List of Contents

Introduction

'Virtue alone is happiness below.'

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 1733-4.

'If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, during a revolution the mainspring of popular government is both virtue and terror; virtue, without which terror is baneful; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice; it is thus an emanation of virtue; it is less a principle in itself, than a consequence of the general principle of democracy, applied to the most pressing needs of the *patrie*.'

Maximilien Robespierre, speaking to the National Convention, 5th February 1794.

Virtue as happiness, virtue as terror: two more contrasting statements could scarcely be imagined than those made by the English poet and the French revolutionary. Yet the concept of virtue encompassed within itself both these ideas, and much more besides. It was at the very heart of eighteenth-century political, social and moral thought. It had a multiplicity of meanings, applications and resonances, some of which were interconnected, whilst others were distinct and appeared in sharp contrast to one another. Of the many meanings that virtue had, one in particular was to cast a long shadow. This was the idea that the political organisation and the social ordering of society should be based on virtue. It shaped the Revolution that ended the eighteenth century - and consequently continued to inform the world which that Revolution itself precipitated, still to a degree our own world.

Writers in the eighteenth century regularly asserted that virtue was

necessary in political life, by which they meant that anyone who engaged in politics ought to be motivated solely by the desire to promote the general or public good rather than by their own self-interest and personal gain. The idea that virtue was necessary in political life was an old one; it derived from the classical republican tradition and the political thought of the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome. But alongside this powerful and egalitarian concept grew another one in the eighteenth century which was also to be far reaching in its implications. This was the contention that the possession of virtue entitled people to participate in public life and eventually, by extension, to exercise political rights. By being 'virtuous citizens', that is, moral public-spirited beings, people's voices were legitimised, they became a moral force with a right to be heard, even before the Revolution of 1789 made them citizens with explicit political rights.

The debate on virtue involved fundamental questions such as what should be the aim of politics, and how it should be conducted; questions which are no nearer to acquiring definitive answers now than they were in the eighteenth century. The problem of whether either political leaders or ordinary citizens should be obliged to display public or private virtue raises problems and tensions between public duties and private aspirations which still haunt modern political life. Thus the ways in which people in the eighteenth century thought through these problems and conceived of a moral politics are still of considerable to us. It is the aim of this book to arrive at a better understanding of how people at that time began to use the notion of virtue in order to arrive at a new way of conceptualising politics. We need to consider not only political theory in the abstract, but also its dynamics and practical applications. 'Virtue' is a fundamental concept which offers us a key with which to explore such ideas and strategies.

The notion of a politics based on moral abstractions may seem to our eyes naive and possibly faintly ridiculous. It may even appear dangerous and

redolent of coercion. Today we are acutely aware of how manipulative politicians may seek to justify violence and oppression in the name of an imposing but empty rhetoric of 'the public good', 'the general will', or 'liberty and equality.' The very word 'virtue' has been long since been drained of almost all effective meaning, and now signifies little more than a vague notion of sentimental morality, or a quaint, almost comically-outdated, word for the chastity of women. It is only with an effort of historical understanding that we can, from our vantage point at the end of the twentieth century, comprehend what was meant in the eighteenth century by the idea of moral politics, the politics of virtue. Yet such an effort is indispensable if we are to reconstitute the meaning of politics at this key period in the development of modern political thought.

The history of concepts and of political culture in France has been virtually rewritten in recent years. The debate over the origins of the French Revolution is at the heart of much of this work: historians such as Keith Baker and Roger Chartier have returned with new energy to the problem set out by Daniel Mornet in the 1930s: was there a direct the relationship between the ideas of the Enlightenment and the outbreak of Revolution and, if so, how can it be characterised?[1] The social and cultural history of the Enlightenment is now as vital as the ideas themselves to any account of the nature of the Enlightenment. No longer are historians content to consider the Enlightenment as a set of ideas viewed in isolation from their readership: they are also engaged in assessing the effect of the growth in an audience for intellectual works, particularly amongst the bourgeoisie. The cultural expansion in eighteenth-century France -- with the ever-growing market for books, plays and artworks -- is now recognised as a compelling subject in its own right. Historians such as Robert Darnton have uncovered the publishing history of this period and have shown that the impact of the Enlightenment needs to be assessed as much through the study of its readership and of the

minor writers who operated at its fringes, as through the classic repertoire of its major thinkers.[2] Thanks to the pioneering work of Habermas, the eighteenth century is now seen as the crucial period in the formation of a bourgeois public sphere. This in turn has led to a radical rethinking of the implications of the expanding and self-conscious audience for cultural works.[3]

Gender is now seen as a major concern for historians of political culture. No current work on the politics of virtue could remain unaffected by the growing awareness of the part played by distinctions based on constructions of gender in shaping political rhetoric, particularly for this simultaneously most public and yet most private of terms. This is one area in which the concept of virtue in eighteenth-century France has been the subject of a significant reevalution in recent years -- by Outram and Blum, amongst others.[4] My fuller consideration of this issue is available in another place: unfortunately, the economics of modern publishing intervened to preclude it being given its due in the present work.[5] Here there is only space to offer a summary of the main points of my research. The discourse of feminine virtue provides a thought-provoking counterpoint to the mainly masculine discourses of political virtue. Nowhere do we see more clearly that the same discourse that could be used to empower and bestow a right to participate, could also condition and entrap the speaker. The rhetoric of virtue was double-edged for women, certainly, and not without its problems and ambiguities. But it provided strategic possibilities which could be exploited. Although virtue in its civic sense left little space for women in the public sphere, women were not completely passive agents in this discourse. They could, and did, employ notions of moral virtue and *bienfaisance* to justify arguments that women could play an active role in society through virtue to improve public manners and morals. Models of women's virtue which appeared may seem very limited now, but represented a considerable step

forward in the way that women were represented during the eighteenth century. The language of virtue was employed within the social confines of what was possible for women at that time. But at its more radical edge it challenged the political and social conventions and provided a voice for women who, hitherto, had been voiceless.

The relationship of the legal profession and legal cases to the political culture of the later eighteenth century has recently been brought to light by historians such as Maza and Bell.[6] There has not, until now, been a general study which focuses on the concept of political virtue in France, but the English-speaking world of the eighteenth century has been subject to a number of works on the rhetoric of political virtue particularly in the context of classical republicanism.[7] Led by Pocock and others, studies of British politics and political theory have shown how such classical republican terms as virtue and patriotism were key words used to justify dissent from government policy, and thence to legitimise the idea of political opposition and transform conceptions of the nature of politics. On the other hand, studies of the politics of virtue in France have tended to focus on the ideas of individual *philosophes*, most notably Rousseau.[8]

It may be that studies of the concept of political virtue in France have not yet been undertaken precisely because our view of this subject cannot but be affected by the cataclysmic events of the French Revolution and this makes the subject much more sensitive and contentious than for Britain. The revolutionary project after the fall of the monarchy was, in the words of Robespierre, to bring about literally a 'republic of virtue' on earth.[9] What began as a vision of universal happiness and goodwill descended into a nightmare. In the name of virtue, a policy of terror was instituted against the enemies of the virtuous republic. It was a traumatic experience which, more than anything else, served to discredit the politics of virtue, so that the word

subsequently vanished from political vocabularies and has never since been effectively revived. The link between virtue and terror remains a compulsive and terrifying one -- as we can see from Robespierre's speech cited at the start of this introduction -- such an incongruous juxtaposition of words still retains its power to horrify. Many commentators have since argued that the step from virtue to terror was, despite the apparent paradox, an inevitable one, and that the employment of moral absolutes in political rhetoric will necessarily result in the use of violence against those whose moral and political allegiances differ from those of the dominant political group. Such was the view put forward by J.L Talmon and other writers of the Cold War period, who saw in the French Revolution the origins of twentieth-century Stalinism, and even of the racial policies of the Nazis. Talmon looked at the ideas in isolation, thus enabling him to see a linear development from Rousseau's 'general will' to Robespierre, Marx, Lenin and ultimately Stalin.[10] It was a viewpoint which found little favour with historians of the period, who were sceptical of the extent to which the context and events of the French Revolution could be understood in twentieth-century terms.[11]

In recent years the 'totalitarian' thesis has been reanimated by one the foremost historians of the revolutionary period, François Furet. Influenced by post-modernist thinking, Furet has put the study of revolutionary language, rather than social or economic history, at the forefront of debate. He depicts 1789 as the moment of the invention of a new 'political discourse'; one which for the first time conflated politics and morality: 'When politics becomes the realm of truth and falsehood, of good and evil, and when it is politics that separates the good from the wicked, we find ourselves in a historical universe whose dynamic is entirely new.'[12] He argues that this juxtaposition of politics and morality was both novel and inherently unstable and that these very instabilities led directly to the revolutionary Terror. Thus it was the new revolutionary moral politics (the politics of virtue although Furet does not use

the term) which made the Terror not only possible, but inevitable from the moment the Revolution broke out. This interpretation has had an immense and important impact on the way in which modern historians perceive both the Revolution and the politics of virtue. Whatever the values of Furet's approach for revolutionary historiography -- and he has attracted both adherents and critics -- it is predicated upon the essential novelty of the political language of the revolutionaries and downplays the continuities which existed between the political ideas of the *ancien régime* and those of the Revolution.

Influential though this approach has been, it by no means offers the only explanatory framework within which to situate the complex relationship between revolutionary politics and eighteenth-century thought. An alternative method, and one which is less historically anachronistic, is to explore the continuities between revolutionary politics and the political language of the eighteenth century. As Alfred Cobban argued long ago, the idea that 'fundamental moral principles in government was the only cure for political evils' was a commonplace of eighteenth-century thought: virtue, patriotism and popular sovereignty were all dominant political ideas long before the Revolution.[13] The French Revolution was indeed to prove a springboard for modern conceptions of politics, but revolutionary conceptions of the nature of politics themselves emerged out of the context of ideas which were already familiar in the eighteenth-century. The example of Robespierre's terrifying statement that virtue and the terror are interlinked is helpful here. It was a revolutionary statement in every sense. Yet Robespierre's basic understanding of political virtue derived from Enlightenment thought.[14] And Rousseau was by no means the sole influence in this respect. The revolutionary concept of political virtue was in fact derived from a much broader body of ideas than those of Rousseau alone. Thus, Robespierre's speech on that occasion contained a definition of virtue in

terms which paraphrased the famous explication given by Montesquieu -- a definition which was itself derived from Italian classical humanist writers, and which had influenced political theory in France throughout the second half of the eighteenth century. In Robespierre's words:

> ...What is the fundamental principle of democratic or popular government, that is to say, the essential spring that supports it and makes it work? It is virtue; I speak of that public virtue that worked so many wonders in Greece and Rome, and which should produce even more astonishing ones in the French republic; of that virtue that is no other thing than love of the *patrie* and of its laws.[15]

Conceptions of politics gradually and painfully took on new forms within the unprecedented context of the revolutionary experience. The idea of political virtue provided a key point of continuity: it was already a concept of crucial importance long before the Revolution itself broke out. Revolutionary rhetoric, however, would add new resonances to the classic notion of political virtue. Most significantly, it was in the context of the unprecedented political situation of 1793 that it became thinkable for the first time to juxtapose the word 'virtue' with the word 'terror'. It would be in the conjunction between these two such disparate words, not linked by pre-revolutionary thinkers, that the language of political virtue took on a truly revolutionary significance and proved definitively its break with the customary patterns of eighteenth-century political thought.

The current historiographical trend has been to see the eighteenth-century concept of political virtue in terms of the Revolution and to overlook the legacy of Enlightenment thought in this respect with the exception of Rousseau's specific contribution. But if we consider the concept of virtue solely in terms of how it relates to the Revolution, the temptation is to view

its development teleologically and assume that the evolution from pre-revolutionary to revolutionary virtue was a necessary one. As an approach this seems to me to be potentially misleading, since it encourages the assumption that the politics of virtue already constituted a revolutionary language before the Revolution broke out. The evidence suggests the contrary. Although political virtue had a particular affinity with radical arguments, it was a rhetoric which both political conservatives and radicals could employ. Indeed, it was a rhetoric familiar to members of the educated classes throughout much of Europe and in North America -- anywhere in fact, where a classical education was standard practice at secondary level.

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This book considers the eighteenth-century concept of political virtue as a subject in its own right. On the whole, eighteenth-century writers expressed their ideas with striking sophistication and showed much adroitness in their active manipulation of rhetorical strategies in a variety of circumstances and contexts. Most of the writers whose works figure in these pages appear to have been well aware of what could and could not be said in a given situation and the consequences of adopting a certain mode of rhetoric. Far from them giving much indication of having been manipulated by a discourse whose real significance they were unable to comprehend most seem to have had as least as clear an understanding of what they were doing as we can have in piecing together their meaning. The historian, of course, always has the final advantage of being able to say 'what people meant' and to impute to their subject matter ideas and intentions, without their subjects ever having the chance to reply or to repudiate such claims made on their behalf. It seemed to me safer (as well as more just) to hesitate before making any judgement, and to try to allow space for the complexity and subtlety with which eighteenth-century writers used, understood and thought of the language of virtue. This

does not imply adopting an uncritical attitude towards the texts under examination. But it does mean that we need to exercise caution and seek to understand the nature of the texts before venturing to criticise them.

Throughout the eighteenth century a positive obsession existed with the idea of virtue: not only in political terms, but in all its manifestations. During this time virtue never loosened its hold over the public imagination: indeed, that hold simply intensified as the century progressed and the concept developed further and more radical implications. Part of the reason why the rhetoric of virtue exercised such a degree of influence lies in fact that it imparted power through the force of its moral authority. It gave power to those who employed the rhetoric: it gave them a voice, an alternative moral authority to the traditional arbiters of society, church and state. And it gave power to people who formed the audience for the rhetoric and could see themselves transfigured by it into virtuous citizens. An extraordinary range of people, including writers, artists, government ministers, radical journalists, priests and philosophers, who had little else in common, were brought together by this obsession. Rousseau is the best-known to us, but he was far from being the first to situate virtue at the heart of human endeavour. He was one amongst many, albeit extraordinarily eloquent and influential. The rhetoric of virtue predated him, and would have existed without him, although it would possibly have lost something of its wider influence and certainly some of its most eloquent expression. The impact of the rhetoric of virtue reached much further than those who actively wrote about it, to those people who absorbed the literature on the subject. Readers sighed and wept over novels, in which the virtuous heroes -- and above all, heroines, of whom Richardson's Clarissa was the archetype -- suffered endless vicissitudes whilst remaining admirable figures and true to themselves. More prosaically, atheists such as Helvétius and d'Holbach devised theoretical models for

societies which would be ruled not by God but by virtue; priests from their pulpits extolled the joys of virtue and doing good to others (an idea known as *bienfaisance*). Even the marquis de Sade, who spent his literary energies swimming against the tide of virtue, did not feel himself able simply to ignore the subject; he too was obsessively engaged with virtue in order to refute it. He regarded the idea that virtue was rewarded as one of the most nauseating lies to which mankind was subject. Thus, the theme of his most notorious novel, *Justine*, where virtue is not rewarded, but punished, was set up as a deliberate refutation of the moral framework of Richardson's *Pamela*. One way or another, it was difficult to avoid the notion of virtue in the eighteenth century. Indeed, even the somewhat contradictory marquis liked to think of himself as in some sense a man of virtue, a philanthropist (*bienfaiteur*) in his personal life, if not in his literary endeavours, disclosing in private letters that he had helped the poor of his neighbourhood.

These self-consciously innovative eighteenth-century writers were also drawing upon the past for their inspiration: the word virtue itself dated back to classical antiquity. Private and public virtue were familiar themes throughout a long tradition of European ideas. Influential figures, from Marcus Aurelius to Boethius to Montaigne, had discussed at length the need for virtue in order to live a proper life. But why did this idea emerge with such unparalleled intensity in the eighteenth century? It may be that part of the answer lies in the phenomenon characterised by Paul Hazard as 'the crisis of the European mind': that is, the growing uncertainty from the later seventeenth century about the nature of the world and of man's place within it. This crisis was precipitated by the dawning conviction that whilst God as the source of moral authority had not disappeared from the world, he was nevertheless increasingly remote from human affairs. It appeared necessary to find some alternative source of moral authority which could effectively take the place of God -- or at least of that version of God which belonged to

the established churches. People were increasingly thrown back on themselves, unable to accept the Bible as a literal truth, but not satisfied just to exist. They wanted to know and understand the moral order of the universe, and to reassure themselves that such a moral order existed. Philosophers began to elaborate theories of the moral basis of society whose authority derived from 'nature', rather than from the God of revealed religion as the source of order in the universe. Virtue itself was seen as a manifestation of the natural world: a natural phenomenon. Few thinkers rejected God altogether; instead they tended to characterise human virtue as an emanation of God made manifest through nature. But to all intents and purposes the locus of virtue was humanity itself. Virtue provided a source of moral authority in a world beleaguered with uncertainties. It was the means by which mankind could forge a moral pathway, and establish some kind of moral certainty, in the face of an unknown and unknowable universe.

Virtue was thus an ideal which represented human morality, with or without God. But its meaning was not fixed into a single inflexible form. It was a living word, loaded with a heavy weight of polemical and often contradictory interpretations. It was used strategically, as a weapon in debate, providing moral justification for a contrasting range of philosophical and political meanings. We need to comprehend this fluidity of meaning through observation of the many ways in which the concept of virtue was used enlisted in different debates about the nature of politics and of society. Virtue was much more than just a political catchword. The ideas which it invoked reflected profound and persistent questions about the meaning of existence itself. For those people who wrote or read the rhetoric of virtue it could operate on many levels at once - moral, political and philosophical. They saw no inconsistency in this multiplicity of meaning, and neither should we.

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The study of the history of a word demands particular methods. The

study of linguistic meaning in a specific cultural situation presents many problems and pitfalls because language loses so much of its meaning if examined in isolation from the context in which it was produced and the specific circumstances in which an author wrote. The notion of a discourse, that is, of a group of linked words by means of which a speaker gains authority and power, offers an invaluable means for uncovering the nature of language and linguistic strategies. Keith Baker, in particular, has employed this concept to powerful effect to illuminate the political languages of the last years of the *ancien régime*.[16] Opinions differ, however, on the ways in which this concept should be used by historians. The philosopher, Michel Foucault, for example, to whom the development of the study of discourse owes so much, employed the term in a fairly specific sense whereby the concept of discourse necessarily exerts a very schematic relationship to authority and power. Personally, I have found it more helpful to enlist the notion of discourse in the rather more flexible sense favoured by, amongst others, Pocock.[17] I have employed the term discourse simply to indicate groups of loosely-linked words and concepts from which a writer could draw in order to justify and substantiate a variety of arguments. Whilst the terms 'theory' and 'ideology' seem more appropriate for describing *specific* beliefs and arguments, discourses are much less fixed or pre-determined in their meaning: thus, a particular discourse could provide the building blocks to construct a particular theory, but it might also be employed to justify quite a different ideological edifice. A less contentious linguistic term than 'discourse', and one which I have frequently used, is that of 'rhetoric' and rhetorical strategies. Rhetoric was the art of selecting the most persuasive arguments with which to convince an audience to share one's opinion. This expression has the added advantage of being a term with which contemporaries themselves were familiar and is more indicative of the extent to which their choice of language was part of a conscious strategy whereas

'discourse', particularly in the Foucaultian sense, suggests that speakers and writers were essentially the mouthpieces of a language over which they had little control. The students who attended the *collèges* received a grounding in rhetoric along with a basic level of classical education. They were thus familiar with such seminal works as the declamations of Cicero, in which the process of law was frequently depicted as the struggle of virtue against despotism. It seems that eighteenth-century writers were generally very well aware of what they were doing in employing a discourse of virtue, but nonetheless, one must be wary of assuming that we know what those intentions were. People's 'true' motives are both complex and elusive and we can never be confident that we know what these were without a lot more evidence than the texts themselves can disclose. On the other hand, we can learn much about how people thought at a given time by asking why a particular form of rhetoric was the one selected in a specific historical situation and what made it so effective in that context.[18] Nor would it be wise to reject Foucault's premises entirely. Time and again we can see that discourses have unintended consequences, and exert influences and direct the thoughts of others in ways that are often very far removed from those that the original author would have wished. This book is as much about the reception and strategic use of ideas about virtue as it is about the original contribution of well-known thinkers.

One way in which the concept of virtuous citizenship made itself felt in ways far beyond the original intentions of men such as Montesquieu was in its contribution to the development of the idea of a legitimate public opinion. Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere has generated much interest amongst historians and has greatly affected our conception of eighteenth-century political culture. According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere developed during the eighteenth century as a conceptual space between civil society and the state within which recognition and legitimation

could be provided for that social class which had previously been excluded from political life. The bourgeois public sphere crystallised in the idea of 'public opinion'.[19] 'Public opinion' itself was a phrase used frequently in the later eighteenth century - contemporaries referred to it as a sort of impartial tribunal to which one could appeal for judgement and whose moral authority was superior to the traditional authority of monarchy. But it is a term which eludes easy definition. It has been variously characterised as a sociological reality arising from the growth in numbers of the reading public, and as a political construction or abstract conception of authority.[20] The idea of 'public opinion' is highly relevant to the present work, for as an abstract political construction it is closely linked with the concept of political virtue which could provide a moral justification for public opinion as a source of authority (based, of course, on the assumption that the public was virtuous and had only the common interest at heart). What is less clear, however, is that 'public opinion' was a particularly bourgeois phenomenon, if only because so many of the writers who wrote in criticism of the authority of absolute monarchy were themselves noble rather than bourgeois. The rhetoric of political virtue as it developed in the eighteenth century was not confined to any one social class, but was indicative of an egalitarian attribute to which anyone (at least in theory) might aspire, regardless of their birth.

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In order to appreciate the significance of a politics of virtue we need first to consider what 'politics' itself meant in this period. Under the autocratic government of the *ancien régime* there was no legitimate provision for any form of participatory politics. 'Politics' as it was understood by contemporaries meant something altogether different from what we now understand by the term. Insofar as the concept of 'politics' (or the public

welfare of all) had an official existence it was deemed to be the king's business alone. The only people who therefore had a legitimate right to concern themselves with the conduct of politics were the king himself, and those officials and ministers whom he designated to see that his wishes were carried out. In effect, this meant that the court was the centre of political life - a subject which has been much illuminated by a series of important new historical works.[21] But the court was also seen as the source of intrigue and jostling for position. The politics of the court were framed in terms of the pursuit of self-interest. Patronage, clientage, family connections, institutionalised 'corruption', and the purchase of public office were all recognised means by which *ancien régime* politics functioned. Only the king himself was supposed to be above the pursuit of self-interest and to embody in himself the politics of public interest. But since he dwelt at court and amongst courtiers he was seen as being himself vulnerable to the corruption of his political duty, whether this resulted from his being misled by those around him, or was due to his own weakness.

In contrast to the *realpolitik* world of court politics there existed an alternative -- an idealised concept of politics, based on ideas of society as it *ought* to be. This conception derived from the classical republican tradition. This was drawn originally from the classics of antiquity with which all educated men were thoroughly familiar, and was further refined by Italian renaissance humanists and later by British and American contributions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Virtue in its classical sense of 'love of the *patrie*' or 'love of equality' was an essential ingredient of this political ideal.[22] Virtue was that sustaining quality which was vital for citizens to carry out their public duties, a selfless devotion to the public good: it was seen as incompatible with the amassing of private wealth and the pursuit of luxury.

Despite their contrasting positions, for the most part these two very different understandings of politics, the pragmatic and the ideal, coexisted

with little friction. There was no reason why the officials and administrators of the *ancien régime* should not continue to admire classical political forms whilst continuing to promote rather more pragmatic policies in their day to day lives. Even Montesquieu who, more than any writer of his time, did the most to popularise the idea that the ideal form of government was a republic based upon political virtue, did not consider this view to be incompatible with furthering his career and increasing his family prestige by means of venal office in the accepted manner for one of his class and social station. One must live, he conceded, in the real and not an ideal world.

A profound theoretical gulf nevertheless persisted between two such different modes of formulating politics. The starkness of the contrast made it more difficult for a political theory of compromise to gain ascendancy in France as it had done across the Channel. Political theory in Britain was much affected by the fact that here a form of participatory politics (albeit strictly limited) was accepted as legitimate, in which the interests of a small minority of society including the nobility and more affluent bourgeoisie were given official representation in government. Reflecting the compromise in the British system of government, political theorists in Britain also developed a more flexible concept of political virtue in a set of arguments, originating with Mandeville and further refined by Smith, which mingled political theory with economic self-interest. Here the argument was that one need not deliberately act according to the public interest in order for one's activities to have public benefits by generating economic expansion and national wealth. On the contrary, self-interest (namely the pursuit of personal profit) could result in public virtues, and one could be a virtuous citizen even whilst dedicating one's efforts to the pursuit of material gain. In France by contrast the rhetoric of civic virtue had little connection with the actual business of governing. This separation of theory and practice resulted in the rhetoric of virtue according to the French tradition keeping much more of its classical

austerity. Here the belief that the virtuous citizen was one who devoted himself to the public good was argued much more emphatically than by British theorists and a closer connection was maintained between the notions of personal luxury and political corruption. Since civic virtue had little legitimate place in the French conception of politics a greater degree of virtue in terms of devotion to the public good was therefore expected of the state, in the person of the king himself.

Thus, we cannot clearly define the boundaries between the political and the non-political in eighteenth-century France simply because there was no legitimate space in which politics might exist outside the very limited sphere of royal policy. In addition to this lack of theoretical space for participatory politics, the systematic censorship of any discussion which might question the authority of monarchy or church was a constant fact of cultural life in the *ancien régime*.

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Since there was no pre-existing legitimate space for the discussion of politics in *ancien régime* France, this book is about the process of construction of such a space through the legitimating discourse of virtue. We are concerned here with politics in its broadest sense as the conduct of relations between people on a collective scale. Virtue imparted moral authority to the contention that ordinary citizens could play an active public role. Virtue provided people with a voice that had a right to be heard. Insofar as a politics of virtue existed in the eighteenth century, it was a linguistic and notional politics. This did not become an explicitly political right until the outbreak of revolution brought down the system of absolute monarchy and formalised civic rights into new legislation. In exploring the eighteenth-century discourse of virtue we are looking at a process of linguistic negotiation, and

the strategic application of language to create new concepts of the relationship of man to the rest of mankind. Men could be brought together by the concept of virtue, wrought into a linguistic unity, as virtuous citizens.

There are several key points to be made. The first is that there was more than one way of thinking about the political and social organisation of society in terms of categories of virtue. One could think of this in terms of a field of discourses (or models) of virtue which had particular relevance for ideas about the nature of political organisation. We will trace different discourses of virtue that had particular implications in the field of political ideas and show how they could be enlisted to support very diverse views about the nature and conduct of political authority and the social organisation of society. Virtue could be associated with particular social groups -- such as military nobles, or judicial nobles in the *parlements*. It could be used to reinforce the authority of an individual -- in absolute monarchy this was the king himself, and the discourse of kingly virtue was one of the oldest, but also one of the most ambiguous, ways of conceiving politics. It could be used to legitimise vociferous minorities, such as Jansenists, or even to give moral authority to a largely silent majority -- women. In addition, it could be applied in terms that were at once vaguer and broader, as a notional defence of the moral integrity of ordinary 'citizens'.

Of the traditional discourses of virtue, the most significant were those of kingly virtue, noble virtue and the civic virtue of classical republicanism, and this book will begin by an evaluation of these languages and their dynamics in the first half of the century. Of these, the most explicitly political as well as the most egalitarian in its implications, was classical republicanism. Equally important for the eighteenth-century mind were traditional Christian ideas about virtue. These ideas had a political dimension, although this was often a negative one which emphasised the futility of virtue without God, and which was in marked contrast to the faith in civic virtue of classical republicanism.

Jansenism was to bring forth new ways of conceptualising politics and whilst many Jansenists were sceptical about virtue, others incorporated its rhetoric into their ideas. From about the middle of the century a new discourse of virtue came to the fore which would be of dramatic importance in revitalising traditional ideas of the place of man in political life and society. This was the concept of natural or sociable virtue, which came via English philosophers such as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson and was seized upon by the French *philosophes* and adapted to their own concerns.

The second point we need to bear in mind is that the meaning of virtue was not static: rather it was used polemically and in particular contexts. In French society the negotiation of censorship was an everyday fact of life. Writers sometimes needed to be adept at finding permissible ways to express themselves, even when touching on such dangerous subjects as the authority of the church and absolute monarchy. The very fluidity of the idea of natural virtue made it in many respects a more useful way of talking about the dignity and value of the ordinary citizen, who stood on his own merits, his virtue. Above all, the virtuous citizen had the right to participate fully in discussion and actions relating to the public good. This proved a more flexible and effective way of conceptualising the worth of the citizen than did the more traditional and rigid political formulations derived more exclusively from classical republicanism. But it can be very difficult to pinpoint distinctions between different discourses. Writers did not confine themselves to rigidly defined concepts of virtue. On the contrary, they selected those aspects they wanted from different models of virtue, and adapted them to the particular circumstances in which they found themselves and the kinds of points that they were trying to make. Nevertheless, writers had to work within the constraints and limitations of the language. The discourse of virtue could empower them, but it could also condition their meaning, and entrap it. It had a certain dynamic of its own, and could contain implications far

beyond the intentions of a particular writer.

The third point to note is that one model of virtue in particular was to gradually come to the fore and begin to dominate the others, and even to subsume them into itself. This was the model of virtuous citizenship, which was based partly on the older traditions of classical republicanism, but which drew even more deeply on the idea that came to the fore from the mid-century, that mankind is naturally virtuous and sociable, bound by loving fellowship. This was the model of virtue which would prove so compelling for the revolutionary generation. In their hands the radicalism and egalitarianism always potentially present in this idea of virtue would explode into an explicit language of political rights. But the model of virtue that the revolutionaries would take up was one of several in a field of discourses available to them. We need, therefore, to ask how we should go about uncovering the various discourses of virtue that formed a repertoire of ways of using language to conceptualise the spheres of power, civic rights and political participation in the eighteenth century.

The field of possible sources for exploring the politics of virtue can be extended far further than overtly political treatises. A wide variety of cultural forms served in the self -conscious creation of a 'public opinion' amongst the literate classes, and aided the formation of a 'public sphere' wherein current issues were debated. It was not uncommon for political discussion to appear in apparently unlikely places. At a time when most categories of people were effectively excluded from political participation, plays, novels, exhibitions of paintings, law cases and even pornographic or scurrilous literature could all constitute political texts: they could all be used to criticise, implicitly or overtly, the actions of government and even to question the assumptions on which absolute government rested. Nevertheless, this blurring of categories of political and non-political writings does not mean that all texts are

consequently of equal value and significance, or that we should dissolve the differences between various forms. A political treatise and a work of fiction should not be treated as of undifferentiated value since they were written with particular intentions, and for a specific kind of audience who had certain expectations. These were distinctions of which contemporaries were themselves well aware, and ones which we need to respect if we are to reconstitute the meaning of eighteenth-century political writing.

It should be apparent by now had difficult -- and in some ways artificial -- a task it is to attempt to make rigid distinctions between political and non-political discourses of virtue. Virtue was a central concept in several quite different sets of ideas, amongst which were moral philosophy, debates on the social role of women, and the notion of sensibility. Some of its meanings were overtly political, whilst others were more concerned with social relations or with individual morality, but these might be given an oblique political resonance by a writer in a particular context. Therefore, whilst we can isolate and define some specifically political meanings of virtue, its political resonances are by no means confined to these limited areas.

The vocabulary of political virtue as derived from classical republicanism was familiar to anyone who had shared a higher level education in Europe at any time since the Renaissance: it was part of a common elite culture. In political thought the principal meaning of virtue was the definition derived from the classical republican notion of devotion to the public interest rather than self-interest. The rhetoric of virtue brought an explicitly moral dimension to the heart of political thinking. It expressed the idea that the basis of political power was, or at least ought to be, moral integrity in both public and in private life. 'Virtue' was, with 'nation' and '*patrie*' (or fatherland), one of a series of interconnected key words which reinforced and legitimised each other. Virtue was that facilitating quality which enabled all the other attributes of good government and good

citizenship to exist. Without virtue the whole political edifice would collapse into atomism. It was widely believed that both private and public virtue were indispensable for the good regulation of politics and for the well-being of society. Enlightenment thinkers stressed that government, whatever its form, must be virtuous if society was to be healthy. But it was not necessary for everyone in a society to have political virtue - only those who had the responsibility of government. Thus, for a monarchy to fulfil its public duties the king must be virtuous, whilst a republic depended on the virtue of all its citizens. But not everyone was necessarily a citizen, for under the ancient classical republics inferior men (slaves) and all women had been excluded. Similarly in eighteenth-century France, the ideal of a virtuous republic did not necessarily encompass all the people who dwelt there, but only those who were deemed capable of being active citizens. Active civic virtue was both the highest and, by definition, the most demanding political quality. It was an ideal so demanding that, almost by definition it was seen as all but impossible to sustain. Political theorists, even whilst they idealised civic virtue, generally acknowledged that, given man as he was rather than as he might be, it could never be fully attained.

Political or civic virtue was, however, much more than an abstract political theory. During the eighteenth century it became a polemical weapon which was employed to give moral force to contentious debates. It is this use of virtue as a strategy which most concerns us here. The rhetoric of civic virtue provided a model against which the actions of participants and would-be participants in political life could be measured. Virtue was the voice of defiance, the rejection of corruption, factionalism, political compromise - and yet this challenge to the old order was drawn out of the familiar eighteenth-century language of politics. The rhetoric was employed to impart moral justification to a wide variety of political positions, taking on different inflections of meaning depending on how it was used in a particular context.

For example, civic virtue carried, as has been said, connotations of equality: although citizens might not be equal in wealth or status, they could all possess virtue. It did not, however, follow that a speaker who enlisted the rhetoric of virtue must have radical and egalitarian sympathies -just as the Christian doctrine of equality of souls did not make all Christians political democrats. The rhetoric of virtue was not confined to political radicals or future revolutionaries. On the contrary virtue was part of a broad conception of politics, spanning a number of political perspectives - and in this lies its greatest power. It was an official and acceptable language, which was radical at one end of its spectrum, and could be used to make opposition legitimate, but which could be used to defend virtuous monarchy.

As well as examining the theoretical development of the concept of political virtue through the works of the acknowledged 'great thinkers' of the period, we must cast our net wider and consider some of the now half-forgotten writings of lesser figures whose works were possibly less profound than those of the major philosophes but which were avidly read by a voracious and rapidly-growing audience. Many such works, though mostly forgotten now, exerted a greater degree of influence on their contemporaries than that of some of the works now best known to us. Nor should we confine our inquiries to those people who were won over to Enlightenment ideas. The concept of political virtue was not the exclusive preserve of a few progressive and intellectual thinkers: its influence was felt throughout the mainstream of political culture. It is possible to learn as much by looking at people who were hostile to the rhetoric of political virtue, as from those who were receptive to it.

In the course of this work we will assess the extent to which virtue, along with such related terms as *patrie*, nation, and popular sovereignty, became a key political term during the eighteenth century. One could trace

the history of the word 'virtue' in many different ways, but a principal aim here will be to show why this word in particular proved to be so powerfully evocative and effective as part of a rhetorical armoury of growing political criticism and even outright opposition to absolute monarchy. Older concepts of kingly virtue and noble virtue were gradually superseded by the more egalitarian rhetoric of civic virtue, making possible both a sustained critique of *ancien régime* government, and a growing self-confidence amongst the politically articulate classes. We will ask how it became increasingly acceptable for people to speak publicly on political matters, and how they justified this participation using arguments based on their claim to possess civic virtue, so that the insistence of the autocratic government that French citizens should be denied a political voice came to be seen as a glaring injustice.

With such a wide brief, the process of tracing the rhetoric of political virtue in the eighteenth century must necessarily be a carefully selective one. The first chapter of this book will examine the prevailing discourses of political virtue as they existed at the beginning of the eighteenth century, notably the codes of kingly, noble and classical republican virtue. Subsequent chapters will explore the ways in which the discourse of political virtue changed in character and emphasis during the course of the century. We will look at the rise of new philosophical concepts of natural sociable virtue and how these mingled with and modified the classical republican tradition of civic virtue. We will consider the ways in which traditional concepts of kingly virtue began to change under pressure from these new ideas. We will then take the example of the most powerful political force in the *ancien régime* next to that of the monarchy, that is the *parlements*, and examine the ways in which *parlementaires* and their supporters employed the rhetoric of virtue in their polemical disputes with the monarchy and how this use of rhetoric was taken

up in turn by a wider reading public eager for new ideas and conceptions of political life. Lastly, we will examine the escalating use of the rhetoric of political virtue in the crucial last decade of the *ancien régime* when a positive explosion of this rhetoric appears to have seized the consciousness of the reading public.

A book on this subject cannot hope to be comprehensive and it would be foolhardy to try. Let me at this point therefore say a few words about what this book is *not* about. It is not an attempt to chart the philosophic view of virtue. It is not a study of the high Enlightenment. So many writers do not feature here despite having had important things to say about virtue. Nor does this book set out to impose a meta-narrative on the multiple discourses of virtue in the eighteenth century - a task beyond the capabilities of most historians, and certainly beyond the abilities of this one. There are innumerable books waiting to be written on the idea of virtue in the eighteenth century. This is only one of them.

I have confined myself to an analysis of specific areas which illuminate key moments in the development of ideas about political virtue; and I have sought to show how such ideas were used in polemical debates. Likewise, it has been essential to narrow down the range of sources to be considered. I have concentrated on two types of source. The first of these consists of works which in themselves brought about significant and original changes in the way that virtue was used and understood in the eighteenth century, and this category includes some of the major philosophical and intellectual works on virtue and political theory. Some of them derive from the accepted 'canon' of political thought, such as Rousseau, Diderot and Montesquieu: others include names with which we ourselves are no longer so familiar, but were in their time well-regarded - such as Toussaint, Duguet, and Thomas. The second type of source is that which serves to illuminate the ways in which polemics of virtue were constructed and how the strategic use of such a discourse

could work in practice. This broader category is represented in this book by several hundred documents. It includes: works which influenced ideas in France, from the classics to works of the English and Scottish Enlightenment; contemporary dictionaries through which we can explore shifts in linguistic meaning; treatises and prescriptive works on happiness and the role of natural virtue and sociable virtue; novels and plays which explored the joys and griefs of virtue and citizenship; sermons and eulogies which set out the ambiguous relationship of virtue with Christian theology; conduct books, popular works of history, and essays written for prizes for academies, all of which set out prescriptive models of heroic and virtuous behaviour; documents relating to the periodic contests between monarchy and parlements for moral authority, including pamphlets and remonstrances from the crisis of 1770 to 1774; and finally, developments in a wide range of literature during the crisis of absolute monarchy in the 1780s.

The problem of where to begin and where to end a discussion of so nebulous a subject as the language of political virtue is a formidable one in itself. Few of the theoretical claims made about political virtue in the eighteenth century were altogether without some historical precedent. Therefore, what we are searching for here is not so much the emergence of an entirely unprecedented *language* of virtue, but rather, for new *uses to which that language was put*, new contexts in which it was used, new juxtapositions of discourses which shifted the meanings and implications behind the language of virtue, and, perhaps most importantly, the dissemination of that language on a much wider scale then anything which had been seen previously. Baker has claimed that the elements of the political culture from which revolutionary language would emanate, 'began to emerge in the 1750s and 1760s and that its essential elements were already clear by the beginning of Louis XVI's reign.'[23] It appears that certain elements of the political culture of opposition to absolute monarchy far predated even this period. So this

work will begin much earlier, in the later seventeenth century. It ends in August 1788, when the pre-revolutionary political situation had so drastically altered the stakes in the contest of political virtue that an altogether different book would be needed to explore the changes which were then taking place.

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[1] Some of the most important works in recent years to have examined prerevolutionary political culture and its relationship to revolutionary politics include: K.M. Baker (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Culture*, vol. 1, *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Pergamon, 1987); K.M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); R. Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham and London, 1991). There are also many older but classic studies whose influence is still greatly felt, including: D. Mornet, *Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française: 1715-1787* (1933; republished, Paris, 1954); R. Mauzi, *L'Idée du bonheur dans la littérature et la pensée française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1960) ; H. T. Parker, *The Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries*, (1937; republished, New York, 1965); J. Ehrard, *L'Idée de nature en France à l'aube des lumières* (Paris, 1970); E. Carcassonne, *Montesquieu et le problème de la constitution française au XVIIIe siècle* (1927; republished, Geneva, 1970); and R.R. Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York, 1961).

[2] Amongst the many studies on this subject one should include: R. Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Harvard University Press, 1982); J.R. Censer and J.D. Popkin (eds), *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987); N.R. Gelbart, *Feminine and Opposition Journalism in Old Regime France*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987). On the cultural politics of fine art production, see T.E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985).

[3] J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, tr. T. Burger and F. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

[4] Works which have analysed the relationship between gender and virtue include: D. Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution* (Yale University Press, 1989); C. Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue* (Cornell University Press, 1986); J.B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1988); D. Outram, 'Le langage mâle de la vertu: Women and the Discourse of the French Revolution', in P. Burke and R. Porter (eds), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[5] My research on the relationship of women to the politics of virtue is forthcoming in M. Linton, 'Virtue Rewarded? Women and the Politics of Virtue in Eighteenth-Century France', parts I and II, *History of European Ideas*, 26, 1 (2001), pp. 35-49; 51-65.

[6] On the political impact of the Kornmann case see R. Darnton, 'Trends in Radical Propaganda on the Eve of the French Revolution, 1782-1788' (DPhil, Oxford, 1964). Two recent major studies of legal cases and of lawyers respectively are, S. Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993); and D. A. Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

[7] Works on Britain and America which have studied political virtue in the context of classical republicanism include: J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975); Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); S. Burtt, *Virtue Transformed: Political Argument in England, 1688-1740* (Cambridge University Press, 1992); M.M. Goldsmith, 'Public Virtues and Private

Vices: Bernard Mandeville and English Political Ideologies in the Early Eighteenth Century,' *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 9, 4 (1976), pp. 477-510; G. Bock, Q. Skinner and M. Viroli (eds),*Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); I. Hont and M. Ignatieff (eds), *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge University Press, 1983). On politics and political theory in early eighteenth-century Britain there is also I. Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and his Circle: the Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Harvard University Press, 1968).

[8]For example, this is the approach of C. Blum, *Rousseau and the Republic of Virtue*.

[9] See, above all, the speech Robespierre gave in February 1794, 'On the principles of public morality,' which may be consulted in several places, including the edition of his speeches edited by M. Bouloiseau, *Discours et rapports à la Convention par Robespierre*, e.g. p. 216.

[10] J.L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1952).

[11]See Alfred Cobban's comments in 'The Enlightenment and the French Revolution', in A. Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution* (first published 1968: this edition, St Albans, 1971), p. 24.

[12] F. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1978; this edition, trans. E. Forster, Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 26. Amongst the many works to owe a debt to Furet, some of the most prominent include: L. Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (University of California Press, 1984) on the revolutionaries' invention of a new language, see esp. p. 34; F. Furet and M. Ozouf (eds), *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* , trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press, 1989); *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern*

Culture, 3 vols, eds K.M. Baker, C. Lucas and F. Furet, respectively (Pergamon, 1987-9); K.M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); C. Lucas et al (eds), *Rewriting the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 1991).

[13] A. Cobban, 'The Fundamental Ideas of Robespierre', in *Aspects of the French Revolution* , pp. 138-41.

[14] On the derivation of Robespierre's concept of virtue and its place in his political ideas, see M. Linton, 'Robespierre's Political Principles', in C. Haydon and W. Doyle (eds) , *Robespierre* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 37-53.

[15] Robespierre, *Discours*, p. 214. On the extent to which Robespierre's concept of political virtue derived from Montesquieu rather than from Rousseau see Cobban, *Aspects of the French Revolution*, pp. 137-58, esp. pp. 141 and 152. For a comparison with Montesquieu's concept of virtue as the principle of the republic see his *Oeuvres complètes*, Roger Caillois (ed.), 2 vols (Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1949-1951), vol. 2, Book III, p. 251.

[16]See, above all, K. Baker, 'French political thought at the accession of Louis XVI' together with the other articles in *Inventing the French Revolution.'*

[17] Of the many works of Foucault one of the most pertinent in this context is M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 1972). For Pocock see his 'Introduction: The state of the art', in *Virtue, Commerce and History* , pp. 7-34.

[18] This was the conclusion Quentin Skinner reached when confronted with a similar difficulty in assessing the sincerity of Viscount Bolingbroke's espousal of the rhetoric of patriotism and virtue when he opposed the ruling Whigs in the 1720s: Q. Skinner, 'The principles and practice of opposition: the case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole' in

Historical perspectives: studies in English thought and society in honour of J.H. Plumb , ed. N. McKendrick (1974).

[19]J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 89. Habermas' approach has generated much further discussion, including D. Goodman, 'Public sphere and private life: toward a synthesis of current historiographical approaches to the Old Regime', *History and Theory*, 31 (1992), 1-20; and K.M. Baker, 'Politics and Public Opinion under the Old Regime: Some Reflections', in J. Censer and J. Popkin (eds), *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (University of California Press, 1987), pp. 204-46.

[20] On 'public opinion' as an eighteenth-century term, see Baker, 'Public opinion as political invention', in *Inventing the French Revolution* ; and M. Ozouf, 'L'Opinion publique', in Baker (ed.), *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*.

[21]Amongst the best studies of eighteenth-century politics is P.R. Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Régime France, 1720-1745* (Routledge, 1996). For insights into the politics of patronage and faction in the seventeenth century, one should consult S. Kettering, *Patrons, Brokers and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York, 1986); and R. Mettam, *Power and Faction in Louis XIV's France* (Blackwell, 1988).

[22] This definition is from the *Avertissement* to the 1757 edition of Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des lois*: Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. R. Caillois (Paris, 1949-51) vol. 2, pp. 227-8.

[23] Baker, 'On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution', in Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, p. 24.