The idea of negative liberty: Machiavellian and modern perspectives

My aim is to explore a possible means of enlarging our present understanding of the concepts we employ in social and political argument. A prevailing orthodoxy bids us proceed by consulting our intuitions about what can and cannot be coherently said and done with the terms we generally use to express the concepts involved. But this approach might with profit be supplemented. I shall argue, if we were to confront these intuitions with a more systematic examination of the unfamiliar theories within which even our most familiar concepts have sometimes been put to work at different historical periods.

One way of proceeding with this line of thought would be to offer a general defence of this view about the 'relevance' of the history of philosophy for the understanding of contemporary philosophical debates. But I shall instead attempt to follow a more direct, if more modest, route by focusing on one particular concept which is at once central to current disputes in social and political theory and is at the same time overdue, it seems to me, for this type of historical treatment.

The concept I have in mind is that of political liberty, the extent of the freedom or liberty of action available to individuals within the confines imposed on them by their membership of civil associations. The first point to be observed is that, among Anglophone philosophers of the present generation, the discussion of this topic has given rise to a remarkable width of assent.

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1 Discussing this concept, some philosophers (for example Oppenheim 1968) prefer to speak of social freedom, while others (for example Rawls 1971) always speak of liberty. As far as I can see nothing hangs on this difference of terminology. Throughout the following argument I have accordingly felt free (or at liberty) to treat these two terms as synonyms and to use them interchangeably.

This is that – to cite the formula originally owed to Jeremy Bentham and more recently made famous by Isaiah Berlin – the concept of liberty is essentially a 'negative' one. Its presence is said to be marked by the absence of something; specifically, by the absence of some impediment that inhibits the agent concerned from being able to act in pursuit of his or her chosen ends. As Gerald MacCallum expresses the point, in a form of words that has become standard in the recent literature, 'whenever the freedom of some agent or agents is in question, it is always freedom from some constraint or restriction on, interference with, or barrier to doing, not doing, becoming or not becoming something.2

It would be no exaggeration to say that this assumption – that the only coherent idea of liberty is the negative one of being unimpeded – has underpinned the entire development of modern contractarian political thought. We already find Thomas Hobbes expressing it at the outset of his chapter 'Of the Liberty of Subjects' in Leviathan, in which he presents an extremely influential statement of the claim that 'Liberty, or Freedoms, signifies (properly) the absence of Opposition' and signifies nothing more.3 The same assumption, often couched specifically in terms of MacCallum's triadic analysis, continues to run throughout the current literature. Benn and Weinstein, for example, implicitly adopt MacCallum's framework in their important essay on freedom as the non-restriction of options, as does Felix Oppenheim in his discussion of social freedom as the capacity to pursue alternatives.4 The same analysis is likewise invoked – with direct reference to MacCallum's classic article – in John Rawls's Theory of Justice, in Joel Feinberg's Social Philosophy and in many other accounts.5

It is true that, in spite of this basic and long-standing agreement, there have always been disputes among proponents of the 'negative' thesis about the nature of the circumstances in which it is proper to say that the freedom of some particular agent has or has not been restricted or infringed. For there have always been divergent beliefs as to what counts as opposition, and thus as the sort of constraint that limits the freedom as opposed to merely limiting the ability of agents to act. For more important, however, for the purposes of my present argument is the widespread endorsement of the conclusion that – as Charles Taylor has put it in his attack on the consensus – the idea of liberty should be construed as a pure 'opportunity concept', as nothing but the absence of constraint,

2 MacCallum 1972, p. 176.
3 Hobbes 1656, p. 145.
and hence as unconnected with the pursuit of any determinate ends or purposes.\(^6\)

It is typical of negative theorists – Hobbes is again a classic example – to spell out the implications of this central commitment in polemical terms. The aim of doing so has generally been to repudiate two contentions about social freedom – both occasionally defended in the history of modern political philosophy – on the grounds of their incompatibility with the basic idea that the enjoyment of social freedom is simply a matter of being unobstructed. One of these has been the suggestion that individual liberty can be assured only within a particular form of self-governing community. Put most starkly, the claim is that (as Rousseau expresses it in *Du Contrat Social*) the maintenance of personal freedom depends on the performance of public services. The other and connected suggestion often targeted by negative theorists is that the qualities needed on the part of each individual citizen to ensure the effective performance of these duties must be the civic virtues. To put it starkly once more (as Spinoza does in *Tractatus Politicus*), the claim is that freedom presupposes virtue: that only the virtuous are truly or fully capable of assuring their own liberty.

By way of responding to these paradoxes, some contemporary theorists of negative liberty have simply followed Hobbes’s lead. They have argued that, since the liberty of subjects must involve, in Hobbes’s phrase, ‘Immunitie from the service of the Commonwealth’, any suggestion that freedom might involve the performance of such services, and the cultivation of the virtues necessary to perform them, must be totally confused.\(^7\) Isaiah Berlin remarks, for example, that to speak of rendering myself free by virtuously performing my social duties, thereby equating duty with interest, is simply ‘to throw a metaphysical blanket over either self-deceit or deliberate hypocrisy’.\(^8\)

The more usual and more moderate riposte, however, has been to suggest that, whatever may be the merits of the two heterodox claims I have singled out, they are certainly not consistent with a negative analysis of the concept of freedom. They must point to a different conception – perhaps even a different concept – of political liberty. This appears to be Berlin’s own view in an earlier section of his essay about the two allegedly different concepts of liberty. He concedes that we might entertain a secularised version of the belief that God’s service is perfect freedom ‘without thereby rendering the word “freedom” wholly meaningless’.

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\(^6\) Taylor 1979, p. 177.  
\(^7\) Hobbes 1964, p. 149.  
\(^8\) Berlin 1969, p. 171.
Much of the debate between those who think of social freedom as a negative 'opportunity' concept and those who think of it as a positive 'exercise' concept may thus be said to stem from a deeper dispute about human nature. The argument is an old one about whether we can hope to distinguish an objective notion of eudaimonia or human flourishing. Those who dismiss this hope as illusory—such as Berlin and his many sympathisers—conclude that this makes it a dangerous error to connect individual liberty with the ideals of virtue and public service. Those who believe in real or identifiably human interests—Taylor, Gibbs and others—respond by insisting that this at least makes it arguable that only the virtuous and public-spirited citizen is in full possession of his or her liberty.

This in turn means, however, that there is one assumption shared by virtually all the contributors to the current debate. Even Charles Taylor and Isaiah Berlin are able to agree on it. It is that we must be able to give some content to the idea of objective human flourishing if we are to make sense of any theory purporting to connect the concept of individual liberty with virtuous acts of public service.

The thesis I propose to defend is that this shared and central assumption is unjustified. By way of defending it, I shall turn to what I take to be the lessons of history. I shall try to show that, in an earlier and now discarded strand of thinking about social freedom, the concept of negative liberty was combined with the ideals of virtue and public service in just the manner nowadays assumed to be impossible without incoherence. I shall thereby try to supplement and correct our prevailing and misleadingly restricted sense of what can and cannot be said and done with the concept of negative liberty by examining the record of the very different things that have been said and done with it at earlier phases in the history of our own culture.

Before embarking on this task, one obvious query about this way of proceeding needs first to be answered. It might well be asked why I propose to examine the historical record at this juncture instead of attempting directly to develop a more inclusive philosophical analysis of negative liberty. My answer is not that I suppose such purely conceptual exercises to be out of the question. On the contrary, they have I think been among the most probing and original contributions to the contemporary debate. It is rather that, in consequence of certain widespread assumptions about the best methods of studying social and political concepts, it is apt to seem much less convincing to suggest that a concept might be coherently used in an unfamiliar way than to show that it has in fact been put to unfamiliar but coherent uses.

The nature of the assumptions I have in mind can readily be illustrated from the current literature on the concept of liberty. The basic postulate of the writers I have so far mentioned is that to explicate a concept such as that of social freedom is to give an account of the meanings of the terms habitually used to express it. To understand the meanings of such terms, it is further agreed, is a matter of understanding their correct usage, of grasping what can and cannot be said and done with them. So far so good; or rather, so far so Wittgensteinian, which I am prepared to suppose amounts in these matters to much the same thing. These procedures tend to be equated, however, with giving an account of how we generally employ the terms involved. What we are enjoined to study is 'what we normally would say' about liberty, and what we find 'we do not want to say' when we reflect about the uses of the term in an adequately self-conscious way. We are adjured to stay 'as close to ordinary language as possible', the reason being that the highroad to understanding a concept such as that of liberty is to grasp 'what we normally mean' by the term 'liberty'.

This is not to say that 'ordinary language' is allowed to have the last word. Most of the writers I have cited are at pains to distance themselves from so widely discredited a belief. Rather it is assumed that, once we begin to move towards a position of equilibrium between our intuitions about concepts and the demands of current usage, it may well prove necessary to adjust the one in the light of the other. We may need, that is, to revise what we are disposed to say about liberty in the light of what we

17 I have in mind especially MacCallum 1972 and Baldwin 1981.
18 For explicit presentations of these postulates, applied to the case of 'explicating the concept of freedom, see for example Parent 1973, pp. 149–51 and Oppenheim 1968, pp. 140–50, 174–82.
19 Parent 1973, pp. 124–25. Cf. also Bento and Weinsein 1971, p. 249 on the need to study 'what in general one can appropriately say about the term 'freedom' in order to understand the concept, and their criticism of Parent's account (Parent 1973, p. 435) on the grounds that it is necessarily contrary to standard usage' that 'one is bound to mistrust the characterisation of freedom which makes it even possible'.
20 For this injunction see Oppenheim 1968, p. 179.
find ourselves saying about other and closely connected concepts such as
inghts, responsibility, coercion and so forth. The true goal of conceptual
analysis - as Joel Feinberg, for example, formulates it - is thus to arrive,
by way of reflecting on 'what we normally mean when we employ certain
words', at a more finished delineation of 'what we had better mean if
we are to communicate effectively, avoid paradox and achieve general
coherence.'

As the above quotations reveal, however, the question is still about
what we are capable of saying and meaning without incoherence. Given
this approach, it is easy to see how it comes about that any purely analyti-
cal attempt to connect the idea of negative liberty with the ideas of virtue
and service is liable to appear unconvincing, and vulnerable to being dis-
missed out of hand. For it is obvious that we cannot hope to connect the
idea of liberty with the obligation to perform virtuous acts of public ser-
vice except at the unthinkable cost of giving up, or making nonsense of,
our intuitions about individual rights. But this in turn leads to that, in
the case of all the writers I have been considering, only one of two responses
are offered to someone who insists on trying to explicate the concept
in such a counter-intuitive way. The kinder is to suggest that - as Isaiah
Berlin for example tends to put it - they must really be talking about some-
thing else; they must 'have a different concept of liberty.' But the more
usual is to contend - as for example William Parent does - that they must
simply be confused. To connect the idea of freedom with such principles
as virtue or rational self-mastery, as Parent patiently reminds us, fails to
convoy or even connect with 'what we ordinarily mean' by the term lib-
erty. From which he takes it to follow that any attempt to forge such links
will only result in a confused misunderstanding of the concept involved.

It is in the hope of preventing myself from being ruled out of order
in this fashion that I propose to exchew conceptual analysis and turn
instead to history. Before doing so, however, one further preliminary note
of warning must be sounded. If there is to be any prospect of invoking the
past in the manner I have sketched - as a means of questioning rather
than underpinning our current beliefs - we shall have to reconsider, and
indeed repudiate, the reasons usually given for studying the history of
philosophy by many of its leading practitioners at the present time.

21 See Feinberg 1975, p. 2. For similar commitments see Parent 1973, p. 166; Raz 1974, pp. 305-41;
and Oppenheim 1961, pp. 171-72, who cites both Feinberg and Raz with approval.
reflecting on 'inscrutable locations having to do with freedom', we can dismiss MacCallum's
contention that the term always denotes a triadic relationship.

For a representative discussion of these reasons, consider the intro-
duction to J. L. Mackie's revealingly titled book, Problems from Locke. This
opens by articulating the basic presupposition of much contemporary
work in the history of philosophy. There is a certain determinate range
of problems, we are told, that go to make up the discipline of philo-
sophy. We can therefore expect to find a corresponding range of historical
treatments of these problems, some of which may prove to be of continu-
ing philosophical interest. It follows that, if we want a usable history,
there are two guidelines to be observed. The first is that we should
concentrate on just those historical texts, and just those sections of just
those texts, in which it is immediately apparent that familiar concepts
are being deployed to construct familiar arguments with which we can
then take direct issue. Mackie gives clear expression to this rule in the
methodological Introduction to his book. He remarks that he 'makes
no attempt to expound or study Locke's philosophy as a whole, or even
that part of it which is to be found in the Essay'. This is because he is
exclusively concerned with 'a limited number of problems of continuing
philosophical interest' that happen to be raised and examined at various
moments in Locke's texts.

The underlying assumption is thus that the reason for exhuming the
great philosophers of the past is to help us arrive at better answers to
our own questions. The second guideline we are exhorted to observe
then follows from this commitment. We must be prepared to recast
the thought of the philosophers we are investigating in our own idiom,
seeking to produce a rational reconstruction of their beliefs rather than
a picture of full historical authenticity when these two projects begin to
collide. Mackie offers a particularly clear statement of this further rule,
observing that the main purpose of his work is 'not to expound Locke's
views or to study their relations with those of his contemporaries and
near contemporaries, but to work towards solutions of the problems
themselves.'

The value of following these rules, we are finally assured, lies in their
capacity to provide us with a ready and easy way of dividing up our
intellectual heritage. Suppose we come upon a philosophical text, or
even a section of an otherwise interesting text, in which the author begins
to discuss a topic which (as Mackie puts it) 'is not a live issue for us'. The
right response at this juncture is to reallocate the text for study under the
separate heading of 'the history of ideas'. This is held to be the name

of a distinct discipline that concerns itself with issues of purely historical significance, as opposed to 'intrinsically philosophical' significance. Sometimes it is rather strongly implied that it is hard to see how these issues (not being 'live') can have much significance at all. But it is usually allowed that they may well be of interest to those who happen to be interested in such things. It is just that such people will be historians of ideas; they will not be engaged in an enquiry of any relevance to philosophy.

I have no wish to question the obvious truth that there are large continuities in the history of modern philosophy, so that it may sometimes be possible to sharpen our wits by arguing directly with our elders and betters. I do wish to suggest, however, that there are at least two reasons for questioning the assumption that the history of philosophy should be written as though it is not really history.

It seems to me in the first place that to recover what a given philosopher may have said about some particular issue can never be sufficient to provide us with an historical understanding of their work. I have already sought to explain this commitment in volume 1 chapter 6 of the present work. Here I need only observe that to mount an argument is always, I take it, to argue with someone, to reason for or against a certain conclusion or course of action. This being so, the business of interpreting any text that contains such forms of reasoning will always require us (to speak over-schematically) to follow two connected lines of approach. The initial task is obviously to recapture the substance of the argument itself. If we wish, however, to arrive at an interpretation of the text, an understanding of why its contents are as they are and not otherwise, this still leaves us with the further task of recovering what the writer may have meant by advancing that particular argument. We need, that is, to be able to give an account of what they were doing in presenting their argument: what conclusion or course of action they were supporting or defending, attacking or repudiating, ridiculing with irony, scorning with polemical silence, and so on, and on through the entire gamut of speech acts embodied in the vastly complex act of intended communication that any work of discursive reasoning will comprise.

One of my doubts about the prevailing approach to the history of philosophy is that it systematically ignores this latter aspect of the interpretative task. I now turn to my other criticism, which I propose to treat at much greater length. It is that the notion of 'relevance' embodied in the orthodox approach is a needlessly constricting and philistine one. According to the view I have been outlining, the history of philosophy is only 'relevant' if we can use it as a mirror to reflect our own beliefs and assumptions back at us. If we can do this, the subject takes on 'intrinsically philosophical significance'; if we cannot, it remains 'of purely historical interest'. The only way to learn from the past, in short, is to appropriate it. I wish to suggest instead that it may be precisely those aspects of the past which appear at first glance to be without contemporary relevance that may prove upon closer acquaintance to be of the most immediate philosophical significance. For their relevance may lie in the fact that, instead of supplying us with our usual and carefully contrived pleasures of recognition, they enable us to stand back from our own beliefs and the concepts we use to express them, perhaps forcing us to reconsider, to recast or even (I shall next seek to suggest) to abandon some of our current beliefs in the light of these wider perspectives.

To open the pathway towards this broader notion of 'relevance', I am pleading for a history of philosophy which, instead of purveying rational reconstructions in the light of current prejudices, tries to avoid them as much as possible. Doubtless they cannot be avoided altogether. It is deservedly a commonplace of recent hermeneutic theories that, as Hans Georg Gadamer in particular has emphasised, we are likely to be constrained in our imaginative grasp of historical texts in ways that we cannot even be confident of bringing to consciousness. All I am proposing is that, instead of bowing to this limitation and erecting it into a principle, we should fight against it with all the weapons that historians have already fashioned in their efforts to reconstruct without anachronism the alien mentalités of earlier periods.

The above remarks are excessively programmatic and in danger of sounding shrill. I shall now attempt to give them some substance by relating them to the specific example I have raised, the example of what can and cannot be coherently said and done with our concept of negative liberty. As I have already intimated, my thesis is as follows. We need to look beyond the confines of the present disputes about positive versus negative liberty in order to investigate more fully the range of arguments about social freedom that arose in the course of modern European political philosophy. This quest, I hope to show, will bring us to a line of
argument about negative liberty which has largely been lost to view in the course of the present debate, but which serves to cast some doubt on the terms of that debate itself.

The missing line of argument I should like to reinstate is the one embedded in the classical and especially the Roman republican theory of citizenship. Before becoming engulfed by more individualistic styles of political reasoning, the Roman vision of freedom and civic equality enjoyed a brief but brilliant revival within the republican regimes of early-modern Europe. Within the Italian city-republics, the most incisive and influential articulation of what I shall describe as the neo-Roman case was provided by Niccolò Machiavelli in his Discorsi on Livy's history of Rome. After England was proclaimed a 'Commonwealth and free state' in 1649, a similar style of neo-Roman thinking came briefly to the fore, with James Harrington in his Commonwealth of Oceana offering the most systematic reworking of the Machiavellian line of argument. Meanwhile the success of the Dutch revolt against Imperial Spain helped to bring the same strand of thinking to still greater prominence in the Netherlands, with Spinoza in his Tractatus Politicus making by far the most significant contribution to the debate.

This is the tradition, I shall argue, that we need to retrieve if we wish to provide a corrective to the dogmatism about the topic of social freedom that has marked the writings of more recent theorists of natural and human rights. By way of attempting this act of retrieval, I have chosen to concentrate on Machiavelli's presentation of the neo-Roman case in his Discorsi on Livy. I have made this choice in part for reasons of space, but also because the Discorsi seems to me the text in which – as Spinoza long ago observed – we encounter the most acute and helpful reworking of the classical theory of citizenship. I shall thus be concerned to develop an historical thesis about Machiavelli's intentions in the Discorsi as well as a more general argument about the value of trying to recover what I take to be his line of thought. My historical thesis is that, while there are many things that Machiavelli may be said to be doing in the Discorsi, perhaps his most central concern is to address – partly to question, but chiefly to reiterate and amplify – that view of libertas which had lain at the heart of Roman republican thought. My more general thesis I have already stated: that to recapture the structure of this theory as far as possible in its own terms may in turn help us to enlarge our own understanding of the concept of negative liberty.

Machiavelli begins to consider what it means to be in possession of our liberty in the opening two chapters of Book 1 of his Discorsi. But his main discussion is launched in his ensuing sequence of chapters, in which he examines what ends and purposes we commonly seek within civil associations, and in consequence what grounds there we have for valuing our liberty. This is the stage at which he introduces the psychological generalisations I have already discussed in chapter 6. He observes, that is, that in all known politics there have been two distinguishable types of citizen with contrasting dispositions and correspondingly different reasons for prizing their liberty. On the one hand are the grandi, who typically desire to obtain power for themselves and to avoid ignominy at all costs. Their principal aim is accordingly to remain as free as possible from any interference (senza ostacolo) in the pursuit of their ascendency. On the other hand are the ordinary citizens, the plebe or popolo, whose main objective is simply to live in security. Their principal aim is likewise to remain as free as possible from interference, but in their case in the name of following so far as possible an undisturbed way of life.

This account of why everyone values their freedom is at the same time an account of what Machiavelli means by speaking of individual freedom within civil associations. The grandi and popolo alike aim to be free in the sense of being unobstructed in the pursuit of the particular goals they choose to set for themselves. As Machiavelli puts it in the opening chapter of Book 1, the crucial contrast is thus between 'free men' and 'those who depend on others'. To possess one's liberty is to be free in the ordinary 'negative' sense of being unconstrained by other agents. It is therefore to be free – as Machiavelli adds in his next chapter with reference to collective agents – to act 'according to one's own will and judgement'.

It is important to underline this point, if only because it contradicts two claims often advanced by commentators on the Discorsi. One is that Machiavelli introduces the key term liberta into his discussion 'without taking the trouble to define it', so that the sense of the word only emerges gradually in the course of the argument. The other is that, as soon as

31 For an analysis and critique of my ensuing argument see Settellati 1995.
34 Machiavelli 1960, I, 16, p. 1256 'uomini liberati o che dipendono da altri'.
35 Machiavelli 1960, I, 16, p. 1294 'governare per loro arbitrio'.
Machiavelli begins to make his meaning clear; it transpires that the term "liberty" as he uses it "does not bear the sense" we should nowadays attribute to it; on the contrary, "it must be taken in a wholly different sense." 27

Neither of these contentions seems warranted. As we have just observed, Machiavelli begins by stating exactly what he means by speaking of "liberty"; he means absence of constraint, especially absence of any limitations or obstructions imposed by other agents on one's capacity to act independently in pursuit of one's chosen goals. But as we saw at the outset, there is nothing unfamiliar about assigning the term "liberty" this particular sense. To speak of liberty as a matter of being unconstrained by other social agents, and in consequence able to pursue one's own ends, is to echo a formula employed by many contemporary theorists of negative liberty, with whose basic framework of analysis Machiavelli appears to have no quarrel at all.

Given that we all have various goals we are minded to pursue, it will obviously be in our interests to live in whatever form of community best assures us the freedom to pursue them. So we need to know under what kind of regime we can most reliably hope to maximise our liberty to attain our chosen ends. By way of answering this question, Machiavelli introduces — at the start of Book 2 — an unfamiliar but pivotal claim into his discussion of individual liberty. The only form of polity he maintains, in which we can hope to retain our freedom to follow our own pursuits will be one of which it makes sense to say that the community itself is free. Only in such communities can ambitious citizens hope to acquire power and glory for themselves, "rising by means of their virtù to positions of prominence." 28 Only in such communities can ordinary members of the "popolo" hope to live in security, "without having any anxiety that their property will be taken away from them." 29 Only in a free community, a "viven libero," are such benefits capable of being freely enjoyed. 30

It remains to ask what Machiavelli means by speaking not merely of individuals but of communities as living, or not living, a free way of life. The short answer is that he means the same in both cases. As he makes clear at the start of Book 1, a political body, like a natural body, is free if and only if it is able to act according to its own will and in pursuit of its chosen ends. To speak of a free city or a free state is thus to speak of a community which is "not subject to the control of anyone else", and is thus able, in virtue of being unconstrained, "to govern itself from the outset according to its own will, whether as a republic or a principality." 31

What, then, is the type of regime best suited to upholding such a free way of life? Machiavelli thinks it possible, at least in theory, for a community to live in liberty under a monarchical form of government. He sees no reason in principle why a king should not organise the laws of his kingdom in such a way as to reflect the general will — and thereby promote the common good — of the community as a whole. 32 But in practice Machiavelli is deeply sceptical about the capacity of princes to promote our liberty, as he makes clear in a crucial summarising passage at the start of Book 2: "It is not the pursuit of individual good, but of the common good, that makes cities great, and it is beyond doubt that it is only in republics that this ideal of the common good is properly served, because everything that promotes it is followed out." 33 Machiavelli's resounding conclusion is thus that, if we wish to see the common good fostered, and our individual liberty in consequence upheld, we must make sure that we institute and maintain a system of self-government. We can never hope to live a free way of life unless we live under a republican regime.

This conclusion represents the heart and nerve not merely of the Discorsi but of all neo-Roman theories of freedom and citizenship. Among more recent proponents of negative liberty, however, this commitment has usually been dismissed as an obvious absurdity. Hobbes, for example, seeks to dispose of it by sheer assertion, declaring in Leviathan that "Whether a Common-wealth be Monarchical, or Popular, the Freedom is still the same." 34 This contention has in turn been reiterated by many defenders of negative liberty in the course of the contemporary debate, most of whom have explicitly denied that there is any necessary connection between the maximising of individual liberty and the upholding of any particular form of government. Our next task must therefore be to enquire into the reasons Machiavelli offers for insisting that, on the contrary, the preservation of individual liberty requires the maintenance of one particular type of regime.

29 Machiavelli 1960, II, p. 281: "non dubitando che il patrimonio gli sia tolto.
31 Machiavelli 1960, I, p. 129: "si sono solito governare per loro arbitrio, o come repubbliche o come principati."
The key to Machiavelli's reasoning at this stage is to be found in his account of the place of ambizione in public life. As we have already seen, he believes that the exercise of ambition is invariably fatal to the liberty of anyone against whom it is successfully directed. This is because it takes the form of a liber dominandi, a willingness to coerce others and use them as means to one's own ends. We need next to recognize that this disposition to act ambitiously arises, according to Machiavelli, in two direct forms, neither of which we have any possibility of fending off unless we live as citizens of an elective and self-governing republic.

One of these forms we have already encountered. It arises - to cite Machiavelli’s terminology - 'from within' a community, and reflects the desire of the grandi to achieve power at the expense of their fellow-citizens. This is an ineliminable threat, for the grandi we have always with us, and they will always pursue these selfish goals. These they characteristically seek to attain by gathering around themselves groups of partisans, aiming to use these 'private forces' to wrest control of the government out of the hands of the public and seize power for themselves.

Machiavelli distinguishes three main ways in which ambitious grandi can manage to acquire such partisans. The first, which he considers in Book 1, is that they can use their high social standing to overawe their fellow-citizens and persuade them to adopt measures more conducive to the promotion of sectional interests than the good of the community as a whole. The other two possibilities are raised in the course of Book 3. One is that the grandi can seek to have themselves re-elected to public offices for excessive periods, so becoming sources of increasing patronage as well as objects of increasing personal loyalty. The other is that they can lay out their exceptional wealth to purchase the support and favour of the popolo at the expense of the public interest. As Machiavelli summarises at the outset of his discussion, in every case the same chain-reaction is set up: 'From partisans arise factions in cities, and from factions their ruin.' The moral is that 'such is the ambition of the grandi'

54 For systematic analyses of Machiavelli's employment of this term see Price 1962 and Price 1968.
citizens act as the defenders of their own liberty, thereby preventing them from adopting the lazy and effeminate alternative of hiring soldiers to fight on their behalf. To rely on mercenaries, Machiavelli repeatedly warns, is a sure way to ruin your city and forfeit your liberty, simply because their only motive for fighting is the small amount of pay you give them. This means that they will never be so much your friends as to be willing to lay down their lives in your cause. By contrast, a citizen army will always be striving for its own glory in attack and its own freedom in defence, and will therefore be far more willing to fight to the death.

Machiavelli is not of course saying that a city which defends its body with its own arms will thereby guarantee its citizens their liberty. Against overwhelming odds, as the Sannites discovered in their struggles against Rome, there is ultimately no hope of avoiding defeat and enslavement. But he is certainly admonishing us that, unless we are willing personally to contribute to the defence of our community against external aggression, we shall become so weak as to lay ourselves open as a prey to anyone who chooses to attack. As a consequence of this effeminate feebleness, we can expect to find ourselves, sooner rather than later, reduced to a state of servitude.

As for the personal qualities we need to cultivate in order to defend our liberty, Machiavelli singles out two above all. We first of all need to be wise. But the wisdom we require is by no means that of the consciously sage and sapient, the savi, whom Machiavelli (following Livy) usually treats with marked disdain and irony. To be savi is generally to lack precisely those qualities of wisdom which are essential in military (and indeed in civil) affairs. The relevant qualities are those required for the forming of practical judgments, the careful and effective calculation of chances and outcomes. They are, in a word, the qualities of prudenza. Prudence tells you when to go to war; how to conduct a campaign; how to bear its changing fortunes. It is one of the qualities by which the greatest commanders have always been distinguished. As usual, Machiavelli is thinking in particular of the military leaders of early Rome, leaders such as Tullius and Camillus, each of whom was prudensissimo in his generalship.

The other quality indispensable for effective defence is animo, courage, which Machiavelli sometimes couples with ostinate, sheer determination and persistence. Courage is the other leading attribute of the greatest military commanders, as Machiavelli repeatedly stresses in explaining the military successes of early Rome. When Cincinnatus, for example, was called from his plough to mount the defence of his city, he at once assumed the Dictatorship, raised an army, marched forth and defeated the enemy in a dramatically short space of time. The quality that brought him this decisive victory was la grandezza dello animo, his high courage. Courage is also the quality that must above all be instilled in every individual soldier if victory is to be grasped. Nothing is more likely to bring defeat than the kind of accident that has the effect of taking away the courage of an army and leaving it terrified. As the conduct of the French in battle above all reminds us, ‘natural fury’ is never enough; what is needed is fury disciplined by persistence or, in a word, courage.

Even if ‘external’ ambition is successfully fought off, there is still the more insidious danger that the same malign disposition will arise ‘from within’ your city, in the breasts of its leading citizens, and thereby reduce you to servitude. How is this to be forestalled? Machiavelli again argues that, in the first instance, this is a matter of establishing the right laws and ordinances, and again alludes to the metaphor of the body politic in describing what laws are required. They must be such as to prevent any single limb or member of the body from exercising an undue or coercive influence over its will. The laws governing the behaviour of the community must express its general will, not merely the will of its active and most ambitious part. But this in turn means that, as Cicero had stressed, there must be specific laws and institutions capable of serving as a tamponeavuto - a curb, a means of tempering selfish ambition and factiousness. For as Machiavelli repeatedly affirms - citing a metaphor much invoked by Virgil as well as Cicero - unless the grandi are ‘bridled’ and ‘held in check’ their natural intemperance will quickly lead to disorderly and tyrannical results.

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30 See, for example, Machiavelli 1960, II, 24, p. 359 and II, 27, p. 360.
31 See, for example, Machiavelli 1960, II, 12, p. 392; II, 14, p. 374; II, 27, p. 372.
32 Machiavelli 1960, I, 21, p. 186; III, 12, p. 428.
36 On the Tribunate as a grada tamponeavuto on the nobility under the Roman republic, see Machiavelli 1960, II, 11, p. 147; Machiavelli’s source appears to be the discussion of the Tribunate as a tamponeavuto in Cicero 1964, III, X, 21, p. 326.
37 See Machiavelli 1960, I, 16, p. 175, where he appears to allude to Virgil 1960-1, vii, 1, 54, p. 266. There we are told that Aeneas holds the winds in his power and curbs them with prison chains - iperboi premit as vincoli e corso frenar‘. Machiavelli speaks throughout Book I of the need for a form to curb the nobility. See Machiavelli 1960, I, 3, p. 196; I, 6, p. 144; I, 13, p. 340; I, 37, p. 226; I, 41, p. 254; I, 55, p. 257. 38
Besides the right leggi e ordini, there are certain personal qualities that everyone in public life must cultivate if they are to act as vigilant guardians of their own liberty. Once more Machiavelli singles out two above all. One is again said to be wisdom, but again this is not the wisdom of the professional sage. Rather it is the worldly wisdom or prudence of the experienced statesman, the person with practical ability to judge the best courses of action and follow them out. This quality is not merely indispensable for effective political leadership. It is also a central thesis of Machiavelli's political theory that no community can hope to be 'well-ordered' unless it is 'brought to order' by such a prudente ordinatore, such a worldly wise organizer of its civic life.\(^{69}\) Furthermore, it is no less crucial that every citizen who aspires to take a hand in government, to help in upholding the freedom of the community, should be prudent by nature. Suppose we ask, for example, how it came about that ancient Rome was able, over so long a period, 'to institute all the laws that maintained her in liberty'.\(^{70}\) The answer is that the city was continually organized and reorganized 'by so many leaders who were prudenti' that this constituted the key to her success.\(^{71}\)

The other quality that every citizen must cultivate is a willingness to avoid all forms of intemperate and disorderly conduct, thereby ensuring that civic affairs are debated and decided in an orderly and well-tempered style. Taking up the Roman ideal of temperantia, Machiavelli closely follows his classical sources—namely Livy and Cicero—in dividing his discussion at this juncture into two parts. One aspect of temperantia, as Cicero had explained in De Officiis, consists of those qualities that enable a citizen to advise and act in a truly statesmanlike way. The most important of these, he repeatedly declares, are modestia and moderation.\(^{72}\) Machiavelli completely agrees:

I see no other way for those who offer advice to republics than to consider everything in a moderate way, not to lay claim to any undertaking as their own idea, and to give their opinion without passion, and then modestly and without passion to defend it.\(^{73}\)

Machiavelli is scarcely less emphatic than Cicero about the value of conducting public affairs in a dispassionate style.


\(^{70}\) Machiavelli 1969a, I, 3, p. 241: 'procedere a tutte quelle leggi che la mantengono libera'.

\(^{71}\) Machiavelli 1969a, I, 3, p. 244.


\(^{73}\) Machiavelli 1969a, III, 35, p. 452: ‘Non ci veggo altra via [se, per quelli che consigliano una repubblica], che pigliare le cose moderatamente, e non ne prendere alcuna per sua impresa, e dare la opinione sua senza passione, e senza passione con modestia difenderla.’
Plate 7  The effects of famine in the city (western wall)
Plate 8: Simon as Supreme Judge of the Sicens (detail of Plate 3)

Plate 9: Giotto, The Last Judgement. Fresco (western wall, Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua)
Plate XI  Giotto, *Justice*, fresco (southern wall, Cappella degli Scrovegni, Padua)
The other requirement of temperantia, Cicero had added, is that everyone should behave 'with orderliness', a sentiment echoed by Livy with his frequent insistence on the need to act secte et ordine, in a right and orderly way. Again Machiavelli completely agrees. To maintain a vivere libero, the citizens must avoid all disordine and conduct themselves ordinariamente, in an orderly way. If temperate and disorderly methods (modi sanitarii) are permitted, tyranny will result; but as long as orderly and temperate methods (modi ordinarii) are followed, freedom can be successfully preserved over long periods of time. Machiavelli helpfully summarises his argument towards the end of Book 1 in the course of explaining why he believes that the cities of Tuscany could easily have introduced a vivere civile if only a prudent leader with a knowledge of ancient statecraft had arisen to command them. As grounds for this judgement he mentions the fact that the Tuscan communes have always displayed animo, courage, and ordine, temperance and orderliness. From which it follows that, if only the missing ingredient of prudente leadership had been added, they would have been able to maintain their liberty.\textsuperscript{76}

Hobbes insists in \textit{Leviathan} that the classical and neo-Roman theory of liberty I have been considering is in danger of leaving us confused:

\begin{quote}

The Liberties, whereof there is so frequent, and honourable mention, in the Histories, and Philosophy of the Ancient Greeks, and Romans, and in the writings, and discourse of those that from them, have received all their learning in the Politiques, is not the Libertie of Particular men; but the Libertie of the Common-wealth.\textsuperscript{77}

\end{quote}

We can now see, however, that Hobbes has either failed to grasp the point of the classical and neo-Roman argument I have sought to reconstruct or else is deliberately distorting it. For the point of the argument is of course that the liberty of the commonwealth and the liberty of particular men cannot be separately assessed in the way that Hobbes and his epigoni among contemporary theorists of negative liberty assume. The essence of the neo-Roman case is that, unless a commonwealth is maintained 'in a state of liberty' (in the ordinary sense of being free from constraint

\textsuperscript{74} Cicero 1903, I.XI, 342, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{76} Machiavelli 1960, I.35, p. 257.
\textsuperscript{77} Hobbes 1996, p. 149.
to act according to its own will] then the individual members of such a body politic will find themselves stripped of their personal liberty (again in the ordinary sense of losing their freedom to seek their own goals). The grounds for this conclusion are that, as soon as a body politic forfeits the capacity to act according to its general will, and becomes subject to the will of either its own grandi or some ambitious neighbouring community, its citizens will find themselves treated as means to their masters' ends, and will thereby lose their freedom to pursue their own purposes. The enslavement of a community thus brings with it the inevitable loss of individual liberty. Conversely, the liberty of particular men, pace Hobbes, can only be assured under a 'free commonwealth', an elective and self-governing form of republican regime.

To grasp this point is at the same time to see that there is no difficulty about defending both the claims about social freedom which, as we saw at the outset, contemporary philosophers have been apt to stigmatise as paradoxical, or at least as incompatible with a negative understanding of individual liberty. The first was the suggestion that freedom is connected with service—that only those who place themselves wholeheartedly at the service of their community are capable of assuring their own liberty. We can now see that, from the perspective of classical and neo-Roman thought, this is not a paradox but a perfectly straightforward truth. For a writer like Machiavelli, the liberty of individual citizens depends in the first place on their capacity to fight off servitude arising 'from outside'. But this can only be done if they are willing to undertake the defence of their polity themselves. A readiness to perform one's military service, to volunteer for active service, to join what we still call the armed services, constitutes a necessary condition of maintaining one's own individual freedom from servitude. Unless we are prepared to act 'in such a way as to exalt and defend our fatherland', we shall find ourselves conquered and enslaved.28

The maintenance of personal liberty also depends according to Machiavelli on preventing the grandi from coercing the popolo into serving their ends. But the only way to prevent this from happening is to organise the polity in such a way that every citizen is equally able to play a part in determining the actions of the body politic as a whole. This in turn means that a readiness to serve in public office, to pursue a life of public service, to perform voluntary services, constitutes a further necessary condition of maintaining one's own liberty. Only if we are prepared

25 Machiavelli 1960, II, 2, p. 283 on the need to promote 'la esaltazione e la difesa della potria'.

'to do good for the community', to 'help forward' and 'act on behalf of' the common good, can we hope in turn to avoid a state of tyranny and personal dependence.79

Cicero had laid it down in his De Officiis that individual and civic liberty can only be preserved if we are prepared to act 'as slaves to the public interest'.80 There are several echoes in Livy's history of the same use of the vocabulary of slavery to describe the condition of political liberty.81 Machiavelli is simply reiterating the same classical oxymoron: the price we have to pay for enjoying any degree of personal freedom with any degree of continuing security is voluntary public service.

I turn to the other contention that contemporary writers have generally held to be incompatible with a negative understanding of individual liberty. This is the connected suggestion that the attributes required of each individual citizen in order to perform these public services must be the virtues, and thus that only those who behave virtuously are capable of assuring their own freedom. If we revert to Machiavelli's account of the qualities we need to cultivate in order to serve our polity in war and peace, we can readily see that this too appears, from the perspective of classical and neo-Roman thought, to be a perfectly straightforward truth.

According to Machiavelli we stand in need of three qualities above all: courage to defend our liberty; temperance and orderliness to maintain free government; and prudence to direct our civic and military undertakings to the best effect. As we saw in chapter 5, however, this is to speak of three of the four 'cardinal' virtues invariably singled out by the Roman historians and moralists. They had all agreed that—to cite Cicero's formulation in De Inventione—the overarching concept of virtus generalis can be divided into four components, and that these are prudence, justice, courage and temperance.82

It is true that Machiavelli's analysis differs from Cicero's in one immensely important respect. He silently makes one alteration—small in appearance but overwhelming in significance—to the classical analysis of the virtues needed to serve the common good. He erases the quality of justice, the quality that Cicero in De Officiis had described as the crowning splendour of virtue.83

28 Machiavelli 1960, I, 4, pp. 153-4 on the indispensability of citizens who 'gioiscono... al bene commune' and act 'per il bene commune'.
29 Cicero 1973, I, 8, 31, p. 322 on 'communi utilitates serviam'.
30 For example, Livy 1924, V, X, 3, col. 3, p. 34. For a fuller exploration of this point see Skinner 1998.
This is not to say that Machiavelli fails to discuss the concept of justice in the Discorsi. On the contrary, he follows the Ciceronian analysis of the concept almost word for word. As we saw in chapter 5, Cicero had argued in his De Officiis that the essence of justice consists in the avoidance of iniuria or harm contrary to right. Such harm can arise in one of two ways; either as the product of fraud or of ‘brutal’ and ‘inhumane’ cruelty and violence. To observe the dictates of justice is thus to avoid both these vices, and this duty lies equally upon us at all times. For in war, no less than in peace, good faith must always be kept and cruelty eschewed. Finally, the observance of these duties is also said to be in our interests. If we behave unjustly, we shall not only cheat ourselves of honour and glory; we shall undermine our ability to promote the common good and thereby uphold our own liberty.\(^{84}\)

Machiavelli fully agrees with this account of what constitutes the virtue of justice. But he flatly repudiates the crucial contention that the observance of this virtue is invariably conducive to serving the common good. As we saw in chapter 5, he regards this belief as an obvious and disastrous mistake, a dissenting judgement that takes us to the heart of his originality and his subversive quality as a theorist of statecraft. He responds in the first place by making a firm distinction between justice in war and peace, arguing that in warfare both forms of iniuria are frequently indispensable. Fraud is often crucial to victory, and to treat it as inglorious is absurd.\(^{85}\) The same is no less true of cruelty, a quality that marked the very greatest of Rome’s generals, such as Camillus and Manlius, and proved in each case to be vital to their success.\(^{86}\) Moreover, the same lessons apply with almost equal force in civic affairs. Although fraud in this case is detestable, it is often essential to the achievement of great things.\(^{87}\) And although cruelty may similarly stand as an accusation against anyone who practises it, there is no denying that it will often have to be practised, and will always have to be excused, if the life and liberty of free communities are to be successfully preserved.\(^{88}\)

This represents an epoch-making break with the classical analysis of the cardinal virtues; its suddenness and completeness can hardly be overemphasised. But it is scarcely less important to emphasise that this represents Machiavelli’s sole quarrel with his Roman authorities. The rest of his analysis of virtù and its connections with libertà is impeccably Ciceronian in character. He not only centres his entire account around the qualities of courage, temperance and prudence, but he regularly refers to these attributes as elements of virtue as well as preconditions of liberty. When generals or entire armies are described as exhibiting animo, they are also said to be displaying an element of virtù.\(^{89}\) When communities and their members are said to be bene ordinata, they are again said to be in possession of an element of virtù.\(^{90}\) When civic and military leaders are commended for virtuous behaviour, this is often because they are said to have exhibited exceptional prudenza.\(^{91}\) In all these cases, the qualities that assure liberty are cardinal virtues.

It is true that this is to offer an unorthodox reading of Machiavelli’s views about the meaning and significance of virtù.\(^{92}\) Federico Chabod summarises the more usual view when he declares that ‘virtù, in Machiavelli, is not a “moral” quality as it is for us; it refers instead to the possession of energy or capacity to decide and act’.\(^{93}\) But I am not denying this; as far as it goes, this seems to me correct. The widest use to which Machiavelli consistently puts the term virtù is in speaking of the means by which we achieve particular results; the means, as we still say, by virtue of which they are achieved.\(^{94}\) As a result, when he comes to speak of the results in which he is principally interested in the Discorsi – the preservation of liberty and the attainment of civic greatness – he consistently uses the term virtù to describe the human qualities needed for these successes to be achieved. Speaking of virtù in these connections, he is thus speaking of abilities, talents, capacities. Of generals and armies he frequently remarks that the quality which enables them to defeat their enemies, to win great victories, is their virtù.\(^{95}\) When discussing the role of virtù in civic affairs, he likewise uses the term to describe the talents needed to found cities, to prevent faction, to avoid corruption, to maintain decisive leadership, to impose orderly government and to uphold the other arts of peace.\(^{96}\)

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\(^{84}\) See, for example, Machiavelli 1960, I, p. 273; II, p. 300; III, p. 301.

\(^{85}\) See, for example, Machiavelli 1960, III, I, p. 318.

\(^{86}\) See, for example, Machiavelli 1960, I, pp. 295-96.

\(^{87}\) See, for example, Machiavelli 1960, I, p. 127.\(^{91}\)

\(^{88}\) For a recent and contrasting analysis see Mansfield 1996, pp. 6-54.

\(^{89}\) Chabod 1964, p. 238.

\(^{90}\) For representative examples see Machiavelli 1960, I, p. 172; II, p. 276; III, p. 334; I, p. 335.

\(^{91}\) For representative examples see Machiavelli 1960, I, p. 172; II, p. 276; III, p. 334; I, p. 335.

\(^{92}\) For a recent and contrasting analysis see Mansfield 1996, pp. 6-54.

\(^{93}\) For representative examples see Machiavelli 1960, I, pp. 184; II, p. 276; III, pp. 334-5.

\(^{94}\) For representative examples see Machiavelli 1960, I, p. 127; II, p. 300; III, p. 301.
My objection to Chabod's type of analysis is merely that it does not go far enough. We still need to ask about the specific nature of the talents or abilities that serve to bring about these great results in civic and military affairs. If we press this further question we find, as we have seen, that Machiavelli's answer comes in two parts. We first need a certain ruthlessness, a willingness to discount the demands of justice when this is necessary to uphold the common good. But the remaining qualities we need are courage, temperance and prudence. At the heart of Machiavelli's political theory there is thus a purely classical message, framed in the same play on words that the ancient theorists had all exploited. If we ask in virtue of what qualities, what talents or abilities, we can hope to assure our own liberty and contribute to the common good, the answer is: in virtue of the virtues.

VI

In the light of the above attempt to outline the structure of a classical and neo-Roman theory of freedom, I now wish to revert to the current disputes about the idea of negative liberty from which I started out. The historical materials I have presented, I shall conclude by suggesting, are relevant to these disputes in two related ways.

They show us, in the first place, that the terms of the contemporary debate have become confused. It is agreed on all hands that a theory of liberty connecting the idea of social freedom with the performance of virtuous acts of public service would have to begin by positing certain ends as rational for everyone to pursue, and then seek to establish that the attainment of those ends would leave us in the fullest or truest sense in possession of our liberty. This is of course a possible way of connecting the concepts of freedom, virtue and service. It is widely (though I think mistakenly) held to be Spinoza's way of doing so in his Tractatus Politicus, and it certainly appears to be Rousseau's way of doing so in Du Contrat Social. It is by no means the only way of doing so, however, as present-day analytical philosophers are apt to suppose. In a theory such as Machiavelli's, the point of departure is not a vision of ends or real human interests, but simply an account of the 'humours' or dispositions that prompt us to choose and pursue our various ends. Machiavelli has no quarrel with the Hobbesian assumption that the capacity to pursue such ends without obstruction is what the term 'liberty properly signified'. He merely argues that the performance of public services, and the cultivation of the virtues needed for performing them, prove upon examination to be instrumentally necessary to the avoidance of coercion and servitude, and thus to be necessary conditions of ensuring any degree of personal liberty in the ordinary Hobbesian sense of the term.

This brings me to the other way in which the classical and neo-Roman theory is relevant to contemporary arguments. As a consequence of overlooking the possibility that a theory of negative liberty might coherently have the structure I have sketched, a number of philosophers have proceeded to enunciate further claims about the concept which they take to be statements of general truths, but which are in fact true only of their own particular theories of negative liberty.

One of these has been the Hobbesian claim that any theory of negative liberty must in effect be a theory of individual rights. As we have seen, this has acquired the status of an axiom in many contemporary discussions of negative liberty. Liberty of action, we are assured, 'is a right'; there is a 'moral right to liberty'; we are bound to view our liberty both as a natural right and as the means to secure our other rights. As will be evident, these are mere dogmas. A neo-Roman theory such as Machiavelli's helps us to see that there is no conceivable obligation to think of our liberty in this particular way. Machiavelli's is a theory of negative liberty, but he develops it without making any use whatever of the concept of individual rights. While he often speaks of that which is actio or morally right, I know of no passage in his entire political writings where he speaks of individual agents as the bearers of diritti or rights. On the contrary, the essence of his theory could be expressed by saying that the attainment of social freedom cannot be a matter of securing personal rights, since it indispensably requires the performance of social duties.

Machiavelli's scholastic contemporaries and their contractarian descendants have tended to respond to these arguments in a similar way. The best means, they suggest, to secure our personal liberty must...
nevertheless be to conceive of it as a right, as a species of moral property, and to defend it absolutely against all forms of external interference. But to this objection the classical and neo-Roman theorists of freedom have a strong retort. To adopt this attitude, they maintain, is not merely the epitome of corrupt citizenship, but is also (like all delerictions of social duty) in the highest degree an instance of imprudence. All prudent citizens recognise that, whatever degree of negative liberty they may enjoy, it can only be the outcome of—and if you like the reward of—a steady recognition and pursuit of the public good at the expense of all purely individual and private ends.

As we have seen, however, contemporary theorists of negative liberty have not lacked their own retort at this point. They have gone on to denounce the underlying suggestion that it may be in our interests to perform our duties as dangerous metaphysical nonsense. But it will now be evident that this too is a mistake. Machiavelli believes of course that as citizens we have a specific duty (officio) to perform, that of advising and serving our community to the best of our abilities. So there are many things, he repeatedly tells us, that we ought to do and many others that we ought to avoid. But the reason he gives us for cultivating the virtues and serving the common good is never that these are our duties. The reason is always that these represent, as it happens, the best and indeed the only means for us ‘to do well’ on our own behalf, and in particular the only means of securing any degree of personal liberty to pursue our chosen ends. There is thus a perfectly clear and unmetaphysical sense in which, although Machiavelli never speaks of interests, it would be fair to say that he believes our duty and our interests to be one and the same. He is celebrated, moreover, for the chilling emphasis which he places on the idea that all men are evil, and can never be expected to do anything good unless they can see that it will be for their own advantage. So his final word is not merely that the apparent paradox of duty as interest enunciates, once more, a straightforward truth. Like his Roman authorities, he also believes that it states the most fertile of all moral truths. For unless the generality of evil men can be given selfish reasons for behaving virtuously, it is unlikely that any of them will perform any virtuous actions at all.

8

Thomas More’s Utopia and the virtue of true nobility

Almost everything about Thomas More’s Utopia is debatable, but at least the general subject-matter of the book is not in doubt. More announces his theme on the title-page, which reads: De optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula Utopia.¹ His concern, that is, is not merely or even primarily with the new island of Utopia; it is with ‘the best state of a commonwealth’.

To say that this is More’s concern is at once to raise what has always been seen as the main interpretative puzzle about his book. Does he intend us to take the description of Utopia in Book 2 as an account of a commonwealth in its best state? Are we intended to share and ratify the almost unbounded enthusiasm that Raphael Hythloday, the traveller to Utopia, displays for that island and its way of life?²

Until recently More’s interpreters tended to answer in the affirmative. One theory has been that More aimed to picture the best state that reason can hope to establish in the absence of revelation.³ A yet more influential suggestion has been that he not only sought to portray a perfectly virtuous commonwealth, but wished at the same time to convey that, in spite of their heathenism, the Utopians are more truly and genuinely Christian than the nominally Christian states of western Europe.³ While disagreeing on the extent to which More holds up Utopia as an ideal, both schools of thought accept that Utopia must in some sense be regarded as an ideal commonwealth. Of late, however, the

¹ More 1516, p. cxxv. On the apparently Semitic attribution in the title see Parrish 1957.
² This interpretation was originally propounded in Chambers 1555 and has since been adopted by numerous commentators. For a list see Skinner 1978a, p. 257n.