VIRTUS

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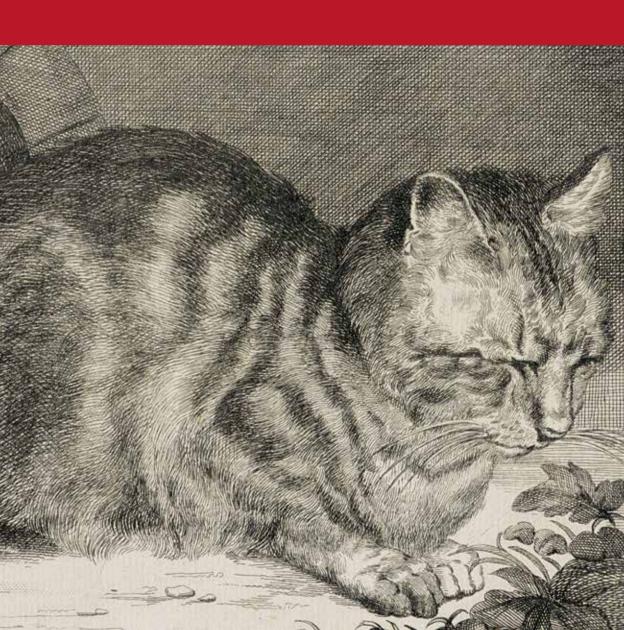
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What is humanist political thought?

James Hankins, *Virtue politics: Soulcraft and statecraft in Renaissance Italy*
(Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2020, 736 pp., index)

James Hankins' *Virtue politics* is the opus magnum of a major scholar. With great depth and breadth, Hankins develops a portrait of late medieval Italian humanist thought and situates it in the history of Western thought. *Virtue politics* questions first and foremost the tendency of intellectual history to search for the origins of modern political, and especially of republican ideas, in Italian humanism. Hans Baron had opposed the fifteenth-century 'civic humanism' to the ideas of the supposedly apolitical writers of the preceding century. Skinner took over some of Baron's central ideas (though not uncritically), and saw in Machiavelli's republicanism the culmination of humanist 'civic humanism'. According to Hankins, this scholarship has developed a biased narrative of humanist political thought and is based on an anachronistic understanding of the term 'republic'. Hankins underlines the diversity of opinions on political regimes in late medieval humanism. Above all, he insists that late-medieval Italian humanists prioritized the moral reform of the ruling elites over the design of good institutions and laws – a political program that he calls 'virtue politics'.

In Hankins' view, humanists had usually a conservative stance and did not endeavour to change political regimes. They were not what he calls 'exclusivists', that is they did not think that only one sort of political regime is legitimate. To be sure, many supported the political regime of their polity, but they did not mean to export it. Hankins thus downplays the significance of institutional and legal questions and insists that the most important issue for the humanists was to improve the moral qualities of political leaders. For humanists, the legal-

ity of power in general, and hereditary rights in particular, were not a sufficient, and often indeed not essential, criteria for political legitimacy. They opposed the theories of jurisconsults. More important was whether the political leaders – monarchs or oligarchs – fostered the common good, respected the liberty of the subjects (respectively citizens), and obtained a certain popular assent. The chief method to improve the leaders' morality was liberal education.

One appealing aspect of Hankins' interpretation is that it situates Italian humanism in the history of 'paideumata' (παιδευματα), that is of movements aiming at bettering society. According to him, humanism had both common and distinctive features with scholasticism and the Enlightenment. What made humanism a unique moment in the history of political thought, is precisely the project of 'virtue politics' that was distinct from the legalist approach of both scholasticism and the Enlightenment, and contrasts very much with modern 'exclusivism' that Hankins traces back precisely to the Enlightenment. Hankins takes seriously the Christian character of most of humanist thought, and does not contrast it too sharply with scholasticism. He underlines the centrality of Aristotle to these two paideumata. Still, he sees a clear break with scholasticism, and uses for this reason the term 'Renaissance'.

After five chapters providing the outline of the argument and describing the core elements of humanist political thought without much contextualisation, twelve chapters discuss and contextualise the work of nine authors: famous ones like Petrarch, Boccaccio, Leonardo Bruni, Leon Battista Alberti, Francesco Patrizi and Machiavelli, and less well-known ones like Biondo Flavio, Cyriac of Ancona and George of Trebizond. Hankins develops an insightful narrative of the rise and fall of humanist thought from the mid-fourteenth to the early sixteenth century. According to him, the programme of 'virtue politics' had been already defined by Petrarch, who is thus the father of humanist political thought. Petrarch reacted to a 'civilisational crisis' that put into question the legitimacy of both the emperor and the pope and rested on a widespread feeling of Italian decline in comparison to ancient Roman greatness. Boccaccio and Bruni took over Petrarch's ideas and adapted them in their own idiosyncratic way to Florentine political discussions. The humanist political programme was then enriched and reinforced by the rediscovery and translation of Greek classical texts in the fifteenth century. But the French invasions of Italy and the many wars and humiliations of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries induced Machiavelli to think that humanists had failed in reviving ancient virtue. In Hankins' interpretation, Machiavelli gave up the central tenets of humanist political thought in abandoning the very idea of virtue politics.

Because of its very richness, it is impossible to discuss all the theses and arguments of *Virtue politics*. This review is written from the point of view of a specialist in early modern, especially Enlightenment, history, and will thus rather discuss the contribution of this monograph to issues that go beyond the interpretation of individual authors of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Hankins makes a compelling case against the biases of the 'civic humanism' approach. *Virtue politics* is convincing when it criticises the teleology and anachronisms of many studies about Italian humanist political thought. The concept of 'virtue politics' is surely a use-

ful tool to understand what binds together diverse authors who had otherwise very different political visions. Still, one wonders if Hankins does not generalise too much himself and downplays in an exaggerated manner the importance of institutional and legal issues (of 'ius') in humanist thought. As he himself shows, the question of the best institutions to promote virtue was intensively discussed in late medieval humanism. For example, as *Virtue politics* makes clear, Bruni did invent a new meaning of 'republic' and had a daring programme of institutional reform (even if he may not have pleaded for citizen militia, as Hankins shows). Hankins could have underlined both the diversity of political opinions and the common emphasis on virtue without pushing too far his thesis that for humanists only the moral virtue of political leaders really mattered.

That for at least some humanists 'ius' did matter is furthermore a sign that Hankins may overestimate the contrast with medieval political thought in general, and with scholasticism in particular. To be sure, he does not follow the caricatural view that sees in the 'Renaissance' a radical break with the 'Middle Ages'. But he could have explored more precisely the continuities in the basic worldview of these medieval authors. As he makes clear, Aristotle was a major authority and source of inspiration to both scholasticism and humanism, and the Italian humanists had a deeply Christian worldview that meant that they often read ancient authors in the light of Christian interpretations. This may explain why scholasticism and humanism both insisted on natural inclinations, divine order, and the moral good. More than a new general theoretical framework and goals, humanism may have brought about a new method and a new persona (the 'philosopher').

That the Enlightenment *philosophe* persona had humanist origins shows, lastly, that there may be greater continuities between Italian humanist and Enlightenment thought than Hankins acknowledges. In the eighteenth century, 'virtue politics' was still a major project, and many authors placed a greater emphasis on the morality of political leaders than on political regime. To be sure, in the eighteenth century, this was mostly combined with scholastic legal thought (ideas about 'natural inclinations', 'natural law' and 'natural rights'). Yet it appears clearly that Italian humanism made a major contribution to the emergence of Enlightenment thought. This humanist input may be somehow obscured by the fact that we usually associate today the Enlightenment with liberal and democratic thought – an interpretation that is anachronistic in a manner reminiscent of the one that associates humanism with republicanism. By assuming a sharp decline of humanist thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Hankins strangely downplays the relevance of his findings for the wider history of Western thought. Hankins has written an important book with major and convincing claims that should incite us to reconsider further the history of Western political thought. It is to be hoped that specialists of other 'paideumata' will follow the lead.

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