Silke Schwandt M.A., Bielefeld University

Virtus: Moral limitations of the political sphere in the Middle Ages. Towards a History of Word Use

For the Middle Ages, morals and, above all, the virtues at its center, played an important role not only for distinguishing between good and bad, but, more importantly, even for the structuring of society. Medieval authors have woven many of their arguments concerning human behavior and the order of human society using a language of morals at the center of which we mostly find the Latin term *virtus*. But to what end did these authors use *virtus*?

In his *Policraticus*, written around 1159, John of Salisbury, one of our key texts for the study of medieval political theory, argued:

"For if an act is done once or oftener, it does not immediately become a part of character (*statim moribus aggregatur*), unless by being done steadily it passes into usage. Usage includes both virtues and vices (*virtutes et vitia aeque complectitur*), although the vices are not generally reckoned as character, to which the vices are usually set in opposition. From the latter fact it is plain that only the virtues are included under the name of morals (*solas virtutes censeri nomine morum*), or character, although sometimes we speak of "good" and "bad" morals to distinguish the vices and virtues (*cum bonos tamen, aut malos dicimus mores, vitia distinguimus et virtutes*)."[1]

For John, it is obvious that "only the virtues are included under the name of morals" opposed by the vices. This dichotomy between virtues and vices – good and bad – serves not only John of Salisbury to define character or morals (*mores*). Over a period of close to one thousand years (from Late Antiquity through to the Reformation and beyond), philosophers, theologians, and legal experts from all over Europe have used *virtus* in that way. Moreover, throughout the Christian Middle Ages there is no public activity serving the *bonum commune* that is not measured by a relatively strict set of morals or virtues. And even today, the vernacular expressions derived from that term (such as *Tugend*, *virtue* or *vertu*) are employed similarly to describe the modes and limits of normalised human action. But there is more to *virtus* than what is implied by its use as a means to distinguish between good and bad actions as shown

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1 *Policraticus*, V 4; Translation quoted from DICKINSON, John, *The Statesman's Book of John of Salisbury*, New York 1963.

in the quotation above. For St. Augustine, for example, it serves as a criterion for social affiliation. Defined as the "due order of love" (*ordo amoris*), *virtus* is what enables us to live a good life (*qua vivitur bene*) associating him who lives accordingly to the *City of God* opposed to the earthly city.[2]

In both cases, the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury and St. Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, *virtus* is the key term to the understanding of their moral thought and the center of their language of morals. It is mainly used to standardize human action. Additionally, as for St. Augustine, it is used to describe the perimeters of society, and therefore the moral limitations of the political sphere. Thereby, at this point, at least two concepts of *virtus* can be named, which can be traced in both texts and are identified by closely looking at the way *virtus* is used within the argumentation of the medieval authors: (1) virtus as a strict set of rules for human action, which, (2) if one lives according to it, determines social affiliation. Thus the analysis concentrates on *virtus* and its employment, firstly within medieval treatises on political thought; thereby following the thesis, that the meaning of a certain term and the concept behind it arises from its particular use and its history. In addition, other terms surrounding *virtus* are believed to contribute to its meaning and will be analysed – such as the frequent combination of *virtus* and *civitas* in St. Augustine's *City of God*, which indicates the political meaning of *virtus* in terms of its use as a criterion of social in- or exclusion. Writing such a History of Word Use for *virtus*, concentrating on its political use, includes, next to WHAT is said, also HOW it is said. This aims at the analysis of the syntactical relations of a term, which allows to draw conclusions concerning certain speech patterns, their contribution to the limits of speech, their historical place and their social and cultural background. Is *virtus* the subject or the object of a clause, thus acting or acted with or even upon? Is there a specific set of words used with *virtus*? Does it differ from context to context or maybe from genre to genre? Does it change in time?

Going back to St. Augustine and John of Salisbury and their uses of *virtus*, there are a few differences to be pointed out. Writing around 400 A.D., Augustine had to face several impeachments from his pagan environment. *De civitate Dei* is an apologetic text wherein early Christian thought tries to prevail against Roman and Greek philosophy by including it into the new concepts. Therefore one of the dominating *virtus*-concepts in the City of God encloses the philosophical idea of *arete* in the formula of good life (*bene vivere*). Moreover, Augustine's dualistic conception of society as *civitates* is based on the example of the city of Rome and its – for him recent – defeat. These concepts are somewhat wider than those of John of Salisbury, who can look back on several centuries of successful Christian ideas. He does not need to explain or define the eschatological aim of a good life on earth, nor the fact that virtus is not only to be qualified as human action, but also indicates the divine influence on men. Nevertheless, John's argumentation includes again philosophical thoughts. This time re-discovering

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2   cf. St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XV 22

Aristotelian ideas and implementing them into Christian doctrine rather than defending the latter against pagan influence.

Anyhow, both authors seem to understand politics and morals as a network of reciprocal relations, aiming at describing the ideal society. At least that is, what their language suggests. John, as well as St. Augustine, uses a lot of examples to illustrate his arguments, thereby naming political leaders and their titles, but wherever he describes ideal political leadership he employs a rather theoretical language. His use of the term *princeps*, understood as a more general term for political leaders, has had influence on other writers of his time. Otto of Freising, for example, who at one time had the same teacher as John – Peter Abelard, seems to employ the same use of *princeps* as a term for the ideal political leader in his chronicle of the deeds of the kings of the Francs. This shows not only the continuousness within medieval thought, but demonstrates also the communicative ties between certain authors, which leads to another aspect of the History of Word Use. The analysis of the language of morals in the *Policraticus* and *De civitate Dei* illuminates commonalities and differences within the concepts of *virtus* of these authors – the possible consistency of ideas over time (in this case over 700 years). The example of Otto of Freising, on the other hand, can be used to show, how, beyond a history of ideas, the examination of speech can mark the limits of a moral discourse across the boundaries of different text genres. Therefore the text corpus for the analysis will include not only the case studies mentioned above, but also texts beyond those treatises on political theory, such as, for example, chronicles, sermons and legal treatises, thereby trying to find out what can be said within the limits of the discourse and what cannot.

Overall, writing a History of Word Use for *virtus* aims at letting medieval thought speak to us again by concentrating on its employment of language; thereby tracing the historical roots of our understanding of morals and, moreover, re-describing the moral limitations of the political sphere in the Middle Ages.