

Response to the Third Philippic

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Formerly, men's minds were animated with that which they now feel no longer, which conquered all the opulence of Persia, maintained the freedom of Greece, and triumphed over the powers of sea and land: but now that it is lost, universal ruin and confusion overspread the face of Greece. What is this?

Demosthenes' attitude towards the rapid changes in contemporary warfare struck me as interesting. He imagines, first, that the Athenians' uncomfortable political situation was exclusively the result of their own inactivity and was thus entirely within their power to solve—this implies a belief in a kind of social or political decline in Athens itself. Second, the answer he provides to the question of why “the Greeks were once so jealous of their liberty, and are now ready to submit to slavery” is that corruption, specifically bribery, had spread to places in Athens where it didn't exist before. Then, finally, his attitudes towards warfare in general are clarified when he asserts that “now, on the contrary, we see most defeats owing to treachery; no formal engagements, nothing left to the decision of arms.”

Pre-modern Italian poet Ludovico Ariosto once wrote, in reference to the invention of gunpowder, that “through you the soldier's glory is destroyed, through you the business of arms is without honor, through you valor and courage are brought low, for often the bad man seems better than the good; through you valor no more, daring no more can come to a test in the field.” Now, Demosthenes' translator Thomas Leland, an Enlightenment-era Irish historian of the late Classical period, writes of the Greeks that “to recur to bribery in order to defeat their antagonists was to be guilty of corrupting the morals of what, in an extensive sense, may be called their country.”

Very similar sentiments were echoed by westerners during the French Wars of Religion, for example by Montaigne, which predated Leland by around two centuries. Interestingly, Leland, like Ariosto, also wrote some historical fiction based in the medieval period. His *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury* begins thus: “when Henry III reigned in England, Sir Randolph, a valiant knight of Cornwall ... retired to the peaceful enjoyment of those honors and fortunes which he had *purchased by a series of hardy services* in the field.” He goes on: “the eve of his life was engaged in ... teaching [his sons] the sacred duties which they owed to heaven and to their country, inspiring them with a gallant love of arms [and] undaunted courage duly tempered with benevolence and humanity.” Here we see the recurring association of strength in the field with strength in morals, or at least nostalgia for a time when such a relationship existed or was generally idealized, when the moral purchasing power of cash was low and of “hardy services” was high. That ideal will be investigated here.

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On 13 July, 982, at the height of the summer campaign season, the emperor of Germany was afloat in the Mediterranean. Having been destroyed in battle by Arab invaders in Calabria—at the southern extremity of the European continent—he was forced to swim out to sea towards a ship in the distance, trying to avoid the rout that resulted in the deaths of Margrave Gunther of Merseburg, Count Udo II of Rheinfranken, Bishop Henry of Augsburg, and “innumerable others whose names are known only to God.” The defeat suffered by the emperor Otto II at Capo Colonna was so devastating that it provoked a massive, decades-long revolt of pagan Slavs in eastern Germany known as the *slawenaufstand*. The Slavs were provoked to revolt primarily by the deaths of so many powerful men: Gunther, Udo, and Henry were only three among the “innumerable” number of German aristocrats and clerics who were cut down in Italy. This devastating blow to the Ottonian administration is what provoked the revolt, rather than the mere loss of life.

The presence of so many aristocrats at such a battle was not unusual. These centuries—the ninth through the eleventh—were the formative years of western chivalry and feudalism that produced such art as the *Song of Roland* and which culminated in the disastrous Hundred Years' War; aristocrats were at the vanguard of that movement. The conclusion of the *Song* tells us something very interesting about this gestational period of western civilization: it does not conclude with Charlemagne driving the Arabs out of Spain, the tale's main action. Rather, it concludes in Paris with a trial by combat: a relative of the man responsible for the betrayal of the titular hero at Roncesvalles Pass is pitted against a just accuser to determine the guilty party. The two men, both servants of the king Charlemagne, match each other in every imaginable skill, both in strength and honor. At the moment when it seems that the traitor's relative has won the upper hand, however, God prevents the hero from being struck down, and the relative is killed. It had not been honor, or strength, or even the French courts (since they had been unable to reveal who had betrayed Roland), which had discovered the traitor Ganelon: it was God, who intervened on behalf of the

just accuser and allowed him to be recognized and dealt with justly. In Roland's world, then, it is the just who prevail over the betrayers; they defeat them in arms and battle, and prove to be the strongest, only with God's help.

A similar feat of arms took place in the real world early in the Hundred Years' War; it was arranged to decide control of Brittany between French and English-backed claimants. The French prevailed after a tough battle in which, as the historian Froissart wrote, all the combatants "held themselves as valiantly on both sides as if they had been all Rolands"; the battle is known as the "Combat of the Thirty." From then on, the political landscape of France changed considerably, especially towards the War's dramatic conclusion. The French won in the end, but not before the disastrous defeat at Agincourt in 1415, where the mounted nobles of France were butchered by the peasant archers of England (as the stereotype goes). As among the Germans at Capo Colonna, great loss of life was incurred among the greatest of the French at Agincourt: the dukes of Orléans and Bourbon were captured; the duke of Alençon and the Constable of France were killed. The mad king of France did not attend the battle.

The noble French equivalents of Froissart's knights had been slaughtered at Agincourt by unnamed, untitled peasants. The tumult of the fifteenth century would produce an uncanny mirror of those circumstances sixty years later: at the battle of Nancy in 1477, the mounted noblemen of Burgundy, led by Duke Charles *le Temeraire* himself, were crushed by a mass of unnamed, unennobled Swiss mercenaries. And yet the circumstances of the Combat of the Thirty and the battle of Agincourt may have been more similar than those of Agincourt and Nancy: while the French had been able to regroup, collect themselves, and, notwithstanding great exertion and several heroic feats, win the war against the English after Agincourt, there would be no recuperation for the Burgundians after Nancy. *Le Temeraire* was killed, and with his life went the court of Dijon, "consigned to the dustbin of history": the Burgundian territories were inherited and partitioned between the Valois and the Hapsburgs.

In this sense, Froissart's Burgundian Thirty had lost at Nancy worse than the German counts at Capo Colonna, and worse than the French dukes at Agincourt. The victors on the field that day had been the Swiss mercenaries, who capitalized on the victory by descending on and ravaging northern Italy. The pike-bearing *landsknechts*, archetypes of Ariosto's modern beguilers, wreaked havoc on the country.

Machiavelli thought that he had a solution to the Swiss problem created by the collapse of Burgundy, or at least a long list of remedies. It is somewhat ironic, given the content of his book, that Machiavelli concluded his "exhortation to rid Italy of the barbarians" with a quote of Petrarch's that begins: *Virtue against fury shall advance the fight*.

It echoes the *geist* of Roland, that God will descend from the heavens to save good men from the unjust, which is antithetical to *The Prince*. Leo Strauss says that Machiavelli "replaces the imitation of the God-Man Christ by the imitation of the Beast-Man Chiron," which summarizes his theory nicely.

Machiavelli's "secular principles of politics" won the combat of ideas against Froissart's ideal Combat of the Thirty and the idea of Charlemagne's trial of Ganelon. The sum of Machiavelli's anti-Switzer theory had been, as Strauss says, anything but a return to the medieval values that Ariosto eulogized; it had been to eradicate them from political thought more thoroughly than ever before: Machiavelli imagined no more Rolands on the field or Charlemagnes at court.

Like Thucydides' Athenian diplomats, Machiavelli's Prince does what the strong can while the weak suffer what they must. Indeed, Strauss says that Machiavelli went so far as to merely proclaim the doctrine of the Athenian diplomats openly, while Thucydides had hidden his own ideas behind them.

Now, Machiavelli's ideas have conquered the west, at least to the extent that the Roland ideal (that the strong are just, due to the intervention of God) has been eradicated from all political thought, and to the extent that religion has been scrubbed from the political landscape. One twentieth-century political philosopher, Cary Nederman, wrote of a medieval writer, glowingly and incorrectly, that he "divided his treatise into separate treatments of temporal politics and ecclesiology," so that the ecclesiology could be discarded and the political philosophy pillaged and despoiled (on Marsiglio of Padua). So far have moral ideals been cleaved from politics that it has become an element of western culture to immediately distinguish between the two.

If the Roland ideal becomes a microcosm of the relationship that used to exist in the west between religion and politics, then we might say that attempts have even been made by these philosophers at scrubbing the Roland ideal from history itself, while the landscape of western political theory is in many ways more like its state two millennia ago than its state one millennium ago.

(Nederman is not alone in his failure to confront the religious realities of the past, and he is not alone in his failure likewise to properly understand the classical and medieval worlds. In *Federalist No. 18*, James Madison criticizes the ancient Greeks for not giving the Amphictyonic Council more political power—if only they had been "as wise as they were courageous!" The Council,

however, was primarily a religious institution, not a political one; Madison dismissed the Council's religious duties as nothing more than "the superstition of the age." An inability or failure to grasp this reality produced an analysis that is unhelpful and uninteresting. The role that religion played in Greek politics and public policy was not well-understood, which helps explain why modern historians have struggled with assessing Greek identity even today. Consider the following passage:

"But now even my power of speech fails me ... For in a land long alienated from letters and completely barbarized, who dares sing out the Muses' melodies? ... if [Hippocrates refused to lend his services to the Persians], how then can I devote the very best thing and the most beautiful invention of the Hellenes—history—to the recounting of barbarian deeds against Hellenes?"

This passage was written not by a classical Greek, but by a late Byzantine author describing the fall of Constantinople in 1204 to the westerners. The classical western view on the author's people held by Gibbon and Voltaire are united in Hegel:

"At Byzantium Christianity had fallen into the hands of the dregs of the population—the lawless mob. Popular license on the one side and courtly baseness on the other side, take refuge under the sanction of religion, and degrade the latter to a disgusting object."

To some degree, a lack of knowledge created the misunderstanding, but in other cases it was quite voluntary. Consider, now, this passage:

"In expectation of God's love for mankind, we ought to sing out with David, 'Remember us, O Lord, with the favor thou hast to thy people ...' knowing full well that in the end the ungodly shall be overlooked and flogged, and that for those who hope in the Lord their chastisement shall be accompanied by the call to repentance and consolation."

Not only was this passage also written by a late, "courtly" Byzantine, it was written by the same author as the above quote, in the same place, lamenting the fall of Constantinople to the westerners. Without a good Roland or Charlemagne to beseech, his appeal lands directly at the feet of the Lord.

As the Enlightenment philosophers chose to be repulsed by the Byzantines, so the Enlightenment and modern philosophers have chosen to molest their own history by scrubbing it of religion at their leisure and scouring among the violated remains for morsels in vogue).

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As for the enemy of the Roland ideal, Machiavelli had complained that the wiliness of the Switzer mercenaries had allowed the French to enter Italy *col gesso*—"with chalk" in hand, meaning that they entered the country drawing up plans for their billets rather than planning for battle, since there would be no contest on the field. Perhaps ironically, Machiavelli's recommendations created a political landscape that could not be imagined without such maneuvers: his preference for shrewd calculations combined with the advance of military technology nurtured a civilization terrified of violence and combat. Of course, the twentieth century was replete with awesome armed conflicts the likes of which Ariosto could never have imaged. But the world has been graced with many of the other kind as well: it seems nowadays that Afghanistan is full of armies running around *col gesso* and nothing else; such is the state of war today, with the modern Melians constantly at the brink of annihilation by our new Athenian diplomats, armed now with the ideals of Machiavelli and Voltaire. These two extremes represent the poles of Ariosto's reviled modern warfare: either honor was annihilated by violence (e.g. the Great War), or combat was avoided altogether for the sake of strategy (e.g. the Cold War).

Far from being a potential source of truth and justice, as it was for Froissart and the unknown author of the *Song of Roland*, now all combat is reviled, and very few armies are willing to put down their chalks; the few that are turn their tactics on purely political principles, as has become the norm. In general, though, the taste for such combat has gone sour since the Second World War. Maybe someday it will sweeten again. But regardless of whether it does, it seems that, for the distant foreseeable future, our politicians will continue to put themselves in the shoes of the Athenian diplomats. They will browse Machiavelli for answers on whether to destroy Afghanistan, Palestine, and all the other modern Melians, while our copies of Marsiglio and Froissart gather dust.

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Machiavelli's theory may rightly be called a seminal doctrine in the arrangement of the modern political landscape. Montesquieu, for example, yielded to Machiavelli. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, he uses the word 'virtue' to describe nothing more than the love of one's country. The word is stripped of its old meaning and power: it does not mean to seek the good. So, when he says, for example, that virtue is necessary for the survival of a democracy, he only means that it is necessary for the people to love their country. And when he says that "it was only ever after [Chaeronea] as easy to triumph over the forces of Athens

as it had been difficult to subdue her virtue,” he only means that the perpetual subjugation of Athens was achieved merely by repressing or softening love of the country.

Montesquieu, in this Machiavellian sense, did nothing more than affirm the abolition of the Roland ideal. He says as much:

I would only make my readers comprehend that all political [vices] are not all moral vices; and that all moral [vices] are not political vices.

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The truth of history, of course, is that the Roland ideal has never been realized. Otto’s defeat at Capo Colonna made that quite obvious to the medieval writers who formulated the ideal in the first place, especially if they assumed that their leaders were good men. In fact, medieval history is replete with such examples. William of Tyre, a crusader cleric, wrote of a combat at Mount Cadmus in Turkey:

“The battle was long fought and of doubtful outcome. Finally, however, in punishment for our sins, the infidels conquered. Many Christians were killed and large numbers made prisoners; our army was reduced to a very few. Many noble and illustrious men perished that day, men notable for their military deeds and well worthy of pious remembrance . . . Their names we do not remember, but we believe that they are written in heaven and their memory will be held in benediction forever.”

Like many of the German nobles who died at Capo Colonna fighting against the Arab invaders, many of the crusaders killed at Mount Cadmus fighting against the Turks are remembered only by God, very much unlike Roland, and also unlike the knights at Froissart’s *Combat*, all of whose names are recorded. Leaving behind the stories, then, the historians give us an insight into the real world: good men die in battle every day. Their names are not remembered; prayers cannot be said for them or their families. And they are conquered by bad men who do not deserve the rewards of victory. Such, then, is life as it always was.

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It does not appear that the Roland ideal was ever realized on a grand scale; it would be a mistake to idealize the Middle Ages as such. This is the somewhat obvious answer to the dilemma raised by Leland’s fiction. If we would like to strive for a greater result, then we must ask ourselves whether, without a concrete historical precedent, the pursuit of the Roland ideal is productive, or whether it is attainable at all.

This problem might also be called “the question of western civilization”—is pursuit of the ideal a vain thing? Is the ideal achievable? The question of the Roland ideal is one iteration of this form; two other iterations of the same type have shaped the western canon: of progress and virtue. And there are many other iterations; for example, the striving for ideal mathematical systems.

Is the pursuit of societal progress sufficient to produce a perfect civilization? Should we assume that such a thing is attainable? While this question is most obviously relevant to Hegelian and Marxist theory, it has shaped the canon of western literature in a deeper, more subtle way: it has impelled all forms of theoretical reformation. Thus, to his list of “Eutopian” writers, starting with More and Bacon, the historian Jacques Barzun adds Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Fielding, Tolstoy, Eliot, Joyce, and Fitzgerald. In these writers’ works, “the messy real world is shown without disguise or softening, but the ideal one runs alongside in the author’s comments . . . the Eutopian features sketched or implied in the depiction of what is.” A mini utopia is carved out of each authors’ ideals and values. This is especially true of Rabelais and Montaigne, who both attached (brief) depictions of utopias to their works. Such is the provenance of this pursuit that it has stretched from at least as early as Plato (and probably much earlier) to at least as late as the present. The question of Progress, then, is too great to be surveyed properly here. Suffice it to say that most moderns, especially young people, are newly enchanted by the vision of a perfect future; the fantasy and mystery of the utopia through progress is an antidote to the present, or else a sedative.

Perhaps more justice can be done to the other question: is the pursuit of personal virtue sufficient to attain true personal happiness? Should we assume that either of those things are attainable?

In the *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero argued that virtue “has everything that can befall mankind in subjection to her”—that fortune is subject to virtue. It is a very happy conclusion: to feel that everything is ultimately under your own control. Saint Augustine ridiculed and insulted this view several centuries after Cicero wrote, attacking “the stupid pride of [the Stoics] who suppose that the supreme good is to be found in this life,” charging them with attempting “to manufacture for themselves in this life an utterly counterfeit happiness by drawing on a virtue whose fraudulence matches its arrogance.” Of course, Augustine argued that real happiness can only be attained in the next life and that worldly virtue is always at the mercy of fortune.

One of his intellectual descendants, G.K. Chesterton, took this reaction much further, writing that “complete self-confidence

is not merely a sin; complete self-confidence is a weakness. Believing utterly in one's self is a hysterical and superstitious belief like believing in Joanna Southcote," although, in fairness, he was responding to an ideology far less complex than Cicero's.

Through most of the Middle Ages, only Cicero's philosophy was known to the reading intellects of the west. It was only at the dawn of the Renaissance that his political writings were discovered along with knowledge of his lengthy and controversial political career. This discovery shocked many westerners, perhaps none more so than Petrarch, who wrote a "letter to Cicero" in response: *Alas ... like a wayfarer at night carrying a lantern before him, you revealed to your followers the path where you yourself stumbled most wretchedly.*

Cicero did not follow his own advice; he died as a politician, not a philosopher.

The main character of Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, Usbek, is in one way an image of Cicero. An easterner, he adopts many of the intellectual trappings of the Enlightenment during a trip to Paris, but is also "constitutionally incapable of inquiring into the practical implications of these thoughts for his own Persian life." While criticizing marriage institutions and slavery in the west, he writes back to his estate in the east ordering his eunuchs to initiate a bloody reign of terror against his unfaithful wives and their accomplices. His intellectual life and his personal life remain "hermetically sealed" from one another; rather like Cicero, he is utterly incapable of applying his thoughts to his actions (although, unlike Cicero, Usbek is oblivious to the contradiction and makes no effort to reform himself).

Of course, Cicero was a great philosopher. But the course of his life, along with the dilemma proposed by Montesquieu, offers a sharp counterpoint to the assumption of the Stoics that philosophy is the path to virtue, that it offers the only opportunity for true happiness in this life. It apparently seems very possible that great and lay philosophers alike, such as Cicero and Usbek, can deeply penetrate the study of virtue without the theory ever leaving their minds.

We should not assume, however, that dying as a politician necessarily represents an abandonment of the quest for virtue. We should recall an old maxim of Aristotle's: man is political, or social, by nature. It is a duty, therefore, to participate in and contribute to civic life: "it is evident that a city is a natural production, and that man is naturally a political animal." Dante thought so as well, and he thought it somehow a sin to withdraw from civic life like the medieval ascetics. Modern American conservative philosophers have juxtaposed the northern withdrawer, Thoreau, to the southern participator, John Randolph; the fictitious ideal of Cicero's great abscondence to the Tuscan countryside may not necessarily be considered an ideal at all. Of course, the realities of social organization make it impossible to describe a clear division between withdrawing from and participating in civic life, and when Aristotle refers to cities, such as in "every city must be allowed to be the work of nature," he is not referring to urban complexes in the modern sense, but rather to the whole *polis*.

It is thus another question to ask whether alleged withdrawers such as Thoreau really did abdicate the Aristotelian obligation, and yet another to ask whether Cicero could have fulfilled it without involving himself as he did: surely mere participation in civic life must not be equated to dying for one's own political ambitions.

In any case, it is probably fair to say that the medieval ascetics—the classic withdrawers—have exercised as great an influence over the intellectual landscape of western civilization as have any such cadre of philosophers. Certainly, the weight of their contributions should not be underestimated due to their real or imagined social positions.

The questions of progress and virtue—*is pursuit of the ideal sufficient to attain the ideal?*—recall a formulation of the proof of the existence of God offered by one of those would-be medieval withdrawers that took a similar form. Anselm of Bec, a monk of Normandy, argued that mere cognizance of the possibility of the existence of God is logically sufficient to prove that God exists. Duns Scotus—another medieval—offered a proof along a similar line that was eventually adopted by Descartes; Anselm's formulation was briefly accepted by Bertrand Russell. This proof essentially argues that the answer to the question "is conception of the perfect form sufficient to prove the existence of the perfect form, God?" is the affirmative. We are then left to wonder whether the answer to this question provides sufficient ground to answer the questions of progress, virtue, and the Roland ideal, in the affirmative or otherwise. These are the questions dealt with by the western canon.