

Overture In Praise of *La Mitezza**

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Among the ancients, ethics was resolved largely through the treatment of virtues. Suffice it to recall Aristotle's *Etica Nicomachea*, which was for many centuries a prescribed text.¹ In our times such a treatment has almost disappeared. Today moral philosophers discuss values and choices, on both analytical and propositional levels, and their major or minor rationality, as well as discussing rules or norms and consequently rights and duties. One of the last significant writings devoted to the classic subject of virtue was the second part of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* (*Die Metaphysik der Sitten*), titled *The Theory of Virtue* (*Die Tugendlehre*), the first part of which discusses the *Theory of Law* (*Die Rechtslehre*). However, Kant's ethics is especially one of duty, and more specifically of inward as distinguished from outward duty, with which the theory of law is concerned. In the former, virtue is defined as the necessary willpower to accomplish one's duty, as the moral strength required by man to fight those defects which prevent or become an obstacle to the accomplishment of duty. Kant's theory of virtue is an integral part of the ethics of duty and, as explicitly and repeatedly declared, has nothing to do with Aristotelian ethics.

During the centuries when European philosophy was prominent, the traditional subject of virtues and, correspondingly of defects or vices, became the subject of treatises on the passions (*de affectibus*). One may think of Descartes's *Les Passions de l'âme*, of Spinoza's *Ethica*, the section titled *De origine et natura affectuum*, or Hobbes's introductory chapters to his political writings, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic* and *Leviathan*. Instead the theory

* "Meekness"

of ethics found its place in the doctrine of natural law, which it retained for some centuries, where the perspective of the law or of norms (moral, legal, ethical) prevailed in the analysis of the elements of morals, hence the resolution of ethics in the theory of duties and rights respectively. In the classic and more well-known treatise, Pufendorf's *De iure nature et gentium* in the chapter on human will, there is hardly any space devoted to the subject of virtues in the traditional sense.

The analysis of virtues continued to have its natural expression in the writings of moralists, of which no traces remain today. In fact, in an affluent society the moralist is generally regarded a killjoy, someone who will not go along, who can not enjoy life. A moralist has become synonymous with a moaner, with an unheeded and quite ridiculous pedagogue, with someone who preaches to the wind, or criticizes customs – fortunately equally boring and innocuous. If one wishes to silence a protesting citizen, one still capable of becoming indignant, simply call him a moralist, and he is done for. In recent years there have been many occasions to observe that whomever criticizes the general state of corruption, the abuse of power, both economic and political, is forced on the defensive and saying: "I am not doing this as a moralist." In other words, he did not want to have anything to do with that kind, which was generally held in such low esteem.

Alisdair MacIntyre's provocative work *After Virtue – A Study in Moral Theory* was unknown to me at the time.² It was translated into Italian in 1988 by Feltrinelli, and it is now well known here. This work is an attempt to reinstate the subject of virtue (which was unjustly and detrimentally abandoned) to its honorable place, and submit it to today's reader in order that it may continue its interrupted journey, starting from Aristotle. MacIntyre's thought proceeds through a continuous polemic, which in my view does not always appear genuine or very original, against emotionalism, the separation between facts and values, against individualism which he terms "bureaucratic," and against all the ills of the modern world for which he considers the Enlightenment principally responsible, through the prevailing of ethical rationalism, with its inevitable convergence into nihilism. This is certainly not the place to dwell on a critical analysis of this book, which interests

me here as a confirmation of the neglect into which the theory of virtue had lapsed. In fact the author presents his work as a work against the current, as a return to tradition, as a challenge to "modernity." One of his preferred targets is the ethics of norms. The ethics of virtue is contrasted to the ethics of norms, which has become prevalent in modern and contemporary ethics, and which constitute the ethics of rights and duties.

I have always hesitated to accept such drastic contrasts, because they favor unilateral attitudes with respect to intangible subjects, such as those pertaining to philosophy, where the truth is never peremptorily, definitively and indisputably on either side, and also with respect to a possible interpretation of history, this huge container filled randomly with a thousand things, to the extent that it is almost always dangerous and inconclusive to isolate one among the many.

That traditional ethics was prevalently an ethics of virtues in contrast to an ethics of norms (or rather, of laws) is quite a debatable judgment. One would need to forget the *Nomoi* (*The Laws*), one of Plato's great works. In Aristotle's *Etica Nicomachea* itself, an aspect of the virtue of justice consists in the custom of obeying laws. The subjects of virtue and the law are continuously interwoven, even in the ethics of the Ancients. At the roots of our moral tradition and as the foundation of our civic education, there are both the demonstrative nature of virtues as types or models of good actions, and the preaching of the Ten Commandments, in which good actions are not simply pointed out but prescribed. The fact that the Ten Commandments generally forbid immoral rather than command virtuous actions is unimportant. The commandment "Honor your parents" is a call to the virtue of respect.

Instead of stirring artificial conflicts between the two ways of considering morals, that is, between the ethics of virtues and the ethics of duties, it is more useful and sensible to recognize that these two types of morals represent two different but not opposed points of view from which one can judge what is good and what is bad in the behavior of men considered for themselves, and in their mutual relations. Their clear contrast, as if one set of ethics can exclude the other, depends solely on the incorrect perspective of the observer. Both have good action as their object, understood as

an action motivated by the search for the fulfillment of Good, which is the goal. With the difference that while the former describes, indicates and proposes the action as an example; the latter prescribes it as a kind of behavior to be adhered to, or as a duty. The various short treatises on virtues and those *de officiis* complement each other, both in the theoretical consideration of morals as well as in moral teaching, in the same way as the catalogue of cardinal virtues and that of charitable deeds, proposed, as we remember well, in the form of precepts, supplement rather than contrast each other in the teaching of morals in school, of which we are from infancy the recipients. The lives of eminent figures, heroes and saints, who promote good deeds by pointing to examples of the virtuous, emerge from the tradition of the ethics of virtue; whereas the kind of catechism which induces one to do good by proposing models of good action emerges from the ethics of norms. Their efficacy is cumulatively not alternatively different. Instead of contrasting virtues with norms, it would be wiser to analyze the relation between them, the different, rather than opposed, practical needs out of which they emerge and which they obey.

Similarly and concurrently with the revival of the subject of virtues, which seemed to have disappeared from philosophical debate, the subject of passions was again taken up, but with a different kind of intellectual vigor, breadth of historical erudition and originality in outcomes, even if with the same intent of anti-rationalist polemic, through Remo Bodei's monumental work *Geometria delle passioni*.³ Compared with the re-evaluation of virtues, Bodei's work resembles the opposite side of the coin. While the ethics of virtue taught moderation, and therefore discipline of passions ("*pleonexia*, the insatiable longing for possessions, represented the moral sin of classical ethics"),⁴ Bodei questions whether one should perhaps revise the "passion-reason" antithesis, and reinstate passions in their deserving place within the reconstruction and understanding of history, in the same way as "desires," that is, those "passions arising from waiting for both goods and satisfactions anticipated in the future,"⁵ occupy an increasingly wider space in contemporary society. Among other things, Bodei draws our attention to the distinction, dear to Hume, between on the one hand, calm or calculated passions, and on the other, aroused

or burning passions. As will become evident at the moment of defining *mitezza*, I introduce a symmetrical distinction, between strong and weak virtues.

I would also like to add that a further reason – perhaps more than a reason, I should say an opportunity – for my decision to revive this discussion is due to the fact that I was recently forced to reflect on the uncommon use of the category of *mitezza* applied to the “law,” the use of which, even as a long-time reader of juridical texts, I had not yet encountered. I am referring to Gustavo Zagrebelsky’s *Il diritto mite*⁶ which was impossible to review prior to asking: “Why *mite*?”

Those who invited me to express myself knew that I would have no hesitation in choosing “my” virtue: I was only uncertain about which of the two terms to use: *mitezza* (“meekness”) or “mildness.” Ultimately I chose *mitezza* for two reasons. In the verse of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 4), which in Italian reads “Beati i mansueti perchè questi possiederanno la terra,” “Blessed are the mild for they shall inherit the earth,” the Latin text of the *Vulgata* uses *mites* and not “mild.” The reason why this translation was adopted is unknown to me: it is one of the many issues which I leave in suspense and which are cramming my unpretentious discussion. The second reason is that “mild,” at least originally, is said to refer to animals rather than to persons, even if figuratively it is also said of persons. (But the same applies to *mite*: meek as a lamb. However, an animal is “mild” because it has been domesticated, whereas the lamb is by nature the symbol of *mitezza*). The decisive argument derives from these respective verbs: *ammansare*, *ammansire*, or *mansuefare*, to domesticate, tame or render docile, which refer nearly exclusively to animals: it is said that we “tame a tiger” but only jokingly would we say that we “tame a mother-in-law.” In Dante’s work it is stated that Orpheus made the wild beasts docile. “To mitigate” however, which is derived from *mite*, refers almost exclusively to human acts, attitudes, actions and passions: in other words, to mitigate is to attenuate the rigor of a law, the severity of a sentence, to appease the physical or moral pain, the anger, the rage, the disdain, the resentment, the zeal of passion. “With time, the hatred between the two nations was mitigated,” one might read in a dictionary, while it would be silly to say that it “became docile.”

With regard to the two abstract nouns that designate the respective virtues of "mildness" and of *mitezza*, I would say (but it is more an impression than a conviction, as I am not undertaking a rigorous discussion) that *mitezza* goes deeper, while "mildness" remains closer to the surface. Or rather *mitezza* is active while "mildness" is passive. Or further, "mildness" is more a personal virtue, *mitezza* more a social virtue. Social exactly in the sense in which Aristotle distinguished personal virtues, such as courage and moderation, from justice, the social virtue *par excellence*, which is a positive inclination towards others (while courage and moderation are only good tendencies in respect of oneself). What I mean is that "mildness" is an inward disposition of the individual, which can be appreciated as a virtue independent of the relation with others. A mild person is calm and peaceful, someone who is not offended by minor issues, who lives and allows others to live their life, and who does not overreact to gratuitous malice, not because of weakness but out of a conscious acceptance of everyday ills. Instead *mitezza* is an inward propensity that shines through only in the presence of the other: a *mite* person is someone whom the other person needs in order to overcome the evil within himself.

In the writings of Carlo Mazzantini, a Turinese philosopher of the generation preceding mine and no longer prominent but very dear to me for his deep philosophical vocation, despite the wide gap in our different understanding of the task of philosophers – I discovered a eulogy and a definition of *mitezza* which I found striking. He states that *mitezza* is the only supreme "power" (note the word "power" used to designate a virtue which makes one think of the opposite, that is, powerlessness, although not resigned powerlessness) which consists "in letting the other be himself." Further adding that "A violent person has no power, because he takes away the power of giving to those against whom he uses violence. Power rests instead with whom possesses the will not to yield to violence but to *mitezza*." Therefore: "to let the other be himself" is a social virtue in the true and original meaning of the word.

The following linguistic observation had not occurred to me when selecting the topic. It seems that *mite* and *mitezza* are words that only Italian has inherited from Latin. Although in French there is *mansuétude*. The French use *doux* (and *douceur*) in nearly

all instances in which we use *mite*, for example: *un caractère doux*, *un hiver doux*. When Montesquieu contrasts the Japanese and their cruel temperament with the Indian people who are of a *doux* (in Italian translated as *mite*) nature, the word appears more precise and less general to us. If we Italians said *dolce* or “sweet” without committing a crime of linguistic lese-majesty, we would still have the feeling of being guilty of a Gallicism, something not altogether familiar, as in the chapter *La dolcezza delle pene* in Beccaria’s famous *Dei delitti e delle pene*, which we readily translate by *mitezza*. Beyond these briefly sketched linguistic observations, but sufficient to provide some indication as to the issue before us, I think the fundamental topic to be developed is that of the location of the virtue of *mitezza* within the phenomenology of virtues.

Beyond the classical distinction between personal and social virtues, there are others which I have not taken into consideration. Among these there is a further classical distinction between ethical and dianoethic virtues (*mitezza* is certainly an ethical virtue), and that introduced through Christian ethics between theological and cardinal virtues (*mitezza* is certainly a cardinal virtue). Instead it seems opportune to introduce a distinction, which I am not aware of as having already been made, between strong and weak virtues. Of course in this context “strong” and “weak” do not at all mean that they have a positive and negative connotation respectively. The distinction is analytical not axiological. Instead of a definition, I would rather use examples to convey to you what I mean by “strong virtues” and “weak virtues.” On the one hand, there are virtues such as courage, steadfastness, prowess, daring, fearlessness, farsightedness, generosity, liberality, clemency, which are typical of those who are powerful (we could also call them “regal” or “courtly virtues,” and perhaps even “aristocratic,” no malice intended); that is, of those who have the task of governing, directing, commanding, leading and who have the responsibility of establishing and maintaining states, to the extent that they are likely to manifest themselves above all in political life, and (according to contrasting points of view) in that sublimation or perversion of politics that is war.

On the other hand, there are virtues such as humility, modesty, moderation, bashfulness, demureness, chastity, continence, sobri-

ety, temperance, decency, innocence, naivety, guileless, simplicity, and among these mildness, gentleness and *mitezza*, which concern the private, the insignificant, the inconspicuous person, someone located at the lower end of the social hierarchy, who does not have any power over anyone and sometimes not even over himself. The person who goes unnoticed and does not leave any trace in the archives, where only the experiences of memorable figures and facts are stored. I term these virtues “weak” not because I consider them inferior or less useful or noble, and therefore to be appreciated less, but because they characterize that other part of society where the humble, the hurt and the poor are located. They are those subjects who will never be rulers, those who die without leaving any trace of their passage upon this earth other than a cross in a cemetery with a name and date, those who do not concern historians because they do not make History, but represent a different history, with a small ‘h’, the submerged history, or rather non-history (although over the last few years there has been some discussion of a micro-history contrasted to macro-history, and it could happen that perhaps in micro-history there may be also a place for them). I am reminded of Hegel’s wonderful pages written about those men of universal history, as he terms them, the founders of states, the “heroes”: they represent those who can claim as lawful what to the common man is not, even the use of violence. There is no place for the *miti* among them. Woe betide the *miti*, for they will not inherit the earth. I think of some of the most common epitaphs bestowed by fame upon the powerful: magnanimous, great, victorious, bold, reckless, as well as terrible and blood thirsty. But in this gallery of the powerful have you ever seen a *mite* ? Someone has suggested to me Ludwig the Affable. However this title does not allow for much glory.

To make these notes more complete it would be interesting to peruse some of the texts within the literary genre of the *Specula Principis*, in order to compile an exhaustive list of those virtues regarded as the qualities and prerogatives of a good ruler. I am thinking in particular of *L’Educazione del principe cristiano* by Erasmus (the anti-Machiavelli, the other side of the “demonic face of power”). The following are listed as the supreme virtues of the ideal prince: clemency, gentleness, equity, civility, benevolence,

and also prudence, integrity, sobriety, temperance, vigilance, charity and honesty. This is extraordinary: nearly all of these virtues are what I termed “weak.” The Christian prince is the opposite of Machiavelli’s prince or Hegel’s hero (a great admirer of Machiavelli). And yet I could not find *mitezza*, other than with reference to those punishments which must be *miti* (which does not include the death penalty on the basis of the old but still new argument that the infected limb must be removed to prevent the healthy part from becoming contaminated). Because each virtue can be more successfully defined if its opposite vice is kept in mind, the opposite of *mitezza*, in the sense that one says of a penalty that it is *mite* or “mild,” is severity or rigor; *mitezza* can thus also be rendered to mean “leniency.” But it is certainly not this meaning that I have adopted in the present justification.

Other opposites of *mitezza*, as I understand it, are arrogance, haughtiness, despotism⁷, which according to different interpretations can be either virtues or vices of politicians. *Mitezza* is not a political virtue, rather it is the most impolitic of virtues. In the prevalent accepted meaning of politics, the Machiavellian or, to be up-to-date, the Schmittian, *mitezza* is exactly the other side of politics. It is in fact for this reason (it may be a professional distortion) that it is of special interest to me. One cannot cultivate political philosophy without trying to understand what is beyond politics – in other words without being deeply involved in the nonpolitical sphere – without establishing the limits between the political and nonpolitical. Politics is not everything. The idea that everything is politics is simply monstrous. I can say that I discovered *mitezza* in this journey of exploration beyond politics. However the *miti* have no part in the political, or even democratic, struggle, and here I mean the struggle for power that does not make recourse to violence. As is well-known, the two animals which symbolize the politician are the lion and the fox (see chapter 18 of *The Prince*). The *mite* lamb is not a political animal: if anything, it is the predestined victim whose sacrifice is used by the powerful to appease the demons of history. A maxim of popular wisdom states that “he who makes himself a sheep shall be eaten by the wolf.” Because the wolf is also a political animal: Hobbes’s *homo homini lupus* in the state of nature is the starting

point for politics, the *princeps principi lupus* in international relations is its continuation.

Before anything else, *mitezza*, "meekness", is the opposite of arrogance, understood as the exaggerated view of one's merits, that justifies the abuse of power. The *mite* person does not hold a high opinion of himself, not because of a lack of self-esteem, but because he is more inclined to think of the impoverishment rather than the loftiness of man, and because he is a man like all others. Even more so, *mitezza* is the opposite of haughtiness, which is ostentatious arrogance. The *mite* person does not show off, not even his *mitezza*. In other words, the ostentation, or display in a gaudy or insolent way, of one's claimed virtues is in and of itself a vice. Thus an ostentatious virtue is transformed into its opposite. Whomever feigns charity lacks charity. And, only someone who is stupid would feign intelligence. And quite rightly *mitezza* is the opposite to despotism. This is because compared to haughtiness despotism is even worse. Despotism is not only a feigned, but an effectively exercised abuse of power. The haughty person shows off his power, the power to subdue others in whatever form, as for instance one would swat a fly, or squash a worm. The despotic person exercises power through all kinds of abuse and misuse, acts of arbitrary and when necessary ruthless domination. Instead, the *mite* person "lets the other be himself," even if this person is arrogant, haughty or despotic. He does not become involved in relations with others with the intention of competing, vexing and ultimately winning. He is not interested in any contest, competition or rivalry, and hence also in victory. In fact, in life's struggle he is the perpetual loser. The image he holds of the world and history, that is, the only world and history he would want to live in, is of a kind where there are neither winners nor losers, and this is because there are no contests for primacy, neither are there struggles for power, nor competitions for wealth. In short, what is missing are the very conditions which allow the separation of men into winners and losers.

Having said all of this, I would not like anyone to confuse *mitezza* with submissiveness. In wanting to delimit and define a concept, both the methods of opposition (for example, peace is the opposite to war), and of analogy (peace is analogous to a truce but is something different from a truce) may be used. I employ the

same expedient to arrive at the identification of *mitezza* as a virtue. After having defined it through a contrast, I will now endeavor to refine its definition by analogy to those virtues which are considered akin or similar (but different) to it.

A submissive person is someone who gives up the struggle, owing to weakness, fear or resignation. Not the "meek" person: he refuses the destructive battle of life out of a sense of annoyance or uselessness of its intended goals, of profound disgust in those things that spark greed in most people, of a lack of this passion that, according to Hobbes, was one of the reasons for "the war of all against all," that is, conceit or boastfulness which push men to want to stand out. And finally, it may be due to an overall absence of this stubbornness or obstinacy that perpetuates quarrels even over trifling matters, through a succession of reciprocal spites and reprisals, or the absence of a feuding or vindictive spirit which in the long run inevitably leads either to the death of both, or to one prevailing over the other. This is being neither submissive nor yielding, because yielding is the inclination of someone who has accepted the logic of the contest, the rules of a game where ultimately there is a winner and a loser (according to game theory, it is a zero sum game). The *mite* does not harbor a grudge, he is not vindictive, nor does he hold resentment towards anyone. He does not persist in brooding over past offenses, rekindle hatreds or reopen old wounds. To be at peace with himself, he must first be at peace with others. He is never the one who starts the fire, and when started by others he does not allow himself to be burnt, even when he is unable to extinguish it. He crosses the fire without being harmed, and weathers inward storms without becoming angry, without overstepping his limits, maintaining his composure and his willingness.

The *mite* is a calm person, but, I repeat, he is not submissive, nor is he affable, because affability contains a certain rudeness or coarseness in judging others. The affable person is credulous, or perhaps someone who is not sufficiently alert to suspect the possible malice of others. I have no doubt that *mitezza* is a virtue. Although I doubt that affability is, because an affable person has an asymmetrical relationship with others (for this reason, provided that it is such, it is a passive virtue).

Nor is *mitezza* to be confused with humility (humility elevated as a virtue by Christianity). Spinoza defines humility as *tristitia orta ex eo quod homo suam impotentiam sive imbecillitatem contemplantur*, "the sadness arising from the fact that man contemplates his impotence or weakness," and this sadness is in turn defined as *transitio a maiore ad minorem perfectionem*, "the passage of man from a higher to a lower perfection." The difference between *mitezza* and humility resides, in my view, in that "sadness." *Mitezza* is not a form of "sadness," because it is rather its opposite form, *laetitia*, understood exactly as the passage from a lower to a higher perfection. The *mite* is a cheerful person because he is inwardly convinced that his is a better world, and he prefigures it in his everyday life by effectively exercising the virtue of *mitezza*, even if he knows that it does not exist here and now, and that perhaps it will never exist. Furthermore, the opposite of humility is excessive self-satisfaction, simply put, pride. And as already stated, the opposite of *mitezza* is the abuse of power, in the literal sense of the word, oppression. The *mite* can be depicted as the precursor to a better world; whereas the humble person is only a witness of the present world, very noble but without hope.

Neither can *mitezza* be mistaken for modesty. Modesty is characterized by a not always honest, but often even hypocritical, underestimation of oneself. *Mitezza*, "meekness," is neither an underestimation nor overestimation of oneself, because it is not a disposition towards oneself, but as already stated, it is always an attitude with respect to others, and is only justified by the way of "being towards the other." This does not mean that the *mite* person cannot also be humble and modest. But the three aspects do not coincide. We are humble and modest for ourselves, whereas we are *mite* towards others.

As a way of being towards others, *mitezza* borders the region of tolerance and respect for the ideas and lifestyle of others. Yet, the *mite* person is not just tolerant and respectful. Because tolerance is reciprocal: in order for tolerance to exist, there must be at least two persons. A condition of tolerance exists when one tolerates the other. If I tolerate you but you do not tolerate me, there is no state of tolerance, but on the contrary, there is domination. It is not unlike that for respect. According to Kant: "Every man has the

right to expect the respect of his own kind, and he himself is reciprocally obliged to respect others." The *mite* does not ask for, nor expect any reciprocity: *mitezza* is a disposition towards others that does not need to be reciprocated in order to be fully actualized. As it is also with benignity, benevolence, generosity, beneficence, which are both social as well as unilateral virtues (this should not appear as a contradiction: they are unilateral in the sense that the direction of one towards the other does not correspond to a similar direction, be that the same or contrasting, of the latter towards the former, that is "I will tolerate you if you tolerate me." But instead: "I safeguard and value my *mitezza*, or generosity, or benevolence, with regard to you, independent of the fact that you may also be *mite*, or generous, or benevolent towards me." Tolerance proceeds from an agreement and endures as long as the agreement lasts; while *mitezza* is a donation and has no pre-established limits.

To complete the picture one must bear in mind that beside the virtues which are akin, there are also those which are complementary, that is, virtues which coexist and thus reinforce each other. In connection with *mitezza*, two come to mind: simplicity and charity (or compassion). But with this warning remark that simplicity is perhaps the necessary precondition for *mitezza*, and *mitezza* is a possible precondition for compassion. In other words, in order to be *mite* one must be simple, and only the *mite* can be favorably disposed towards compassion. By "simplicity" I mean to shun useless abstruseness intellectually, and ambiguous positions practically. If you wish, you can think of it as being close to lucidity, or clarity or rejection of simulation. It seems to me that understood in this way, simplicity is a precondition or rather a predisposition towards *mitezza*. A complicated person is seldom disposed towards *mitezza*: he sees intrigues, plots and ambushes everywhere, and thus he is as diffident of others as he is insecure of himself.

With regard to the relationship between *mitezza* and compassion, I would consider it not as a necessary but only as a possible one, in the sense that *mitezza* can (not must) be a predisposition towards mercy. But as Aldo Capitini would have said,⁸ mercy is an "addition." It is so obviously an addition that among all living beings only man experiences the virtue of mercy. Mercy is a feature of his preeminence, his dignity, his uniqueness. How many

virtues are there symbolized by an animal! Among the many, some of those evoked here: simple as a dove, *mite* (here, "mild") as a lamb; the noble steed, the gentle gazelle, the courageous and generous lion and the faithful dog. Have you ever tried to imagine mercy in an animal? You can try, but it may be difficult. Vico stated that the civilized world emerged from men's sense of shame, when men terrified by Jupiter's thunder bolt abandoned the fair Venus and took their women into the caves. Even if we accept that the civilized world emerged from a sense of shame, only mercy distinguishes the human world from the animal world, that is from the non-human realm of nature. Sometimes it can happen that "compassion dies" (as stated in a partisan song familiar to those of my generation) even in the human world. In the animal world compassion cannot die because there it is unknown.

I feel obliged to conclude these swift observations by explaining the reasons for which, faced with a rather extensive catalogue of virtues, I specifically chose *mitezza*.

You probably may have thought that I chose *mitezza* because I regard it as particularly congenial to me. I must confess candidly that this is not the case. I would like to have the nature of a *mite* person, but it is not so. I go into a fury too often (I say "fury" and not "heroic fury")⁹ to regard myself as such. I love *miti* persons, that is true, because they are the ones who make this "flower bed" more inhabitable, to the extent of making me think that the ideal city may not be that imagined and described in every detail by utopians, where justice is so rigid and severe as to be unbearable, but one where kindly customs have become universal practice (like the China idealized by eighteenth century writers). From the way I have represented it, it is probable that *mitezza* has appeared as a feminine virtue. I have no difficulty in admitting it. I am aware that by saying that *mitezza* has always seemed desirable to me precisely because of its femininity, I am disappointing all of those women in revolt against the age old male domination. I think that it is destined to triumph the day that the city of women is realized (not that of Fellini). For this reason, I have never encountered anything more detestable than the cry of the most adamant feminists: "Tremble and shiver, the witches are hither." I can quite understand the polemic meaning of such an expression, but it is nevertheless dreadful.

Therefore, *mitezza* is not a biographic choice. In and of itself it is a metaphysical choice (in the sense that it is grounded in a conception of the world that I could not justify otherwise). However from the point of view of the circumstances which prompted it, it is an historical choice. In other words, it may be regarded as a reaction to the violent society in which we are forced to live. Not that I am so naive or lack the worldly experience to believe that human history has always been an idyll: it was once defined by Hegel as “a huge slaughterhouse.” However, today there are the “megatons,” which represent the ultimate development for “the fate of the earth” (to quote Jonathan Shell’s book title). Today, as the experts inform us, with all the weapons accumulated in the arsenals of the great powers, it is possible to destroy the earth many times over. That this is possible does not necessarily mean that it must occur. Even if a nuclear war should be unleashed, the experts still say that the earth would not be totally destroyed. But just consider for a moment what a difficult task it would be to start all over again! What terrifies me are these dreaded megatons combined with this will for power that has not diminished: in this century, the century of two World Wars and forty years of latent war between superpowers, it has increased and sublimated. However, it is not only about the will for power of the great entities. There is also the will for power of the smaller ones, that of the lone striker, the small terrorist group, the one who throws a bomb into a crowd where the greatest possible number of innocent people is likely to die – in a bank, a crowded train, a waiting room, a train station. It is the will for power of whomever identifies with this self justification: “I, a humble, insignificant and obscure person, kill someone important, a protagonist of our time, and because of that I am more powerful than he; or I kill with a single blow many insignificant and obscure people like myself, but who are absolutely innocent. In other words, to kill a guilty party is an act of justice, to kill an innocent victim is the extreme manifestation of the will for power.”

I trust you have understood me: I identify the *mite* person with the nonviolent, and *mitezza* with the refusal to exercise violence against anyone. Hence, *mitezza* is a nonpolitical virtue. Or even, in a world bloodstained by the hatred of great (and small) powers, *mitezza*, “meekness,” is the antithesis of politics.

Notes

1. This article was originally presented on 8 March 1983 in Milan as part of a program of lectures organized by Ernesto Treccani and supported by the Fondazione Corrente. It has been revised and updated by the author. The original idea was to produce a "Short Dictionary of Virtues," to be examined by a number of prominent contemporaries. Having been invited to participate, the author took "meekness" (*la mitezza*) as his theme. This article was first published in English in: *ConVivio. Journal of Ideas in Italian Studies*, Vol. I, No. 1 (April 1995), pp. 21-38. An earlier Italian version appeared in December 1993 in: *Linea d'ombra* and later in a collection of Bobbio's essays, titled *Elogio della mitezza e altri scritti morali*, Milan, 1994.
2. A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame (Indiana), 1981.
3. R. Bodei, *Geometria delle passioni*, Milan, 1991.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
6. G. Zagrebelsky, *Il diritto mite*, Turin, 1992.
7. The notion of *prepotenza* derives largely from politics and refers to a "despotic, tyrannical" temperament or character.
8. Aldo Capitini was a professor of education and an anti-Fascist who was repeatedly imprisoned; an organizer of pacifist movements, he is one of the outstanding Italian theoreticians of non-violence.
9. Allusion to Giordano Bruno's famous work *Des fureurs héroïques* (bilingual ed. with annotations by P.-H. Michel), Paris, 1954.