**Michelangelo’s *David* and the Florentine Republic**

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The defining pillars of Western thought are the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions. Knowledge of Western thought in its complete form would compel us to not only know the sources of this tradition separately but the tensions between the two where the West has attempted to mold them into one. Mathew Arnold described this tension as the competition between Hebraism and Hellenism.

But, while Hebraism seizes upon certain plain, capital limitations of the universal order, and rivets itself, one may say, with unequalled grandeur of earnestness and intensity on the study and observances of them, the bent of Hellenism is to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another, to slip away from resting in this or that intimation of it, however capital. An unclouded clearness of mind, an unimpeded play of thought, is what this bent drives at. The governing idea of Hellenism is spontaneity of conscious; that of Hebraism, strictness of conscience.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Though sometimes depicted as an un-segmented linear ribbon of thought, the Western Tradition contains two fundamental sources of thought that really seem hardly compatible when set side by side. The Classical tradition addresses human beings who seek to comprehend the universal order and forge a home in that world by means of their own abilities. Judeo-Christianity, by contrast, regards human beings as agents of divine will whose most fitting disposition is one of submission. In the ancient world, magnanimity is the crown of the moral virtues, whereas the consummate Christian virtue is a self-abnegating humility. As St Augustine’s hard-hitting critique of the ancient virtue in *The City of God* maintains -- the pagan city is “fundamentally sinful,” not because it lacks virtue but because it extols human virtues above all else.[[2]](#footnote-2) Though he never actually employs the epithet “splendid vices,” Augustine certainly regards classical virtue as a prideful attempt to endow the temporal life of mankind with more majestic features than Christina dogma would allow. [[3]](#footnote-3)

The Italian Renaissance offers a plentiful body of both artistic and literary works that directly engage these two pillars of Western thought. For many artists and writers born in this age, the rediscovery of the classical, whether in philosophy, literature, or art, presented a chance to synthesize the best of both worlds. However, among the many who enthusiastically promoted such a synthesis stood a few that sensed the incompatibility between the Judaic-Christian vision of mankind and the Classical view. Among that select few, I would include Michelangelo Buonarrotti and particularly his most famous work, *The David*. Commissioned in 1501 by the Florentine gonfaloniere, Piero Soderini, the work was designed to symbolize the city’s highest ambitions. The biblical figure of King David had been a favorite political symbol of Florentine Republic. A small independent commonwealth amidst the powerful empires of its day, Florence imagined itself akin to the Israelite polity, which, by the grace of the one true God, survived amidst the two empires of its day. David was a particularly apt emblem of the city’s civic vision. Maintaining one’s independence in such a quagmire of foreign policy problems required great virtue as well as divine providence. For patriotic emulation, the city typically turned to ancient models of heroic virtue like Hercules. Yet, while such ancient models perhaps raised a noble sense of civic devotion among Florentines, the same models also posed the danger of causing Florentines to neglect their more fundamental Christian mission. For ancient Greece or Rome, commonality of citizenship means much, if not all, whereas for the Christian citizenship means little, if anything.

The Florentines thought they found in the biblical figure of David an easy reconciliation of classical virtues of fortitude and prudent statesmanship as well as the humble virtues of Christian piety, humility, and forbearance. On the surface, Michelangelo’s *David* appears to proudly celebrate Florence’s self-understanding, but, upon careful inspection. Michelangelo’s work actually offers a subtle criticism of the city’s attempt to synthesize the Ancient and Christian traditions.

When approaching Michelangelo’s *David*, the first thing one notices is the work’s giant stature. [Figure1] *Il Gighante* as it sometimes referred to among Florentines, this fourteen-foot high work of art towers over its onlooker.[[4]](#footnote-4) But, the irony of the statue lies in the fact that Michelangelo has chosen to depict David at the very moment when he, the supposedly diminutive shepherd boy, slays the real giant, Goliath.[[5]](#footnote-5) A further paradox presents itself when we consider his nakedness as Michelangelo has rendered him. While Michelangelo is partly true to scripture here – David does reject the offer of armor in order to do battle with Goliath – the artistic license employed in rendering him in the manner of the classical nude seems to undermine the piety that David seemingly expresses when he rejects the armor. Though truly unarmed, Michelangelo also depicts David with all of the pride exhibited by the nude classical form. Once a lost form of art, the Greek and Roman nude had been rediscovered during the Renaissance by artists who sought to bring this classical celebration of humanity into the center of their work. The classical nude was a conscious attempt to elevate and immortalize by means of art what was most excellent among us in the temporal world. Its introduction as a means of portraying a biblical figure, first by Donatello and now by Michelangelo must have been shocking to a Christian community of the 15 and 16th century, not because of any puritanical norms but because it would seem to make eternal what ought to be thought of as transient. To take pleasure in the human form particularly by accentuating it via an artistic work implied precisely the opposite set of priorities than those established by Christian doctrine. The material body is merely a means to a higher end -- that attained with the new, and “glorified” bodies we receive in Christ.

In stark contrast to the norms of Christian humility, Michelangelo endows the pious shepherd boy of the bible with majestic visual appearence of a Greek god. There is in fact a strange ambiguity in the manner that Michelangelo has depicted his subject. On the one hand, David, having rejected Saul’s offer to loan the boy his armor, would in fact seem nearly naked before the heavily armed Goliath: “His height was six cubits and a span. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels; on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver’s rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels.” (1 Samuel 17:2)[[6]](#footnote-6) By contrast, David is innocent of the ways of war, his confidence residing in nothing more than powers above in comparison to the Philistine warrior who depends on the arts and industry of mankind, despite the fact that the latter’s mere size would seem to give him enough of an advantage. Yet, by depicting David in the classical nude, thus calling to mind the pride of a Greek god or legendary hero, Michelangelo has turned that innocence into a cause for great pride, for self-confidence or magnanimity in Aristotle’s sense of the word signifying -- *not* generosity -- but a sense of one’s superior merit.

Scholars have simply missed how cleverly Michelangelo grasped the tension between the classical and Christian strands of the Renaissance.[[7]](#footnote-7) Panofsky, reflecting on the whole of Michelangelo’s career writes: “Thus in Michelangelo’s works the dualism between the Christian and classical was solved. But it was a solution by way of surrender.” [[8]](#footnote-8)According to Panofsky, Michelangelo could not combine the pagan and Christian in a unified work and thus he “surrendered” in later life to only representing the sublime in Christianity rather than the pride and boldness of the classical world. Morey contends “Michelangelo’s powerful inhibited figures reflect disparity between Christian emotion and the antique ideal, free human will and the will of God: the rational forms of classical sculpture were not made for the ecstasy of a Christian mystic; they writhe in possession of an unfamiliar spirit and betray, by brutal distortion, incongruous proportions and discordant composition, the force of collision of medieval Christianity and the Renaissance.[[9]](#footnote-9) Both Panofsky and Morey are partly right – there is something unsettling about the attempt to unify of these two traditions. But they miss the degree to which Michelangelo, like Lorenzo Ghiberti’s series of baptistery doors, captures this tension in a work that has all of the appearances of perfectly combining both.

I believe that Michelangelo’s purpose in suggesting these strange ambiguities in the *David* – making a giant of the small shepherd boy and a proud nude of the humble youngest son of Jesse can be rendered intelligible if we turn to the actual story of David in the *Books of* *Samuel.* In the famous story of David and Goliath, the innocent shepherd boy offers to challenge the mighty Philistine warrior following an embarrassing demur to Goliath’s challenge for single combat implicating the entire Israelite army as well as its King. In fact, David’s unhesitating acquiescence to Goliath’s challenge of one-on-one combat is starkly contrasted to present king’s own pusillanimity. Saul, either out of fear or from overly cautious calculation, is unable to provide the leadership that his troops need. (*1 Samuel* 9:2) Ironically, the very thing the Israelites had desired in instituting a kingship in the first place was a leader who “will go out before us and fight our battles” (*1 Samuel 8:20*) Though Saul is the tallest among the Israelites, it is David who saves the day not only by defeating the giant in single-handed combat, a minor portion of his real accomplishment here since the Israelites still must rout the remainder of the Philistine army, but he restores Israel’s confidence in the divine favor of God when he publicly proclaims to the enemy: “You come to me armed with sword and shield and I come to you armed with the name of the Lord.” (*1 Samuel* 17:45-47).

Of course, there is good reason to have faith in David as the future king of Israel. When Samuel sneaks away from the watchful eye of Saul to find a new king among the sons of Jesse, we hear the Lord say to Samuel: “Look not to his appearance and to his lofty stature. For I have cast him aside. For not as man sees does God see. For man sees with the eyes and the Lord sees with the heart.” (*1 Samuel* 16:7) The lesson is simple: appearances are deceiving; hence, we should listen to the word of the Lord rather than trust in our own powers of sight. It is clear that God’s first choice was wrong (deliberately so presumably in service of teaching a needed lesson to His people). Saul’s only qualification lies in his visual appeal: he was “heads and shoulders” taller than the other Israelites. (*1 Samuel* 9:2) However, as simple as this teaching is, it’s a hard lesson to learn. Saul’s failure as king provides a simple but important lesson for the Hebrews: do not judge with your eyes but trust only in the Lord. In fact, this dependence on sight seems to be the central problem of the Israelite monarchy. In response to the people’s request for a king, Samuel volunteers a devastating prophecy of the evils that will befall such a political arrangement – “your sons he will take and set for himself in his chariots and cavalry…he will set for himself captains of thousands and captains of fifties, to plow his ground and reap his harvest…your daughters he will take as his confectioners.” (*I Samuel* 8:12) Given that most of that most of Samuel’s warnings are precisely what the people of Israel want – military consolidation under a clear visible head – the speech fails to persuade them to do otherwise. Their response to Samuel reveals much about the inner working of their political minds: “No! A King there will be over us! And we too shall be like other nations and our king will rule before us and go out before us and fight our battles.” (*I Samuel* 8:13) The Israelites’s retort emphasizes the importance of the visual. Safety is best secured by molding yourself in the image of other nations rather than listening to prophets, and kingship is best form of political rule because he can serve as a visible sign to other nations of your military prowess. Knowing that the Israelites are so dependent upon the visual accouterments of political rule, it is not sufficient that David is a man after God’s own heart; being God’s anointed king will require that he also “appear” to be God’s anointed king.

Given that Saul’s great height and broad shoulders were insufficient to consolidate political power under his leadership, David will have to be more clever in winning the hearts and minds of the Israelites. Returning to the encounter with Goliath, we witness early on David;s adroit skills in political stagecraft. Again, David says to Goliath: “You come to me armed with sword and shield and I come to you armed with the name of the Lord.” (*1 Samuel* 17:45-47) While there might be some truth to David’s claim that only faith in something greater than mere military strength could level the battle-field here, it is obviously misleading given that he manages to deliver a devastating blow by means of his unmentioned sling and stone.

There is good evidence that David is quite adept at leaving out crucial details about his arms in order to heighten the wonder of the spectator. In listing his credentials before Saul who, in one of the most hollow moments of his leadership, decides that he should vet the shepherd boy before sending him into battle where no other Israelite will tread, David explains to the Israelite king:

A shepherd your servant has been for his father with the flock. When the lion or the bear would come and carry off a sheep from the herd, I would go after him and strike him down and rescue it from his clutches. And if he would rise against me, I would seize his beard and strike him and kill him. Both lion and bear your servant has struck down, and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, for he has insulted the battle lines of the living God. The Lord who has rescued me from the lion and the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine. (*1 Samuel*: 17:35-40)

If we are to believe that David has struck down bears and lions, it must have been with his trusty weapon. Interestingly, David gives an extremely precise battle plan here while being fuzzy about the details – he will indeed “strike” Goliath (though not mentioning the sling) and then, once Goliath is wounded, he will indeed seize him by the beard, strike him again (this time with his own sword), and kill him (by beheading). But David’s omission of the sling is only made more conspicuous when he declines to accept Saul’s armor. When Saul offers David the king’s armor, he initially puts it on but then reports “I cannot walk in these, for I am unused to it.” (I Samuel 17:39). Why didn’t David just say, “Look, I don’t need any of this stuff. I’m planning on walking out there with this here slingshot and about five rocks. If this doesn’t go the way I plan, that armor isn’t going to be much use to me.” David does not just mislead Israel’s enemies, he also dissembles before its king.

There is, in fact, a certain ambiguity in David’s apparent combination of heroic virtue and piety. For instance, David is often praised for his piety when, in *I Samuel,* he impressively restrains himself from two opportunities to kill King Saul who, overwhelmed with jealousy towards the popular and militarily successful David, has been pursuing David with the purpose of taking his life. Upon both occasions, David declares: “The Lord forbid that I should reach out my hand against the Lord’s anointed.” (*1 Samuel*, 24:11; 26:10) Despite the appearance of pious deference to God’s vicegerent on Earth and his apparent magnanimity of character, it is unclear whether these public professions are entirely genuine or calculative publicity statements; after all, David knows that he too is the Lord’s *anointed*. Any attempt to kill Saul would set a dangerous precedent for David’s own monarchy. These reflections raise some questions about whether David genuinely synthesizes the classical heroic virtues that give him an edge over his rivals with his professed piety and humility before the Almighty, or if a certain stagecraft allows him to manufacture the appearance of having combined both. We are never entirely certain if David is a man after God’s own heart or a prudent practitioner like Machiavelli’s prince of whom it is said: “everyone sees what you seem to be, but few can touch who you really are.” (*The Prince*, ch. 17)

The ambiguity in David reaches a critical climax in the latter half of the books of *Samuel* as his power over his military subordinates becomes increasingly more attenuated and his obligations to maintain the authority of the monarchy come into conflict with his obligations to uphold the Mosaic Law. While the Bathsheba story might at first appear to be a momentary slip particularly given the fact that David appears to exhibit some remorse following God’s punishment, a careful analysis of the story reveals how in fact the story captures the inner conflict in David’s entire monarchy and explains his inability to regain the dignity he once possessed. The story opens with a foreboding introduction: “at the time the kings sally forth, David sent out Joab and his servants with him and all Israel.” At a time when other kings go out to do battle, David outsources. The people of Israel had wanted a king that would “go before them” in battle. David, the symbol of Israel’s military consolidation at the moment in which this consolidation has reached its greatest height, resides safely in his palace while others do his dirty work. Returning to Samuel’s initial warning to the people of Israel regarding kingship, we can now see how prophetic his words indeed were. Samuel had warned the people that they would get military consolidation under hierarchical restraints – now they have it. But this had proved unpersuasive to them since military consolidation is precisely what the people wanted. However, Samuel’s warning also contained another line of argument. As military concentration becomes stronger in the person of the king, argued Samuel, it will be harnessed by the monarchy for the purposes of also satisfying what we might call the needs of a regal court – hence the army will be used to satisfy the luxuriant inclinations of the king – “to plow his ground and reap his harvest…your daughters he will take as his confectioners.” (*I Samuel* 8:12) As David succeeds more and more in warding off Israel’s enemies, his court has become increasingly more luxuriant; he now has a harem – daughters of Israelite fathers who function as the King’s confection. Perhaps the Israelites did not notice Samuel’s warning about this part of kingship because they were too eager for a strong military leader. However, I suspect that they did not heed the warning because they accepted this part of kingship as an inevitable fact of monarchy. If kings are visible symbols of a nation’s greatness in relation to its rival – they must have regal courts free of vulgar want and necessity. Great kings live a world apart from soldiers, a point that the Hebrew text makes clear when it describes David’s fumbling attempt to cover up his crime with Bathsheba by sending her soldier husband home to have intercourse with her.

Samuel understood that the desire for a strong military king was inseparable from the luxuriant king that enjoys his court at the expense of others. Both give confidence to a people by appealing to their sight. If Israel is made more beautiful by triumphing over its enemies then its king must embody that beauty through a beautiful court. The kingship simultaneously asks for the selfless devotion of a great solider who cares only for the well being of the troops he leads into battle and yet at the same time it encourages a selfish centralization of luxuries and ornamentations in order to manifest its excellence to others. Other nations also live solely by sight rather than by the word of God, but the Hebrews were supposed to know that the fate of those nations was always tragic because of the inner contradiction of a life lived by our natural faculties. Israel was supposed to be different because it was the Chosen people set apart by the Law. In the end, Israel really proves to be no different than all of the others.

I believe that Michelangelo’s *David* is designed to capture this ambiguity in the biblical David in a manner that is similarly instructive to his fellow Florentines. Here we think we see a man who has it all – natural virtue and piety in perfect consonance. The statues’ nakedness suggests the innocence of the young shepherd boy who embodies Christian piety and yet the pose of the classical nude also suggests a pride and confidence in natural human abilities characteristic of classical virtue. The *David* therefore embodies everything that Florence has striven for in its seeking to harmonize the two divergent strands of Western thought. But the partially hidden sling in the left (*sinistra*) hand points to the fact that the combination requires some deception. There is no reason I know of that the statue could not have been designed with the sling positioned in the right hand; so then why make David a lefty? The Italian left – sinistra – was of course and still is commonly a euphemism for “sinister.” While this is weak evidence on its own, Michelangelo does clearly attempt to make the sling as subtle as possible suggesting that he is well aware of the weapon’s duplicitous role in the biblical story. The peculiar positioning of the work’s profile not only serves to draw attention to the nude body but it also makes it even more difficult to see the death-dealing weapon from the vantage point of the typically placed onlooker. [Figure 2 (this is the correct orientation in my opinion intended for the original placement of the statue)] Additionally, if it is true that, as some scholars believe, the statue was originally designed to be placed atop one of the buttresses of the Cathedral then this would have made the weapon all but invisible from the normal vantage point. [Figure 4][[10]](#footnote-10) A visitor to Florence might indeed only see the front and never detect the sling at all.

This dual perspective of insider and outsider affected by the manner that Michelangelo has crafted the *David* for its original location provides an instructive lesson in the true nature of the Florentine commonwealth. The outsider sees *David* in the same way that the city would like others to see Florence. Absent the sling, we see only the most harmonious combination of heroic virtue and simple piety. Though it was a serious weapon used throughout the Near East, the sling was not a manly form of combat since it is employed at a distance from the enemy. Had it been more conspicuous in the David, it would have compromised the unity of classical virtue and Judeo-Christian piety in the work. Hidden beneath the *David’s* hands and behind his back, we are reminded that it is an instrument of duplicity.

A Florentine resident would know what lies behind the plausive veneer and I believe might have appreciated the point that Michelangelo is making by implication. [[11]](#footnote-11) The city’s history of endless internal political struggles and foreign skirmishes reveals how really duplicitous one must be to maintain this kind of independence from imperial powers. Florence would like others to see itself in the terms stated in the 1294 decree for the construction of the Cathedral**: “**a people of noble blood [who] order their affairs in such a manner that their nobility and lofty sentiments shall be evident in their works.” It imagines itself as noble as Israel – God’s chosen people – a people, like David, after God’s own heart. Unfortunately, Florentines really know themselves better than this. To the outsider, Florence seems like a grand testament to human genius and the profound reverence for the works of God. To the insider, Florence is more complicated because it experiences the inner tension between natural human ambition and those loftier obligations to God. Michelangelo’s David captures this in an extraordinary way. The outsider would have seen the *David* without the sling – he simply sees natural virtue and piety harmoniously combined, but the insider, having become more familiar with the details up close, knows the secret weapon that makes this appearance possible. Florence is more like Israel than it even knows.

There has been a long debate about whether the statue is supposed to capture to moment before or after David slays the giant.[[12]](#footnote-12) Most art historians now seem inclined to the former interpretation. The evidence seems to be that there is a stone in David’s right hand that he is yet to launch. However, in the biblical account David grabs five stones from the creek; so it is possible that Michelangelo has his David still holding a second in reserve. Regardless, my point here is that it may have been Michelangelo’s purpose to make the answer to this question ambiguous in the statue. If we cannot discern the triumph in David’s eyes from the steady concentration that he would exhibited before having launched his weapon, or if we are forced to wonder how a man could have such repose before so terrifying a contest, then Michelangelo has succeeded in inspiring within the spectator the same wonder that must have struck the Israelites. In what lies David’s greatness? In what lies Florence’s?

1. Matthew Arnold. *Complete Prose Works*) Volume 5 (H. Super, Ed.) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1965) p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James Wetzel. Splendid Vices and Secular Virtues: Variations on Milbank's Augustine. The Journal of Religious Ethics, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Summer, 2004), pp. 271-30 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Anton Gill, *Il Gigante: Michelangelo, Florence, and the David 1492-1504* (Macmillan, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Of course Michelangelo had little choice in the size of the statue given the fact that he was commissioned to work from an 18 foot block of marble. Second, he had no choice of subject since he was commissioned to produce a David. Nevertheless, artists always possess a great deal of freedom in rendering their final subject. This while the statue would have to be giant and it would have to be David, it did not have to be David at the most inopportune moment of the story to be rendered gigantic. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All citations for the books of *Samuel* are from Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation With Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. , Charles de Tolnay, “Michelangelo Studies” ,The Art Bulletin, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Sep., 1940), pp. 127-137 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Panofsky, "The Neoplatonic Movement.” 177 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. C. R. Morey*,* Christian Art*. (*New York, London, Toronto: Longmans, Green*,* 1935) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There is a substantial debate among scholars about the original placement of the David. It was not decided until 1504 by a committee in Florence to place the statue on the rostra in front of the Palazzo delle Signoria. I find the argument that the David was originally designed as part of a program of prophets on the tribune of Cathedral most persuasive based on his careful examination of the record of debates among in the curia. If true, the David would have to face north rather than west making the sling difficult to discern. N. R. Parks, “The Placement of Michelangelo’s David: A Review of the Documents,” *The Art Bulletin* 57, no. 4 (1975): 560–570. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. During his work on the statue, Michelangelo constructed an edifice that would allow him to sculpt the David without anyone seeing the work. This was typical of Michelangelo who refused to allow his patrons to see their commissions during the execution of the works. Art historians have tended to see this as part of Michelangelo’s neurotic perfectionism or as a feature of his contempt for the interference of those who were inferior in talent and judgment (which for Michelangelo included just about everyone). I don’t deny this but I do think he may have also held a more sophisticated reason for secrecy until the work was complete. As I am suggesting here with the David, the full argument of Michelangelo’s work does not rest simply in this or that portion of the work. He is not simply a great technician that executes to perfection a nose or an arm, etc. Rather, the meaning of many of his works only come to light over a series of narrative steps that the observer must reach over the course of observation. If one saw the work before its completion, the spectator would miss the full breath of the work’s argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. H. Travers Newton and John R. Spencer, “On the Location of Leonardo’s Battle of Anghiari,” *The Art Bulletin* 64, no. 1 (March 1, 1982): 45–52. See also K. Weil-Garris, “On Pedestals: Michelangelo’s David, Bandinelli’s Hercules and Cacus and the Sculpture of the Piazza Della Signoria,” *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 20 (1983): 377–415. Charles Seymour, *Michelangelo's David: A search for identity*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1967), I41-55. Saul Levine, “The Location of Michelangelo’s David: The Meeting of January 25, 1504,” *The Art Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (March 1, 1974): 31–49. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)