroic *virtù* (a quality of rulers, founders of states) and civic *virtù* (a communal quality of citizens)⁶. His heroic *virtù* represents the qualities and capacities of a prince to establish, restore and maintain security in his domain. The civic *virtù* embodies those qualities of the masses that make the state strong, especially "devotion to community, public spirit and respect for the law"⁷. Therefore the civic *virtù* is closer to Ibn Khaldun's *asabyyya*.

Both Ibn Zafar and Machiavelli try to give the best advices to their virtuous princes in order for them to rule successfully and to have certain moral and behavioral traits. Ibn Zafar considers that a wise ruler is the one that is always prepared in any situation and is ready to receive council from his vizier. In order to be always prepared a sharp sword is always useful, a fleet courser should he need to

¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.

² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³ Harvey. C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, cit., pp. 26-27.

⁴ Barbara FREYER STOWASSER, *Religion And Political Development...cit.*, p. 16.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁶ Maureen RAMSAY, "Machiavelli...cit.", p. 30.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

escape, a beautiful women and an impenetrable fortress¹. Ibn Zafar applies the attributes of the virtuous ruler directly to governance. This way an astute prince should know the "five signs" that bring the fall of rulers: belief in rumors, turning against those whom he should love, missing adequate income, favoring and dismissing subjects based on caprice not judgment, refusing the advice of men having astuteness and experience. Machiavelli's *virtù* has an effect upon the political community the imparting of security, peace, justice, and harmony, and thereby of unity and power. Furthermore in his *Discourses*, Machiavelli notes that a good and wise prince may bring advantages to his domain when thanks to his goodness and virtue he liberated himself from envy. In this context "goodness" denotes the prince's integrity and adherence to religion².

According to Machiavelli, virtue is distinct from goodness because it is willing to do evil. On one hand, in his *Discourses* he even says that *la bontà non basta!* On the other hand from the standpoint of goodness, goodness is not enough and therefore is part of virtue or even identical with it. The standpoint of goodness is important in Machiavelli's view because goodness is needed for the grandeur of goodness. For example the virtue of princes can be notable only if it can shock the goodness of good people, thus transforming the chimera of morality in its reality³.

Besides the many commonalities between the Machiavellian virtue and the concept of virtue at Ibn Zafar and Ibn Khaldun, there are also crucial differences that make Machiavelli's *virtù* a revolutionary notion for its time. On one hand, Ibn Khaldun was well aware of Aristotle's formula of ethics that a virtue lies in the "golden mean", in the middle of two extremes. He indicates that the extremes of every human trait are blameworthy while the good is centered in the middle. Moreover, generosity is between stinginess and waste, while courage is between fear and foolishness⁴. On the other hand, Machiavelli displays a certain aversion against classical virtue and its most important feature in politics: moderation. He talks about "extraordinary" or "excessive" virtue but he does not talk about moderation as a virtue. Instead he talks about harshness, rejects kindness (*comità*) and condemns "the middle way". The only time when he talks about moderation is when he considers it as a military form of prudence as in the case when he assesses the command "to measure one's force"⁵. Ibn Khaldun is well aware that human traits can not be treated separately from the human being in order to reach the golden mean in each of them. He was too realistic in order to fully accept such an idealistic resolution.

What makes Machiavelli's notion of virtue revolutionary for its time is the fact that it encompasses the vices but in the same time coexists with the old Aristotelian notion of virtue which is deterred by them. This kind of vicious virtue achieves its effect only in "contrast with what people usually expect from virtue, that it not include vice"⁶. Machiavelli's precursor, Ibn Zafar has a typical view of vices for an Islamic scholar. As opposed to virtues, Ibn Zafar recognizes the vices that a ruler might develop and therefore he warns against vanity, impulsiveness,

¹ R. HRAIR DEKMEJIAN, Adel FATHY THABIT, "Machiavelli's Arab Precursor...cit.", p. 134.

² Barbara FREYER STOWASSER, *Religion And Political Development...cit.*, p. 15.

³ Harvey. C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, cit., p. 25.

⁴ Fuad BAALI, Ali WARDI, *Ibn Khaldun...cit.*, p. 117.

⁵ Harvey. C. MANSFIELD, *Machiavelli's Virtue*, cit., p. 15.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

arrogance, harshness, rage, indolence, gluttony and sensual gratification which distract the prince from his responsibilities. Moreover, in order to avoid indulgence in sensual pleasures and in order to closely follow the Quran, Ibn Zafar advocates abstinence as a "virtue followed only by the elect"¹.

In Machiavelli's view a vice such as harshness is directly encompassed in the possession of *virtù* and it is necessary in both republics and principalities. The main variable is corruption, and in this very context *virtù* is indispensable as it can require harshness. For example when conditions are corrupt a man of *virtù* need not keep faith and is free to perform terrible actions. In a war for example, military commanders need to be harsher to corrupted troops than to the honorable warriors². Scholars such as Wood, emphasize the militaristic aspects of Machiavelli's *virtù* arguing that the author of *The Prince* transfers to politics the attitude of soldiers in a war³.

Comparing Machiavelli on one hand and Ibn Zafar and Ibn Khaldun on the other we observe the complexity of the concept of virtue together with surprising commonalities between Arab philosophy and Machiavelli. This essay concludes that Machiavelli's concept of virtue (*virtù*) is not entirely an original concept although introducing the so-called vices as part of it is a revolutionary idea.

The notion of virtue, the way it was framed in ancient Greece and Rome and in the way it was used by Machiavelli can not be fully understood without a thorough analysis of Arab philosophy. Although there is not proof that Machiavelli was inspired in his works by Ibn Zafar of Sicily or by Ibn Khaldun, this hypothesis remains up for debate and for further study.

¹R. HRAIR DEKMEJIAN, Adel FATHY THABIT, "Machiavelli's Arab Precursor...cit.", p. 134.

²Robert A. KOCIS, *Machiavelli redeemed; Retrieving His Humanist Perspectives on Equality, Power, and Glory*, Associated University Presses, London, 1998, p. 101.

³Maureen RAMSAY, "Machiavelli...cit.", pp. 29-30.