

DISPUTATION CLII

September 15, 2016

Dearest Peucinians,

Last week we had a fruitful discussion about the sources of political authority in society and the validity of seeking reform through civil disobedience and revolution. As a society, we voted with Abraham Lincoln and Edmund Burke in saying that it is better to affect change gradually and within the existing political system. This week we broach a topic close to the heart of the first great political scientist, Niccolò Machiavelli.

RESOLVED: GREAT LEADERS NEED NOT GROUND THEIR DECISIONS IN MORALITY

Affirmative: Cesare Borgia '16

Negative: Sappho (Σαπφώ) '19

Do the ends justify the means? Not according to Plato, who stresses the importance of acting in accordance with justice and the moral virtues. In the *Republic*, Socrates wonders why anyone would bother acting justly if he knew his injustices would never be revealed. Socrates responds to his own question by sharing the myth of the Ring of Gyges. The wearer of the ring is invisible to the naked eye, and he can cause all sorts of calamity without detection. He never receives worldly punishment for his deeds, but more and more he becomes a slave to his appetites and destroys his own soul. Two thousand years later, Oscar Wilde tells the same story in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Both tales warn of the dangers of acting without morality, but none of the characters are meant to be understood as great leaders. The question is worth asking: can a leader afford to have a conscience and confine herself within a moral code, or is this an impediment to her greatness?

In his famous work *The Prince*, Machiavelli breaks with the philosophers of antiquity in positing “It is necessary, therefore, if we desire to discuss this matter thoroughly, to inquire whether innovators can rely on themselves or have to depend on others: that is to say, whether, to consummate their enterprise, have they to use prayers or can they use force? In the first instance they always succeed badly, and never compass anything; but when they can rely on themselves and use force, then they are rarely endangered. Hence it is that all armed prophets have conquered, and the unarmed ones have been destroyed.” He cites numerous examples of leaders who have accomplished their goals by taking decisive action according to advantage and necessity. Those leaders who arm themselves only with high-minded principles are destined to fail.

Except, of course, when they succeed. Machiavelli was wholly incapable of accounting for the rise of that one great unarmed prophet, the one who forever changed the course of Western civilization by imploring his followers to love their oppressors, turn the other cheek, and live a life of humility and poverty. Jesus Christ and his ideology conquered even the great Roman empire, but the man himself never raised a sword to another human being. Another leader we call great, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., cited the example of Christ in imploring his followers to eschew violence on principle. These leaders not only grounded their decisions in morality, but are considered great *for* their morality.

We therefore ask: what makes a leader truly great, her actions or her beliefs? Whose notion of morality is she beholden to? What, if not acting justly, separates the great leader from the tyrant? And, when it matters most, what kind of leader do we want at the helm of *our* republic?

Thursday September 14th, 8:30 PM --TAKE NOTE OF LATE START TIME--
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall

Semi-Formal Attire

Yours,
μὲνω - Meno

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus