

*In Praise of Meekness.*

*Essays on Ethics and Politics.*

Norberto Bobbio.

Translated by Teresa Chataway

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Sadly, these essays by the 90-year-old *mano maestra* of Italian political philosophy may prove to be among his last. Sadder still is the way in which his careless English copy editor has let him down. Bobbio is normally a master of expressive prose in the Italian original; this translation is at times weighed down by dreary passages, moments of awkwardness, and grammatical errors. The overall effect is to touch readers with the hand of melancholia. Bobbio himself reinforces that feeling with some characteristic confessions.

We are reminded that he is a chronic self-doubter, that he finds writing a trying experience, and that he considers himself one of those human beings who is 'never happy'. In these collected essays, which hang together poorly, his preoccupation with faith, meekness and other 'pre-political' virtues compounds the pensive sadness. Yet to conclude from all this that the book is a sorry testament to Bobbio's frailty in old age and his gradual withdrawal from politics would be a mistake.

Patient readers will find *In Praise of Meekness* full of important insights into the ethics appropriate to a civil society, in which non-violent power-sharing among different groups and institutions is routinely practised, under the

protection of a democratically elected and publicly accountable government. Heeding Croce's warning that those who engage in politics should learn to respect the power of the non-political, Bobbio insists that democracies require more than respect for the law, freedom of communication and periodic elections in order to function well; they also need democratically virtuous citizens. Virtues may be seen as the substructure of civil society. The point is put persuasively, even if Bobbio's clear-headed reflections on virtue have an old-fashioned feel about them. He is, for instance, oddly silent about virtues that are today among the most controversial in established democracies like Italy, Britain and America. Masculinity and femininity, risk-taking and responsibility, frugality and avarice go unrated. Bobbio instead concentrates on such perennial matters as toleration, evil, secrecy, scepticism, and religious morality. His reasoning strains throughout to be undogmatic, even about reason itself ('there is no worse prejudice than that of believing we have no prejudices', he says at one point, when querying self-righteous anti-racism).

Hence Bobbio's praise of meekness (*mitezza*) as a cardinal virtue. Meekness is a friend of democracy, he says. Although often symbolised by the lamb, it should not be confused with docility or submissiveness. Meekness is normally associated with 'private, insignificant, or inconspicuous individuals . . . the subjects who will never become rulers, who die without leaving any other trace of their presence on this earth than a cross in a cemetery'. Bobbio concedes that meekness is indeed the opposite of haughty hunger for power over others, and it is for that reason usually considered a weak virtue. But it is not the virtue of the weak. Meekness emboldens; it gives individuals inner strength to act upon the world. It dislikes violence and it shuns showy arrogance and all forms of aggressiveness. Meekness radiates in the presence of others, calmly, and cheerfully enabling them to 'be themselves'. Meekness implies tolerance, and, since it shuns abusive power, it anticipates a better world. The meek live off the simple conviction that the world to which they aspire is better than the world in which they are forced to dwell. Bobbio's praise of meekness is a brave illustration of meekness in action. It rightly points to the political need to think more profoundly about the 'deep' social preconditions of civil society and political democracy, and to do so with our eyes trained upon writers as

different as Erasmus and Machiavelli, Locke and Hume. Those who think that talk of virtues is old-fashioned, or as moralising as a killjoy neo-conservative rounding on those who like sex and other freedoms, will think twice after reading this book. Its reflections upon virtue are important, even if only because they force us to consider other virtues – the humble dislike of hubris, for instance – that arguably lie much closer to the heart of democratic theory and politics.

Less convincing is Bobbio's particular attachment to meekness. The very word itself (in English and other European languages) has come to have unfortunate connotations of deference. Bobbio emphasises the different Latin roots of meek (*mites*) and mild (*mansueti*), but this tack seems weak, especially since countless sermons delivered to quiet flocks by Christian priests seem through time to have convinced us that meekness is mildness, the patient anticipation of miracles.

Bobbio could, of course, reply that his own defence of meekness calls into question its Christian misuse, in which case a more telling objection looms. The key problem of *In Praise of Meekness* is not only that it tells us nothing about how politically to cultivate meekness (Bobbio notes in passing that meekness is 'a gift', without telling us from where or by whom it is given). It is that that strategic question is precluded outright, essentially because Bobbio's whole case rests upon the distinction between meekness and politics. Meekness is for Bobbio a cardinal virtue of civil society exactly because politics – the potentially violent struggles for power over others through state structures – is its opposite. But since meekness is 'the most apolitical of virtues', politics cannot be subjected directly to its codes. Meekness is always at the mercy of politics. Bobbio notes that the Hobbesian rule *homo homini lupus est* (man is a wolf to men) must be the starting point for understanding modern politics and international relations. If that is so, then the odd conclusion of these essays is that meekness, when confronted with the wolf of politics, can only be the quiet bleating of sheep.

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