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Simon Stevin's *Vita Politica*: Pre-provisional Morality?

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Abstract: The Dutch mathematician and engineer Simon Stevin (1548–1620) wrote a political handbook, *Vita Politica* (1590), in which he provided essential guidance for civic life amid the religious and political turbulence of the Eighty Years War. Descartes was certainly influenced by Stevin in mathematics, and this paper examines the possibility that some aspects of Stevin's political thought influenced Descartes in his formulation of the provisional morality in the *Discourse on Method*. The evidence is circumstantial, but the intellectual affinity between Stevin and Descartes is striking nonetheless. In any case, given Stevin's importance in the emergence of the mathematical science of nature, his political thought deserves more consideration than it customarily receives from those interested in early modern philosophy.

Some apology seems appropriate for drawing attention to a nearly forgotten political handbook written by a mostly unheard-of Dutch mathematician and engineer. Simon Stevin (1548–1620)—adviser and tutor of Prince Maurice of Nassau, quartermaster of the Dutch Republic's army, and founder of a school of engineering affiliated with Leiden University—is today most influential though hardly well known for developing and popularizing rules for calculating fractions with Arabic numerals in positional, decimal form. Stevin's interest in practical mathematics led him to encourage artisans (surveyors, tapestry merchants, wine gaugers, and so on) to use decimal divisions of their various units in order to ease calculations and commerce.¹

¹ See D. J. Struik's introduction to *De Thiende* in vol. II-A of *The Principal Works of Simon Stevin*, 5 vols., ed. E. Crone, E. Dijksterhuis, R. J. Forbes, M. G. J. Minnaert, and A. Pannekoek (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1955–1966); available online. Subsequent references to *The Principal Works* will be identified by *PW* together with a volume and page number.

His related works on arithmetic reveal a conception of numbers and of their relation to material nature that earned him a place in Jacob Klein's narrative recounting the origin of modern symbolic mathematics.² Accordingly, Stevin's thought mainly interests those who study science and mathematics in early modernity. And yet Stevin did not write in naive innocence of the political and human meaning of his intellectual labors.

The vast majority of Stevin's writings were not thematically political, even though they often served Prince Maurice's interests directly or indirectly. Obviously, Stevin's works dealing with commerce, hydrostatics, navigation, fortifications, and so on yielded advantages to the emerging Dutch republic, but Stevin thought of his mathematical work also in practical terms. In fact, he operated with an explicit understanding of theoretical science as integrated with practice. His views in this area may lack the complexity of their Baconian and Cartesian counterparts, but Stevin nonetheless embraced a characteristically modern humanitarian view of science: "The property and the end of theory is that it furnishes a sure foundation for the method of practical operation, in which, by closer and more painstaking care one may get as near to the perfection of the theory as the purpose of the matter requires for the benefit of man."³ In another passage, he compares theoreticians to people who cut down trees: "But if he were to cut down those trees to let them rot, without expecting any benefit of them, that would be acting foolishly."⁴ Thus, his mathematical and engineering writings serve political goals rather directly,⁵ but this does not necessarily mean he envisions a comprehensive scientific-political project comparable to that of modernity's philosophical founders. Still, Stevin's work shows remarkable affinity with that of Bacon and Descartes, and given Stevin's importance in the emergence of the

² Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans. Eva Brann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

³ Stevin, "Vant Menghen der Spiegheing en Daet" [On theory mixed with practice], in *Wiscons-tighe Ghedachtenissen* [Mathematical memoirs]; see *PW* III, 619. For the humanitarian character of modernity, see Richard Kennington, "Descartes and Mastery of Nature," in *Organism, Medicine, and Metaphysics*, ed. Stuart F. Spicker (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978), 201–23.

⁴ *PW* III, 621.

⁵ Indeed, in the preface "To the Reader" of *L'arithmétique* Stevin refers to arithmetic as "science utile à un chacun en particulier, & en general à toute République" (a science useful to each one in particular and in general to the whole republic) (*PW* II-B, 489, my translation). He served the prince unofficially for about ten years before he was appointed quartermaster (around 1593). "It is striking that from this time onwards all Stevin's works contributed to the construction and fortification of the northern Republic, or were written especially for the prince" (Jozef T. Devreese and Guido Vanden Berghel, *Magic Is No Magic* [Southampton, UK: WIT Press, 2008], 43).

mathematical science of nature, his political thought deserves more consideration than it customarily receives, or so I hope to show herein.

Stevin published one political text.⁶ His *Vita Politica, Het Burgherlick Leven* (1590) is a concise and practical handbook devoted specifically to political life as distinct from citizenship or politics generally. Writing during the religious and political turbulence of the Eighty Years War (1568–1648), Stevin deliberately avoided contentious theoretical questions in favor of negotiating troublesome uncertainties related to practical life. In broad strokes, Stevin was an engineer-mathematician, self-consciously engaged in innovative mathematics, who wrote a short guide to life during times of political unrest. The parallel with Descartes and the provisional morality of his *Discourse on Method* is too obvious to overlook. Consequently, and because analyses and explications of *Vita Politica* have appeared recently,⁷ in this paper I examine Stevin's text for signs of intellectual affinity with Descartes's more famous work. It is certain that Stevin influenced Descartes in his mathematical thinking, and it is just possible, though likely unprovable, that there was enough contact between the two for Stevin's *Vita Politica* to serve, in some fashion, as a source for Descartes's provisional morality. In any case, Stevin provides an interesting treatment of issues similar to those that occupied Descartes in formulating his *morale par provision*.

Nearly all of Stevin's works identify him on their title page as "of Bruges," and yet, from 1581 until his death in 1620, he lived in Leiden. He left Bruges in 1571 for reasons that are unknown. He showed no indication of any significant religious affiliation, but unreliable reports allege he was fleeing Catholic oppressors in favor of life among Calvinists in the north. However that may be, after leaving Bruges, he worked in Antwerp, spent many years traveling around Prussia, Poland, Sweden, and Norway, returned for a time to Bruges, and then finally settled for more than half his life in Leiden.⁸ It is

⁶ In *PW V*, 465–581, ed. and trans. Annie Romein-Verschoor. Hereafter page numbers cited parenthetically in the body of the paper refer to this edition. A French translation appeared in *Simon Stevin: De la vie civile, 1590*, ed. Catherine Secretan and Pim den Boer (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2005). For a translation into modern Dutch, see *Simon Stevin: Het Burgherlick Leven: Vita Politica*, ed. Pim den Boer (Utrecht: Bijleveld, 2001). Additional writings were published posthumously as *Materiae Politicae, Burgherlicke Stoffen* [Civic matters] (1649; available at books.google.com).

⁷ In addition to papers accompanying Secretan's French translation, see Catherine Secretan, "L'état de fait comme légitimité," *Études germaniques* 4 (1986): 418–34; Luc Duerloo, "Simon Stevin, penseur politique," in *Simon Stevin (1548–1620): L'émergence de la nouvelle science* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2004), 35–41; Catherine Secretan, "Simon Stevin's *Vita politica, Het Burgherlick Leven* (1590)," *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 28 (2012): 2–20.

⁸ E. J. Dijksterhuis, *Simon Stevin: Science in the Netherlands around 1600* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 4–5.

worth thinking about Stevin's relation to Bruges and to Leiden in connection with his *Vita Politica*. For in that short text, Stevin offers as a kind of centerpiece this general rule: "Everyone must always consider as his rightful authority those who at the present are actually governing the place where he chooses his dwelling" (493). Stevin chose to live in Leiden, but he continued to identify himself as from Bruges. Why? This question may be unanswerable, but it seems forced upon us because *Vita Politica* happens to be his only book whose title page identifies Stevin without also naming him as from Bruges.⁹ Stevin's name appears without reference to any city, which is curious for someone who consistently identified himself as an exile or, at the least, as an alien in the cities where he published (Antwerp, Leiden, and Rotterdam).

I. STEVIN'S CONNECTION TO DESCARTES

Jacob Klein examines the intellectual debt Descartes owes to Stevin in mathematics. Klein says Stevin "contributed more than anybody else to Descartes' discovery of Analytical Geometry."¹⁰ The connection is underplayed in the text of Klein's *Greek Mathematical Thought*, but his footnotes provide evidence that Descartes had direct familiarity with some of Stevin's work.¹¹ In particular, Stevin's effacement of the distinction between discrete and continuous quantity in favor of a "perfect correspondence" between number and magnitude shaped Descartes: "In this respect his influence on Descartes cannot be overstated."¹²

The evidence for further contact with Stevin is merely circumstantial, but highly suggestive nevertheless: Descartes went to Breda in the Netherlands to join the army of Prince Maurice by the summer of 1618, where he remained until April 1619. He met Isaac Beeckman there in November 1618; their intellectual kinship was founded in having arrived separately at the project of understanding nature mechanically and mathematically. Beeckman acted as a slightly older mentor to Descartes, who acted as an intellectual apprentice. Descartes wrote to Beeckman in January 1619 that he was engaged in "painting, military architecture and above all, Flemish."¹³

⁹ Stevin's name does not appear on the title page or anywhere in the text of *De Havenvindig* [The haven-finding art] (1599).

¹⁰ "On a Sixteenth-Century Algebraist," in *Jacob Klein: Lectures and Essays*, ed. Robert B. Williamson and Elliott Zuckerman (Annapolis, MD: St. John's College Press, 1986), 40–41.

¹¹ Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought*, nn281–306.

¹² Klein, "Sixteenth-Century Algebraist," 40.

¹³ *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 3, ed. John Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge

That Descartes took the trouble to learn Flemish has inclined some commentators to suggest that he may have studied directly under Stevin, but the fact that he had to ask Beeckman to translate a mathematical problem from Flemish for him in November indicates that his grasp of Flemish would not have been nearly sufficient to enable him to follow lectures in Flemish at this time. But even given these language difficulties, he probably built up a renewed familiarity with applied mathematics in Maurice's army, and this is something he could easily have ignored since leaving La Flèche four years earlier.¹⁴

Given Stevin's role with Maurice's army, it is difficult to imagine that Descartes did not encounter Stevin's work on military architecture. He certainly examined some of Stevin's problems in hydrostatics.¹⁵

Stevin's *Vita Politica* was reprinted ten times, which attests to its popularity. Beeckman knew the unpublished appendix, which treats Machiavelli and the question whether the prince should mix virtue with vice or should guard it pure, without contamination. (Stevin chose the latter.)¹⁶ It stands to reason, then, that Beeckman also knew the published text of *Vita Politica*. Descartes may never have been able to read it,¹⁷ but Beeckman might have communicated it to him.

II. OVERVIEW OF *VITA POLITICA*

Published in 1590 in Dutch, the *Vita Politica* runs about thirty-five pages in a modern book. Stevin situates the book relative to the "great changes" in government, which are the issue of the Eighty Years War, and which give rise to "great differences of opinion among people on what belongs to good citizenship" (475). Stevin says he will "only touch upon the principal and most essential doubtful points, on which there are daily the most violent differences of opinion among people" (483). These opinions are not merely speculative commitments regarding the nature of citizenship; he speaks, rather, of bad judgment leading to actions that disrupt the whole community. Stevin neither takes us through the multiple opinions nor does he bypass the dispute by some speculative insight. He counters every "misconception" with

University Press, 1991), 1.

¹⁴ Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 67. For Beeckman's connection to Stevin, see Devreese and Vanden Berghe, *Magic Is No Magic*, 273–74.

¹⁵ Gaukroger, *Descartes*, 84–85.

¹⁶ See *La vie civile*, ed. Secretan, 72–86.

¹⁷ The book was not translated into any language prior to the twentieth century (Pim den Boer, "La vie politique selon Stevin et Juste Lipse," in *La vie civile*, ed. Secretan, 192).

arguments that point to a righteous civic life (*recht burgherlick leven*), which is his proper concern.

At the end of chapter 1, he distinguishes *burgherlick leven* (civic life) from the *burgherlick persoon* (civic person) and from what he calls *burgherlickheyt*, which ordinarily means “constitution” but also seems to mean “citizenship” or “good citizenship” (as both his English and French translators indicate).¹⁸ The civic person is one who acts in such a way that the “greatest stability and welfare of the community...in this life” result from his actions; civic life is this “proper practice” itself, which could belong to a ruler or a subject, to a citizen or a noncitizen (489). Stevin emphasizes that he is concerned specifically with civic life and not *burgherlickheyt*. In isolating civic life from the civic person and from citizenship, good citizenship, or the constitution, he makes a precise abstraction. Citizenship varies in different political communities, but civic life is needed in all. A civic person is a whole, but civic life is a practice identifiable without saying what place it occupies in a person’s life. To address civic life in this formal manner may not be a provisional morality, but it is a limited morality, a public morality, a morality available to anyone anywhere. It guides conduct without addressing ultimate and disputed questions; it remains within the horizon of the public good in this life.

The book has eight chapters devoted to the following concerns:

1. Defining civic life
2. Identifying the rightful authority governing a citizen
3. How to behave as a good citizen in civil wars
4. How to behave in government
5. How to behave under laws we regard as not binding, dubious, or contradictory
6. Whether religion is necessary
7. How we should behave in religion
8. Of civic life in general

¹⁸ Stevin grudgingly places in the margin of his text, alongside “certain good Dutch words, their inferior customary Greek and Latin equivalents” (473). *Burgherlick leven* is equated to *vita politica*, *burgherlick persoon* to *politicus*, and *burgherlickheyt* to *politia*. The last term is the most troublesome to put into English. In chapter 1, when he is introducing these terms, Stevin makes clear the primary meaning is “constitution” or “regime”: “Because the organization of the citizens receives its form from the above-mentioned laws and common rules, they are called *burgherlickheyt*” (489). Romein-Verschoor renders this as “good citizenship,” which seems difficult in this context, but necessary in others. Secretan resorts to a variety of locutions: *civilité*, *citoyenneté*, *constitution*, and (once) *la vie civile*, but that seems to be a mistake (see her *De la vie civile*, 46).

The centerpiece of his argument is the following “indubitable general rule” (*seker ghemeene reghel*),¹⁹ also known as the *burgherlicke reghel*:²⁰

Everyone must always consider as his rightful authority those who at the present are actually governing the place where he chooses his dwelling, without concerning himself about the question of whether they or their predecessors have reached their position justly or unjustly. (493)

According to the rule, one must either abide by the laws—even manifestly repressive and tyrannical laws—or, with some qualifications to be considered below, one must leave the country. The *burgherlicke reghel* is qualified in the final chapter, where it becomes clear that Stevin allows for citizens to engage in peaceful and respectful efforts to change laws and political conditions within their country, but if those efforts fail, citizens must either submit to the laws or leave the country, either of which leaves the laws in place. A third option is to resort to what Stevin calls “honest force,” which requires one to leave the country and attack openly from the outside. In all of this, Stevin grants extraordinary scope to individual judgment. That is, he offers no guidance for when it is right to submit, to endeavor to change the laws, to leave, or to attack the regime. Each decision is entirely up to individual judgment.

In fact, Stevin reveals the necessity of this approach in the dedicatory letter, where he explains to Govert Brassers, burgomaster of Delft, that he has been induced to write this text in part by his “conviction” about the wonderful hidden properties of the Dutch language.²¹ He adds parenthetically, “And who is not governed [*gheregiert*] by his own conviction?” (477). This apparently casual remark is crucial to the intelligibility of the whole work. In at least two other passages he grants extraordinary scope to individual judgment (*oirdeel*) and to what he also gives other names, using various words that might be rendered as “opinion,” “sentiment,” “inclination,” or “feeling” (*vermoeden, ghemoet, ghevoelen*).

First, when he discusses how various kinds of laws relate to one another, Stevin mentions unwritten laws, which originate in habit and declare the intention of the community in practice. He recognizes that these laws enjoy great authority because people abide by them although they are not even

¹⁹ Romein-Verschoor’s “indubitable” for *seker* sounds Cartesian; the word might also be translated “sure” or “certain.” Secretan gives *certaine*.

²⁰ When this term appears in chapter 5, Stevin equates it to the Latin *axioma politicum* (534).

²¹ Stevin’s thoughts on the superiority and antiquity of Dutch are fascinating. See his “Uytspraeck van de Weerdicheyt der Duytsche Tael” [Discourse on the worth of the Dutch language], preface to *De Beghinselen der Weeghconst* [The elements of the art of weighing], in *PW I*, esp. 89.

formulated in words. Speaking of all laws, he says, “laws bind us because they are accepted by the opinion of the community” (545). Law depends ultimately on most individuals’ complying with law in accord with their own judgment. Second, in another passage, Stevin emphasizes the importance of religion for inducing people to good behavior. Making philosophical arguments in favor of virtue, he says, is like knocking at the door of a deaf man; these arguments have no purchase on people, often not even on philosophers themselves. But religious arguments about God, who sees men in solitude, knows their thoughts, and has power to punish wrongdoers, are politically necessary. Indeed, these arguments are particularly powerful when they are ingrained from childhood, for, Stevin says, “what we feel is imprinted in human nature” (551). When these beliefs take deep root in people, “they dread neither loss of property and life nor terrible tortures of the body, but consider themselves as happiest of all in the greatest suffering” (565). Stevin sees the political advantage derivable from religious belief despite also seeing what alarmed Hobbes in the “feare of power invisible.”²² Both of these texts reflect Stevin’s deference to the fact that people act based on what seems true to them. He is an advocate of reason, and he criticizes those who judge without experience or otherwise carelessly, but he also, like Machiavelli, argues on the basis of how men actually are: “We shall take the matter not as it might be desired to be, but as it is” (559). Both passages reveal a deference to the power, if not the wisdom, of individual opinion or sentiment.²³

A final general remark addresses Stevin’s relation to the political thought of his contemporaries. His emphasis on individual judgment shows him to be engaged with Calvinist thought, but, especially on the issue of the right of

²² See *Leviathan*, chaps. 6 and 12. Among those believers whose religion is not permitted in their country, Stevin distinguishes three kinds: those who believe without agitating the public order, those who propagate views in secret and deny doing so, and those who do so openly and are willing to suffer for it. The first are good citizens (565); the second are not, animated as they are by an “uncivic erring inclination” (565–67); the third give the impression of righteousness, but they cannot be good citizens. He recommends that they “go to the woods or wildernesses, very far away, where no men ever come, and there profess it without being hindered by anyone.” Those who spread religion forbidden by law are revolutionaries (567–69). Duerloo speculates that Govert Brassers, to whom the text is dedicated, belongs to the first class (“Penseur politique,” 39). This fascinating suggestion reveals what might be Stevin’s practical object with this text. Given the connection between opinion and action, if he can render an opinion publicly and politically ineffectual, he can neutralize and ultimately wither away the opinion. The first class of believer deprives religion of any public effect except what is politically useful. That is a first step toward debilitating the opinion itself because an opinion without effect is like theory without practice. For more on Brassers’s significance, see Boer, “Vie politique,” in *La vie civile*, 195–96.

²³ For further emphasis on the importance of individual judgment, see Stevin’s *Appendice* in *De la vie civile*, ed. Secretan, esp. 79–80.

resistance against tyranny, Stevin rejects Calvinism. While he lists divine law as one of the three kinds of rules human beings need to consider, his insistence on the political importance of religion falls exclusively on its temporal dimensions, specifically its role in encouraging civil behavior. Beyond that, he seems uninterested. He introduces the necessity of religion by noting, "Men's views about [religion] vary widely, some considering it a useless torment, with which people have always plagued each other from time immemorial" (549). This is the only opinion he mentions.

The other pole of contemporary political thought he engages is the neo-Stoicism of Justus Lipsius. Stevin's book stands in sharp stylistic contrast to Lipsius's 1589 Latin text, entitled *Politicorum, sive Civilis Doctrinae Sex Libros* [Six books of politics or of civil doctrine], which expounds in a few hundred pages a theory of politics, more or less in the mirror-of-princes tradition, and which is replete with quotations from classical authorities. Lipsius was a celebrated professor at Leiden University, having published an impressive edition of Tacitus and a popular neo-Stoic text entitled *De Constantia* (1584). This latter book, which is rather a mirror for subjects,²⁴ gives a helpful contrast with Stevin on the question of resistance to tyrants. The *De Constantia* presents a dialogue set in Liege between a character who is fleeing Louvain for Vienna in order to escape political oppression and his friend, who persuades him that he should endure:

And therefore not so much our country as our passions are to be fled:
and this mind of ours is to be so fram'd and establish'd, as that we may
find repose in the midst of troubles, and peace in the midst of wars.²⁵

Lipsius opposes any resistance to tyrants, and in this he stands at the opposite pole of then-current Calvinist thinking, which defended such resistance as lawful.²⁶ Against Lipsius's neo-Stoicism and Calvinist resistance arguments, Stevin articulated a distinctive third position, which in some respects resembles Stoic resignation, although it is not that, and in others resembles

²⁴ In the *Politica*, Lipsius writes, "The work which I now present to you is a politics. In which it is my aim, just as in *De constantia* I equipped citizens for endurance and obedience, now to equip those who rule for governing." Quoted in Secretan, "Simon Stevin's *Vita Politica*," 15.

²⁵ Justus Lipsius, *De Constantia*, near the end of book 1, chap. 1.

²⁶ Secretan cites Theodore Beza's *Du droit des Magistrats* (1574) and a second text, *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos* (1581), which she determines to be anonymous ("Stevin's *Vita politica*," 13). Duerloo identifies the author of this work as Philippe du Plessis-Mornay. He also gives a brief summary of its content on the question of regicide, along with similar consideration of a few other authors, including the radical antityrannical views of Juan de Mariana, SJ, in *De Regi et Regis Institutione* (1599). See "Penseur politique," 37–38.

a defense of tyrannicide, although it is not that either. As we will see, Stevin both does and does not counsel submission to those in power; he both does and does not allow private judgment contrary to those in power.

III. STEVIN'S *VITA POLITICA* AND DESCARTES'S *MORALE PAR PROVISION*

A certain intellectual resonance obtains between some aspects of Stevin's *Vita Politica* and Descartes's provisional morality. There is not perfect agreement or consistency, but I entertain the possibility that Descartes thought through what Stevin had written before he developed his own, much more complex, provisional morality.

In the second chapter's title, Stevin asks which is the rightful authority governing a citizen. Stevin has already noted that each is governed by his own conviction (*vermoeden*), and the chapter proceeds by considering whether the laws do or do not conflict with one's own views (*ghevoelen*).²⁷ One might have a conflict with any of three kinds of law (civil, natural, and divine), or one might suppose the laws contradict each other. When the laws do not conflict and they agree completely with a man's views, no instruction is needed: a man should follow "his own inclination" (*sijn eyghen ghemoet*) (489–91), in which case one follows the law accidentally. When there is conflict, Stevin regards it as nevertheless "evident that everyone has to be a faithful and loyal subject of his authorities" (491). This leads immediately to the question of who the rightful authority is. The response employs a characteristic Stevin-trope linking *reason* and *experience*, much as he links *theory* and *practice*: "Many simple people without civic experience misbehave greatly therein through misconception, slandering their truly legitimate authorities and praising one which is not legitimate" (491). Those without experience are given to misconception, and this leads to misbehavior.²⁸ Some adhere to this ruler and others to that; some appeal to this law and others to that. As we will see, Stevin's view seems to be that each person actually is ruled by his own

²⁷ See 477 and 489. *Vermoeden* (Latin *opinio* in the margin) means "conjecture" or "supposition." In chap. 2, Stevin first uses *ghevoelen*, which means "feeling" or "sense," but then he returns to the earlier word.

²⁸ Part of Stevin's point is that opinion affects practice; there is no simple isolation of theory from practice. Descartes suggests that he can separate them, at least in his own case and provisionally. He tries to construct a situation where his theoretical inquiries have no public consequences and pose no threat to anyone. At least, this is the surface of the *Discourse on Method*. The reality is more complex, for, even within the narrative of the *Discourse*, Descartes's inquiries give him a reputation, and his concern for that reputation prevents him from enjoying solitude. Moreover, Descartes clearly envisions and seems to intend public consequences from his *Discourse*.

judgment about which authority deserves to be heeded. What is more obvious is that there is conflict among citizens about which authority to obey.

With his eye on this conflict, Stevin offers his “indubitable” or “certain” and universal political rule, the *burgherlicke reghel* quoted above. According to this rule, one must recognize as the rightful authority whoever actually rules in the place one chooses to live, without regard to how that person gained power. Stevin proceeds by reducing the justness of any other claim to legitimacy to complete uncertainty. If, Stevin argues, one may ignore the present authority in favor of a prior authority in whose rule one thinks there may be greater justice, one must admit that comparable claims could be made in the name of even earlier authorities. There is no simply just claim to rule but only an indefinite series of claims to rule, and a person may adhere to any one of them “with equal right.” There are no “natural reasons” enabling us to single out one of the anterior “unjust changes” as decisive (493–95).

There is an affinity here with Descartes’s first maxim of morality, which, in simplified form, is to obey the laws and customs of his country. Descartes methodically constructs his practical uncertainty in solitude and introduces a maxim that affords provisional certainty or, more precisely, that removes practical doubt. Stevin argues that public quarrels about the justice of claims to rule would be “endless” and would produce public “uncertainty” (493). His *burgherlicke reghel* sets aside the inquiry into the justice of claims to rule and gives us a completely clear guide for action.

Stevin’s argument for the rightness of acceding to the present, actual ruler proceeds by conceiving each citizen as an outsider to his country. Suppose you want to live in France. “Does not reason demand that this should be done with the intention and the will to conform to the government which you will find there?” (495). Or are you to investigate whether that ruler came to power justly? The quest becomes immediately absurd; the many known or alleged injustices in the succession of rulers, he says, and the infinite and unknown past defeat us. And just as the person immigrating to France would be without allegiances regarding transfers of power in France’s near or distant past, so too each current citizen of France should be without “bitter and blinding” passionate attachments to prior rulers and their descendants (497). The *burgherlicke reghel*, Stevin says, applies generally and with certainty to everyone everywhere.

This attitude is also similar to that of Descartes’s first maxim. One conforms in one’s deeds to the laws, but one need not adhere to them as genuinely

just or good or deserving of adherence, except insofar as they conduce to public order. And in this respect, there is some difference from Descartes's intention. Stevin says the civic person acts such that the greatest stability and welfare of the community in this life result from his actions. Descartes, of course, is satisfied with less. In the first five parts of the *Discourse*, Descartes shows indifference to the well-being of any particular community while he pursues his philosophical interests; he wants not to disturb, but initially he shows no interest in benefiting others. When we consider the full scope of Descartes's philosophical ambition, we see that he clearly means to have a transformative effect on every society. Still, his maxims are presented as providing for a private life and as contributing to personal satisfactions, without detriment to others. Thus Descartes officially recommends his path to no one, but Stevin speaks to all.

As Descartes's maxim appears to weaken attachment to the political order, so Stevin anticipates the objection that his own *burgherlike reghel* might appear to weaken loyalties. He asks whether a subject may aid his recently deposed sovereign prince, to whom he feels he owes allegiance in conscience. Of course one may, Stevin replies, but only in the proper manner, which is to leave the country where the new authorities one wishes to oppose hold power and to join with the dispossessed prince or with some foreign ally. Then one may honorably enter the country "from outside as a professed enemy." Stevin blames the person who feigns to be a subject and seeks to harm the government from within, which he calls treason. People owe the government "homage and obedience as is due to their rightful authorities" (499), but this homage and obedience is also prepared to settle on new rulers as soon as they are actually ruling. In an image that captures his understanding that political attachments are conventional, Stevin compares the political community to a boarding house where the owner makes the rules. If one wishes to stay in the house, one must follow the rules, whatever they may be (575–77).

According to Stevin, then, one's options are: (a) obedience to the reigning power; (b) treason; (c) leave the country; and (d) leave the country and oppose it with a rightful authority from the outside. *Political life*, therefore, necessarily involves allegiance to the ruling power. If you do not abide by the rules, you are not genuinely part of the community, much as one who departs from the rules of chess is not playing chess. Within the community one is either political or treasonous; the one who leaves the political community joins some other community and so lives a political life. The conviction Stevin

urges on his readers is a kind of formal rule of adherence or of recognition of the reigning power. He expects one not to engage in speculation as to the rightness of the rule of those who rule; such speculation would necessarily be interminable and thus paralyzing. One gets on with political life.

Descartes's maxim shows the subtlety of Stevin's position. When Descartes adopts the maxim to obey the laws and customs of the country in which he resides, he uses the local standards and practices to settle his uncertainty in which he has recently placed himself. But the maxim itself to adhere to those standards and practices is Descartes's own standard. Descartes obeys the laws because he has chosen to adopt the first maxim, not because he recognizes himself as owing obedience. Similarly, Stevin's citizen, whether he stays and obeys a new authority or he leaves in order to reenter the country as a professed enemy, also obeys his own conviction. Stevin offers nothing about the rightness or the wrongness of staying or leaving. The question is irrelevant; people hold different opinions. "Learned and experienced citizens consider that...a man who is to take part in or to be employed in the government should know first of all and constantly bear in mind that the community consists of people...of different views and inclinations, one contrary to the other" (515). Stevin does not try to change anyone's mind. He does not insist on right reason as the guide for human actions. The only bad choice is to feign to be a subject and to play the part of the hidden enemy of the community. To do so is, he will say in the eighth chapter, "uncivic stupidity" (579), which is "worse than animal stupidity" (573). The social animals, like bees, ants, and storks, at least recognize that a common life is impossible unless common rules are obeyed; only human beings aim to be a part of a community and not part of it at the same time. One cannot be part of a community without participating in its common rules, and so Stevin's *burgherlicke reghel* has some claim to be both as certain and universal as he claims.

It is not implausible that Descartes, who has a more ambitious philosophical intention than does Stevin, might have arrived at the first maxim upon consideration of the possibilities laid out by Stevin. Descartes would not want to be as openly relativistic as Stevin is,²⁹ but already in Stevin we see the beginning of the detachment of one's actions from any community, and simultaneously we see the beginning of autonomy, in the sense of ownership of the principle of one's actions. And the fact that Stevin insists his rule is

²⁹ "À une époque où la principale préoccupation de tous les auteurs politiques liés de près ou de loin à la révolte des Pays-Bas était de justifier les événements à partir de principes universels et indépendants des circonstances, le point de vue relativiste de Stevin est ici surprenant" (Secretan, *De la vie civile*, 42n19).

perfectly general means that it applies to any citizen anywhere. Descartes's maxim and Stevin's rule each dissolve the bonds of attachment to communities. Stevin's rule identifies the person as, in the modern sense, an individual, that is, as detached from others and as the same person, no matter his or her political circumstances: under any conditions, one has the power to choose allegiance or nonallegiance.³⁰ Stevin provides a crystal-clear alternative to the Aristotelian thesis that he who is by nature not a part of a political community is like "an isolated piece at draughts" (*Politics* 1253a6).

When we turn to the second maxim, there is much less to consider. His clearest remark is parenthetical and brief, but he does address the problem of the inconstancy of human judgment. Stevin states that the necessary adherence to the laws of one's country, despite one's finding them unreasonable, extends not only to changes in the laws over time, but also to changes in one's own judgment about the goodness of the laws from day to day: "we frequently consider bad one day what we regard as good the next day" (577). Our formal embrace of the laws must override our shifting views day to day. This is not identical to Descartes's second maxim, but it is a similar kind of commitment to one judgment (to live by the laws of the land) and to abide by that commitment even when it no longer seems like such a good idea. The endorsement of the *burgherlicke reghel*, again, is a kind of triumph for individual conscience, but it is not a shifting and unstable conscience. One has to set aside those vacillations and cling firmly to the prior judgment, according to which one is attached to the community.

Finally, Descartes writes:

My third maxim was to try always to conquer myself rather than fortune, and to change my desires rather than the order of the world, and generally to accustom myself to believe that there is nothing entirely in our power except our thoughts, so that after we have done our best regarding things that are external to us, all that we fail to accomplish is, as far as we are concerned, absolutely impossible.³¹

That this is merely the appearance of Stoicism is confirmed by Descartes's reference in the same paragraph to philosophers who "persuaded themselves

³⁰ "On se tromperait en lisant dans cette recommandation de l'exil une forme de résignation. Il s'agit au contraire d'une défense très évidente de l'autonomie du sujet et d'une valorisation de sa liberté de choix" (ibid., 20). For more on this theme, see Catherine Secretan, "L'Émergence de l'idée d'«individu» dans la *Vita Politica* de Simon Stevin," *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* 2 (1990): 45–60.

³¹ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Richard Kennington, ed. Pamela Kraus and Frank Hunt (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2007), 29.

so perfectly that nothing was in their power but their thoughts.” By the placement of the adverbs, Descartes shows that he regards the Stoic view as a mistake: some things *are* in our power, even if not entirely so. What is not perfectly in our power is still in our power to some extent. Stevin’s final political injunction, to which I now turn, shows the same sort of neo-neo-Stoicism.

Stevin concludes his book by asking whether submission to existing authority means one must never change bad laws or customs. He says the changes must be done “properly by those who have the legal power to do so” (577). Until they are changed, those who live under these laws must endure them, but not in a simply Stoic fashion. Much as Descartes advises first doing one’s best to change circumstances before accepting them as necessary, so Stevin recommends a series of options for changing the laws. First, one might respectfully and reasonably urge and advise rulers to change the laws. Second, one might entreat them with “requests, prayers, and supplications.” Third, one might offer compensation in money or goods. And if none of these works, then one must submit and conform. That is, one must conform if one remains in the country. Stevin invents a striking method to oppose “cruel tyrants” and “to change bad laws” (577–79).

First of all one must withdraw from the dominion of those whom one wishes to oppose and go to a place where the present government allows you to pursue your ends. When you are there, you must...admonish or command your adversaries to do what you regard as proper. If they comply therewith, you attain your end. If the contrary happens, you may openly declare war on them, take up arms, and thus force them to do it or await your fate. But the man who considers himself unable to bring such an important matter to a successful conclusion must leave everything to take its own course. (579)

This open attack, originating from outside, on what had recently been one’s country Stevin calls “honest force.” To remain within the country while working against its laws and organizing secret rebellion is “disloyal and uncivic stupidity” that leads to great misery. One must advise, beg, or bribe one’s way to political change. After that, either one submits and endures, or one leaves the country, either for good or in order to return with honest force. This is not Stoicism, although there is an element of endurance for most people. Justus Lipsius had advised simple submission to authorities, and Stevin has a place for Stoic constancy, as does Descartes. Nevertheless, in both latter cases, it comes after or at least alongside the alternative of energetic efforts to change circumstances. The title page of Stevin’s book shows a hand manipulating a golden compass, and the image is surrounded by the

words “*Labore et constantia*” (With labor and constancy). It encapsulates nicely the teaching on the final page of the book.

It also sheds some light on a strange remark Stevin makes in the beginning. There he notes the unusual shortness of his work, which, he suggests, might reasonably generate complaint. He attributes this feature to his love of brevity and to his “present mathematical work” (481). It seems likely that this signifies more than his being too busy to write more. Had he meant that, his style would be to say so directly. So how does his mathematical work explain the brevity of his text? In mathematics he places priority on practice over theory. Practice must be informed by theory, but theory is for practice. I suggest that his mathematical work has shown him that some theoretical investigations are irrelevant to fruitful practice. People disagree about the justice of this or that claim to rule, about the nature of citizenship itself, about the best form of government, and so on. A citizen might raise theoretical questions about these sorts of things, but even if one can know the truth for oneself, not much political theorizing is necessary to solve the practical problems citizens face. Moreover, no matter what one discovers, others will hold other views. And who is not ruled by his own conviction? Stevin does not ask what the conviction is or whether it is good or true; he makes a practical argument about political life in the light of what seems to be an undeniable truth. And it seems to me that Descartes is swimming more deeply in the same waters when he makes the *ego*, which both is and is not the genius René Descartes, an apparently indubitable starting point in the search for certain knowledge, which is methodically accessible to all. Descartes systematically excludes from, say, physics any question that cannot be answered with indubitable certainty. Stevin does not pretend, as Descartes sometimes does, that everyone’s power of judgment is naturally equal, although he does regard individual judgment as equally authoritative in each individual. Both approaches depend on the power of certainty, which is not quite the same thing as truth, although it is often a forceful substitute.

Descartes famously says that his morality consists of “three or four maxims.” The great mathematician’s inability to be sure which is the correct number stems, I think, from the fact that what might constitute the fourth maxim stands on a different plane from the other three. The first three are rules of action, but the fourth establishes Descartes’s choice of the philosophic life as opposed to any other.³² Descartes’s account of the best life is

³² See the first and fifth paragraphs of the third part of the *Discourse*.

notoriously vague, but at least he addresses the question. In his published writings, Stevin seems not to have anything analogous to this, which is one sign of the limit of his thought. He has chosen a way of life, but he does not seem to have given an account of that choice in such a way as to constitute a comprehensive reflection on the human good. Stevin appeals to “the greatest stability and welfare of the community...in this life” (489), but he does not address in detail what this is.

IV. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I return to the question of Stevin's identification with Bruges. The affiliation appears on the title page of works published before and after *Vita Politica*. It is possible, then, that the omission of “Bruges” from *Vita Politica* is a meaningless error. Alternatively, Stevin may have deliberately removed it because declaring his affiliation with Bruges, from which he emigrated, might weaken the force of the *burgherlicke reghel*. While either account may explain the absence of “Bruges” from *Vita Politica*, neither explains its presence on the title page of virtually every other book he wrote. It may be impossible to know whether this discrepancy depends on any intelligible principle, but, given the care with which he seems to have written, it is reasonable to look for one.

The following speculation offers an interesting way to account for both facts. Perhaps Stevin normally identifies with Bruges despite being outside of it in order to show that his affiliation with Prince Maurice was not an accident of birth, which gave him reason to be in the Catholic South. Choice, not chance, determines his circumstances.³³ “Simon Stevin of Bruges” living in and writing for the benefit of the Protestant North signifies political upheaval. In the letter prefacing *Vita Politica*, Stevin mentions his *mathematical* work as something he hopes will be “a useful service to the whole country [*landt*]” (481). This somewhat paradoxical suggestion that mathematical work is primarily ordered to the well-being of his own country seems at odds with the universality of mathematical knowledge and with the fact that some of his early mathematical works were published in Latin or French. Nevertheless, he deliberately shifted to writing exclusively in Dutch for the particular benefit of his own countrymen.³⁴ On this interpretation, which should not be

³³ Descartes said he himself lived in the Netherlands “non ex forte nascendi, fed ex delectu” (not by lot of being born, but from choice) (“Epistola ad G. Voetium,” in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vol. 8, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery [Paris: Vrin, 1996], 110).

³⁴ This is at most a partial explanation. According to Stevin, Dutch is the language “capable of

pushed too far, especially considering the humanitarian character of science according to Stevin, his mathematical works have a relatively narrow national focus. Meanwhile, *Vita Politica* may be understood as having more immediately a universal audience. In it he speaks simply as Simon Stevin, a modern individual with no natural political affiliation, and he speaks to those in all political circumstances. True, his mathematical writings are also transferable across political boundaries, but it is as if Stevin writes *Vita Politica* as his most universal book, as a book that speaks the truth to anyone anywhere. By removing the reference to Bruges and not replacing it with his adopted home of Leiden, Stevin speaks politically but without political allegiances. By speaking of political life without regard to any specific political community, Stevin speaks to everyone everywhere. Granted, his text remained parochial, but this does not prove his intention was not more ambitious.³⁵

describing Nature's properties most thoroughly" (PWI, 93).

³⁵ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Third Jacob Klein Conference (2016) at Providence College. I am grateful to the organizers of that conference, especially Richard F. Hassing, for providing the occasion to pursue my study of Simon Stevin. I am also grateful to the editor of this journal, Timothy W. Burns, for his careful comments that led to improvements in this paper.