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WHEN VIRTUE INVERTS - Freedom, Coercion and the Institutions That Keep Their Names

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Article

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WHEN VIRTUE INVERTS

Freedom, Coercion and the Institutions That Keep Their Names

Abstract

Moral philosophy explains how a virtue goes wrong in two ways: as an excess or deficiency on a mean, or as a privation, the absence of a good that ought to be present. Neither explains a recurrent political phenomenon: institutions that keep working, and keep their names, after their moral substance has been replaced, such as the punctual court that issues terror or the fluent press that issues propaganda. This article argues that such cases are not diminished virtue but inverted virtue. When freedom in a domain of life is taken over by a coercing power rather than merely reduced, the discipline of that domain keeps running under its old name but serves the power that holds it. The argument is situated against Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, Foot and MacIntyre, against the literature on institutional corruption, capture and decoupling, and against the tradition of political language. A small formal apparatus serves as a tool for precision and refutability, and the account is applied to seven catalogues of virtue. It explains why the most dangerous corruption looks like order, why audits of form certify captured institutions, why removing an occupier does not restore what it occupied, and why responsibility inside such institutions tracks the exit left to each agent.

Keywords: virtue ethics; corruption; institutional capture; freedom; domination; political legitimacy; responsibility; authoritarianism

Introduction

Consider a society in which the courts sit every day, verdicts are handed down on schedule, procedures are impeccable, and the whole apparatus is bent to the will of a single power. What has happened to the virtue of justice there? It is tempting to say that there is "too little justice". But nothing about the machinery is little: the courts work at full capacity, often harder than before. It is equally tempting to say that justice is "absent". But every office is staffed, every form filed and every sentence executed. What is missing is not a quantity of justice but the thing that made it justice, and something determinate has taken that thing's place. The political vocabulary of the twentieth century already has a word for what such a courtroom produces. That word is terror. It is not less justice but justice's opposite, wearing justice's robes and keeping justice's name.

The case is not exotic. The show trial, the "people's" press, the compulsory "voluntary" association and the surveillance programme called care share its structure. So do quieter contemporary forms: courts that remain formally independent while their composition is engineered (Scheppele, 2018), elections held on time that the incumbent cannot lose (Levitsky and Way, 2010), and information regimes that govern by managed consent rather than open fear (Guriev and Treisman, 2022). In each, the institution has not been destroyed but occupied. Its form is conserved, its name is conserved, and its output now runs against the people it was built to serve.

The received accounts of corruption fall silent before this phenomenon. Virtue ethics knows two theories of how a virtue goes wrong. The doctrine of the mean treats corruption as a fall to excess or defect, so that the corrupted state is a lesser or greater quantity of the same good (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II.6). The doctrine of privation treats evil as the absence of a good that ought to be present (Augustine, *Enchiridion* 11; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 48). The mean cannot call the occupied court "too little" justice, and privation cannot call it an absence. The social sciences describe the phenomenon closely, as goal displacement, capture, ceremonial decoupling and institutional corruption. But, as the next section argues, they do not explain together why the occupied form is a determinate opposite rather than a generic malfunction, why it keeps the virtue's name, and why it does not recover when the occupier leaves.

The substantive problem this article addresses is therefore the occupation of virtue: what a virtue and its institutions become when a power takes over the domain in which freedom was exercised, why the result keeps the virtue's name, and what this means for the people who live under it. It asks three questions:

- **RQ1.** What happens to a virtue, and to the institutions that house it, when freedom in its domain is replaced by a power rather than merely reduced?
- **RQ2.** How does that phenomenon differ from what existing accounts of virtue corruption, vice, institutional failure and moral transformation describe?
- **RQ3.** What follows for the understanding of power, coercion and responsibility, and for the diagnosis, design and recovery of social institutions?

The answer to RQ1 is that the virtue *inverts*. A virtue is freedom exercised in a determinate domain of human life. When freedom is replaced, the discipline proper to the domain keeps running and keeps the domain's name, but it now serves the power that holds it. The result is not less of the virtue but its opposite, under the same name. The contribution claimed is philosophical. A small formal apparatus is used as a tool to make the argument precise, testable against counter-examples, and applicable to catalogues of virtue that its author did not write. It is not offered as the contribution itself.

The article proceeds as follows. The literature review examines eight rival accounts and identifies what each leaves open. The section on approach describes the method. The argument section states the account and its tools. The results section reports its application to seven catalogues of virtue. The discussion answers the three research questions in turn, including the implications for power, coercion, responsibility and institutions, and states the account's distinguishing predictions and the strongest objections to it. Limitations and a conclusion follow.

Table 1 sets out the distinction on which the argument turns.

Table 1. Diminishment and inversion contrasted.

	Diminishment (the received view)	**Inversion (this article)**
What happens to freedom	reduced toward zero	replaced by a power that takes over the domain
Result	less of the same virtue; a defect on the mean	the determinate opposite of the virtue
Form and activity	attenuated, faltering	fully preserved, often intensified
Name	kept with a qualifier ("weak courage")	kept without qualifier
Moral substance	depleted	occupied by the remover's purpose
Canonical case	a timid witness hesitating to speak	a censor's office issuing "the truth" on schedule
After the pressure lifts	springs back toward the mean	persists until the internalised discipline decays

Literature review: virtue corruption, vice and institutional failure

Quantity: the mean and its vices

For Aristotle every moral virtue lies between a vice of excess and a vice of deficiency, as courage lies between rashness and cowardice (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.7). Corruption is a displacement along an axis of quantity. The account is robust for individual character and has been refined for two millennia (Hursthouse, 1999). What it cannot represent is a change of *direction*. The servility of a soldier who fires on his own people when ordered is neither cowardice nor rashness. It is courage's discipline, steadiness under fear and obedience to command, run by a power for its own ends. The inversion account adds a second axis to the mean: not only how much of the virtue there is, but who directs its discipline.

Absence: privation and the splendid vices

Privation theory, developed by Augustine and systematised by Aquinas, holds that evil is the lack of a due good. Its great merit, which the present account keeps, is that corruption is parasitic on the good it corrupts. But the occupied court lacks nothing in its working parts. The inversion

account separates two cases that privation runs together under "absence": freedom merely absent, as in an agent incapable of choice, and freedom actively replaced. Only the first is a lack.

Augustine himself supplied the structure that comes closest to inversion, and priority on that structure belongs to him. In *City of God* XIX.25 he argues that the virtues of a mind not ordered to God, by which it seems to rule body and passions, are "rather vices than virtues". The tradition later called these the *splendida vitia*. Form and name are conserved, the governing term is replaced, and the result is not a diminished virtue but its contrary. What the present account changes is the substrate: freedom understood as sourcehood takes the place of rightly ordered love. That change makes the structure available without theological premises, extends it from souls to institutions, and yields testable predictions about names and recovery.

Misordering: Kant's radical evil

Kant's radical evil is already a substitution account. Evil is not the absence of the moral law from the will but the subordination of the law to self-love, a reversal of the order of incentives (Kant, 1793/1998). The present account belongs to the same family of ethics of freedom. It differs in scope and in source. Kant's inversion lies in the individual maxim, whereas this account ranges over domains, disciplines and institutions, where the naming phenomenon lives. And for Kant the inverting power is the agent's own inclination, whereas this account recognises three sources: external tyranny, social pressure and internalised vice.

Defect and simulacrum: Foot and MacIntyre

Foot (2001) models moral defect on natural defect, as when a diseased root fails to nourish. The category is real but wrong for this case. A defect is a functional failure. An inversion is a functional reversal with the form preserved: the root, fully vigorous, now feeds a parasite. Foot's framework has a place for the timid witness but none for the fluent censor. MacIntyre (1981) comes closer. Institutions oriented to external goods colonise the practices they house, leaving the practice's form without its internal goods. The present account treats such colonisation as one species of occupation. What MacIntyre's account does not supply is a prediction of which corrupted form a practice yields, an explanation of why it keeps its name, or an account of why colonised practices persist once the pressure is removed.

Institutional corruption and the sociology of capture

Merton (1940) described goal displacement, in which bureaucratic rules become ends in themselves. Selznick (1949) showed an agency co-opted by the elites it absorbed. Stigler (1971) argued that regulation is typically acquired by the industry it regulates. Meyer and Rowan (1977) showed that organisations adopt formal structure as ceremony, decoupled from their activity, because ceremony confers legitimacy. Priority on that channel is theirs. Thompson (1995), Lessig (2011) and Miller (2017) developed *institutional corruption*: a systemic dependence that diverts an institution from its purpose without individual bribery.

These accounts describe much of what the inversion account describes, with far more empirical detail. They are, however, mostly accounts of *deviation*, in which the institution serves its purpose less well or serves a private purpose alongside the public one. They treat name retention as strategic legitimation. And they are largely silent on what happens after the capturer leaves. The present account is offered as a moral frame in which these mechanisms appear as routes to occupation, not as their rival.

Words that change their meaning

Thucydides describes the civil war at Corcyra as a time when words changed their meanings, so that reckless aggression was called courage and prudence cowardice (*History* III.82). Plato describes insolence renamed good breeding and anarchy renamed freedom (*Republic* VIII, 560d–561a). Confucius made the rectification of names (*zhèngmíng*) the first task of government (*Analects* 13.3). Orwell (1946) and Klemperer (1947/2000) documented regimes that keep the words of virtue while changing their use. These writers saw the naming phenomenon more clearly than the philosophers of the mean or of privation, but described it from the side of the word, which migrates to new conduct. The inversion account describes it from the side of the domain: the conduct occupies the old domain, and the name comes with it. On this reading, the rectification of names is the restoration of the substance a name has outlived.

Moral transformation: habituation and the making of perpetrators

A final body of work concerns moral transformation, the process by which agents and institutions change their moral character over time. Aristotle held that character is formed by

habituation: we become just by doing just acts and brave by doing brave ones (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.1). The same mechanism runs in reverse. Browning's (1992) study of a reserve police battalion showed how ordinary men became killers through conformity, incremental participation and the normalisation of the task, rather than through prior conviction. Arendt (1963/2006) described the perpetrator whose evil lay in thoughtlessness and in the substitution of clichés for judgement. These accounts explain how people are transformed inside an institution that has changed masters, and the present account relies on them for its third register of coercion, in which an external discipline becomes an internal one. What they describe at the level of the person, the inversion account describes at the level of the virtue and its institution: the habituation that makes a virtue is the same habituation that, under a changed master, makes its opposite and keeps its name.

Freedom, domination and burdened virtue

Berlin (1958/1969) warned that positive liberty historically inverts into tyranny when a power claims to act for the agent's "real" self. In the vocabulary of this article that warning is an instance of inversion, not an objection to it. Pettit's (1997) conception of freedom as non-domination is the closest political analogue of the freedom this account relies on. Tessman (2005) and Card (1996) showed that oppression produces "burdened virtues" in the oppressed, which are genuine but costly. Their work marks a boundary the account must respect: the resister's freedom is constrained, not replaced, and her virtue is reduced, not inverted.

Table 2 summarises the comparison.

Table 2. Eight conceptualisations of virtue corruption and institutional failure.

Account	What it explains	What it leaves open	Relation to inversion
Mean (Aristotle)	vice as excess or defect of one virtue	change of direction with form preserved	a second, orthogonal axis
Privation (Augustine, Aquinas)	evil as parasitic lack of a due good; splendid vices	a "lack" with every part working	separates absence from replacement; structure credited to Augustine
Radical evil (Kant)	misordering of incentives in the maxim	institutions; powers other than the agent's own	generalises the source of reversal

Account	What it explains	What it leaves open	Relation to inversion
Natural defect (Foot)	corruption as functional failure	reversal of a functioning form	adds a reversal category
Colonised practices (MacIntyre)	practice emptied by external goods	which simulacrum, why the name, why persistence	a species of occupation
Institutional corruption and capture	displacement, capture, ceremony, systemic dependence	reversal of purpose; availability of the name; recovery lag	frames these as routes to occupation
Corruption of language (Thucydides, Confucius, Orwell)	honorific words migrating to vice	why the name follows the domain; when it is shed	same event seen from the domain
Moral transformation (Aristotle, Browning, Arendt)	habituation and the t incremental making i of perpetrators c r	he virtue-level and s nstitutional m ounterpart; the t etained name	upplies the echanism of the hird register

The present study

The review identifies three gaps. First, existing accounts describe the conservation of form under a change of master without saying *which* opposite appears, so they cannot distinguish the occupied court from a merely weak one. Second, they treat the retention of the virtue's name as hypocrisy or branding, and so do not explain why the name is available to be retained. Third, apart from scattered remarks, they say nothing about *recovery*, about why captured institutions do not spring back when the capturer leaves. The present study addresses the three gaps with one account and draws out its consequences for power, coercion, responsibility and institutional design (RQ1–RQ3).

Approach

The study is a work of conceptual and normative philosophy, and its method has four parts.

Conceptual analysis. The account starts from a thesis about what virtues are, freedom exercised in a domain, and analyses what follows when freedom is reduced and when it is replaced. The analysis is tested against cases on which judgement is relatively firm, such as the coerced court, truthful propaganda and the monastic vow, and against the rival accounts reviewed above.

Formal reconstruction as a tool. The central claim is restated in a compact notation. The notation separates two cases that ordinary language runs together. It makes the claim refutable by a single counter-example, and it allows the same argument to be run, case by case, across many virtues. A reader who distrusts the notation can bracket every formula and keep the argument (Supplementary Table S8).

Comparative audit. The account was applied to seven catalogues of virtue. One is the 101 Universal Virtues of the Philosophy of Virtues, assembled in 2023 before the account was formulated. The other six were compiled by others: the cardinal virtues, the theological virtues, Aristotle's moral and intellectual virtues, the Confucian five constants, the VIA classification of character strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) and Franklin's thirteen virtues. Each virtue was tested against four criteria, all of which were required for a verdict of inversion. (1) *Distinct opposite*: the result is a recognisable opposite rather than less of the virtue. (2) *Form preservation*: the domain's activity, institution or behaviour continues. (3) *Substance inversion*: the moral substance is replaced by its opposite. (4) *Domain conservation*: the inverted form operates in the same domain, which is why it keeps the name. A verdict of diminishment was available for every entry. All verdicts were assigned by the author, and their records are Supplementary Tables S1–S7.

Adversarial testing. The account states in advance what would refute it, and it is tested against the strongest objections available from the traditions it engages (Supplementary Note 2).

What this method can and cannot establish is stated in the Limitations section. In brief, it yields a derivation, a systematic application and a set of falsifiable predictions, but not an independent test.

The argument

Virtue as freedom exercised in a domain

The account starts from a thesis about what virtues are. Freedom is not one virtue among others but the element of which the others are constituted. Courage is freedom in the domain of fear, honesty is freedom in the domain of speech, and justice is freedom in the domain of social

claims. The thesis belongs to the family of ethics of freedom that includes Kant's autonomy and Hegel's freedom as the substance of spirit. It takes freedom as *sourcehood*: an open field of options together with the agent's own direction within it. In compact form:

> **$V\mathfrak{D} = F \mid \mathfrak{D}$**. A virtue V in domain $\mathfrak{D}$ is freedom F exercised in that domain. Each domain has a *discipline* $\Delta\mathfrak{D}$, the habit, practice or institution proper to it, which is the form the virtue takes there.

The relation is one of ontological dependence, not set-theoretic restriction: a virtue depends on freedom as a determinable depends on its determinates (Fine, 1995). Two scope clauses govern what follows. First, the account evaluates acts, dispositions and the disciplines that produce them, not states of affairs. A coerced act that saves a life is an inverted act, and the life saved remains a good. Second, the account fixes what constitutes a virtue, not who has moral standing. It applies to agents and to the institutions they run.

Two ways of losing freedom

Freedom can be lost in two ways. It can be *reduced*: a prisoner has less room to act, and a frightened person less room to choose. Reduction weakens the virtue without changing its kind. Or freedom can be *replaced*: a power occupies the domain, keeps its discipline running, and redirects its output to its own purpose. The second operation is the deprivation operator:

> **$\ominus : (F, \Delta\mathfrak{D}) \mapsto (0, \Delta\mathfrak{D} \rhd P)$**. The operator removes freedom, conserves the domain and its discipline, and hands the discipline to a power P. P takes one of three forms: external tyranny, social pressure or internalised vice.

The Inversion Theorem

> **$-V\mathfrak{D} = P \mid \mathfrak{D}$**. A virtue actively deprived of freedom does not diminish toward zero. It inverts into the opposite that occupies its form: the removing power expressed in the original domain, under the original name.

Three cases exhaust the possibilities. (i) Freedom is present and self-directing, and the result is the genuine virtue. (ii) Freedom is merely absent, as in an inanimate object or an agent incapable of choice, and the result is moral neutrality. This is the case privation theory describes, and the

only one. (iii) Freedom is actively replaced by a power running the domain to its own ends, and the result is the inversion. The tradition placed (ii) and (iii) under the single word “absence”. Case (iii) is not a lack but a substitution. Figure 1 shows the three cases.

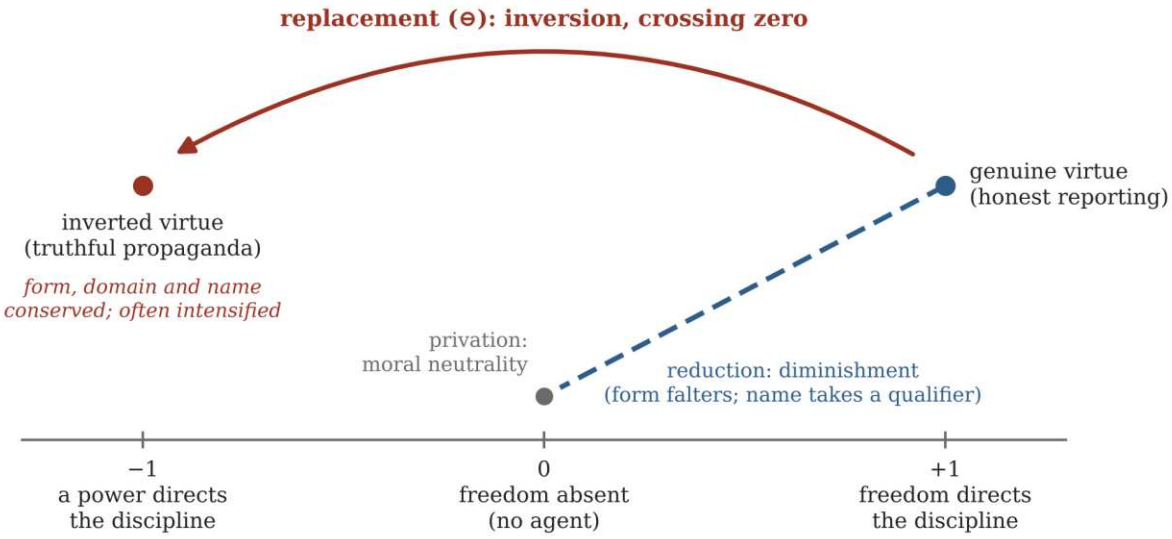

Figure 1. *Diminishment and inversion. Reduction lowers the standing of freedom toward zero, and the activity of the form falters with it. Replacement by a power crosses zero: the activity of the form is conserved, and often intensified, under the same name. Privation (zero) describes only the case in which there is no agent.*

Why the opposite is determinate. The operator removes only freedom. It conserves the domain and its discipline: the trained habits, standing institutions and behavioural repertoires. The output is therefore constrained on two sides. It must be an operation of the discipline, because the form keeps running, and it must be directed by the power, because the power now holds the form. One class of states satisfies both: the domain’s discipline executed toward the power’s ends. Which member of that class appears is fixed by the identity of the power. Care occupied by a state becomes protective surveillance, while care occupied by an internalised vice becomes smothering. Where a power destroys the discipline instead, as with the burned library or the abolished court, the operation is annihilation, not deprivation, and no named inversion persists.

Three boundaries. First, reduction is not replacement: a prisoner who keeps faith with the truth in a cell exercises a genuine virtue at reduced strength. Second, voluntary self-binding is not deprivation. The monastic who vows obedience and the citizen who binds herself by contract exercise freedom in choosing a discipline, and they keep their sourcehood while the binding remains revocable. The operator applies only where the exit itself is removed. Third, real institutions are often partly occupied and move between conditions over time. The theorem types the conditions; it does not require history to occupy one at a time. The full semantics of the operator is given in Supplementary Note 1.

Why the name survives

Inverted virtues do not adopt new names. The surveillance state calls its watching "care", and the censor calls his product "the truth". Ordinary moral language treats this as hypocrisy, which Shklar (1984) counted among the ordinary vices. On the present account it is first of all structural. Because the operator conserves the domain, the inverted form occupies the same region of human life as the virtue. Names in ethics track domains rather than substances: "justice" names the office that adjudicates social claims, whatever animates it. The inverted form therefore inherits the name. Hypocrisy is not excluded, and those who run an inverted institution often exploit the name deliberately. But hypocrisy presupposes that the name is available, and the account explains that availability. The name is accurate about the domain and false about the substance. That is why pointing to its use does not expose the inversion, and why inversion is an effective instrument of rule.

Why predation is not freedom

If freedom is the good, is the flawless embezzler or the disciplined torturer not supremely free? He is not. His "perfect control" is discipline with freedom absent from the domain of his crime, which is the profile of an inverted virtue. More decisively, predation is itself the deprivation operator performed on someone else: to remove another agent's capacity to choose is to run the operator in that agent's field. The *Valence Theorem* follows. An act is an exercise of freedom only if it does not remove freedom from any other agent's field. An act that does remove it is an exercise of power, and its product is an inversion. This is the classical distinction between licence and liberty, derived rather than assumed. It also gives a virtue-theoretic ground for the

republican claim that domination is not an excess of the dominator's freedom but its negation (Pettit, 1997).

Why freedom, and not another master virtue

The traditions have nominated other master virtues: participation in the Forms, knowledge, charity, humaneness through ritual, benevolence (Slote, 2001), care (Noddings, 1984), reason and power. The account supplies a test that does not presuppose it: ask whether each candidate, deprived of freedom, is still itself. Every candidate inverts. Knowledge becomes indoctrination, charity engineered dependency, care smothering, reason rationalisation (Supplementary Table S11). The obvious objection is circularity, since an operator defined as removing freedom trivially leaves freedom as its fixed point. The reply rests on an asymmetry across operators. Define, for any candidate, an operator that removes it from a virtue while leaving freedom intact, and run each operator across the catalogue. Remove charity from courage and the result is uncharitable courage, still courage. Remove knowledge from love and the result is imprudent love, still love. Rival operators produce adjectives, not antonyms. Remove freedom and, on the readings adopted here, each virtue changes sign. The catalogue could have been otherwise, and on these readings it is not. The asymmetry is established by the author's inspection and holds relative to freedom understood as sourcehood, a conception a critic may reject (see Limitations).

A worked case: honesty and truthful propaganda

Honesty is freedom in the domain of speech, and its discipline is accurate assertion, the habit of matching word to belief. Apply the operator. An external censoring authority is installed, and the discipline is not dismantled: the sentences remain well formed and are often true. What is asserted is now selected by the power rather than by the speaker's fidelity to the truth. Test both accounts against an utterance that is true and issued on command. A diminishment account must call it "honesty, slightly reduced", which is implausible, since it is fluent, confident and correct. The inversion account calls it truthful propaganda: honesty's form with its substance replaced. The domain was conserved throughout, so the output is still presented and received as "the truth". The same steps apply to every virtue in the audit. What changes is the domain and the occupying power; the structure (form, domain and name conserved, substance replaced) does not.

What would defeat the claim

The theorem fails if active deprivation of some virtue, not mere reduction, yields a stable state that is (i) merely a weaker instance of the same virtue, (ii) indeterminate, with no stable named opposite, or (iii) obliged to take a new name because the domain does not survive. It also fails if (iv) some candidate other than freedom yields cessation rather than inversion under the deprivation test. Supplementary Table S10 states these conditions formally, and Supplementary Table S9 records the status of every claim.

Results: the account across seven catalogues

The programme's catalogue

Of the 101 Universal Virtues, 100 returned a verdict of inversion and none a verdict of diminishment. The single exception is freedom itself, whose deprivation yields cessation, servitude as the mere absence of the element, rather than an occupied form. This is what the argument predicts, since freedom has no proper domain in which an emptied form could persist. The full virtue-by-virtue record is Supplementary Table S1.

The hundred inversions fall into eight recurring patterns, eight standard ways in which an occupying power runs a domain it has captured (Table 3).

Table 3. Structural types of inversion across the 100 recorded cases.

Pattern	Count	What the power does with the domain	Representative cases
Coerced / compulsory	15	runs the discipline on command	Joy → compulsory happiness; Cooperation → coerced solidarity
Managed / administered	22	substitutes bureaucratic control for self-direction	Justice → bureaucratic execution; Family → state dependency
Performed / simulated	13	keeps the display, removes the reality	Sincerity → scripted authenticity; Liberality → performative giving
Dependency / subjugation	6	keeps the bond, removes the standing	Autonomy → dependency; Free Will → learned helplessness
Extraction / exploitation	7	turns provision into taking	Environment → exploitation; Efficiency → productivity

Pattern	Count	What the power does with the domain	Representative cases
			optimisation
Hollowed / emptied	11	keeps the shell, removes the life	Life → mere survival; Friendship → social utility
Weaponised / distorted	2	turns the truth-organ against truth	Science → propaganda; Reason → rationalisation
Direct opposite	24	installs the plain contrary in the same domain	Study → indoctrination; Beauty → ugliness normalised

The largest class is managed or administered inversion. The characteristic modern inversion is not the jackboot but the clipboard: freedom removed by substituting administration for agency rather than by open violence. The weaponised class is the smallest, plausibly because it is the most visible.

Three facts bear on selection bias. The catalogue was closed in 2023 and has not been altered since the theorem was stated. Its generative principle, which names the virtue proper to every domain of self-directed life, produces candidate counter-examples as readily as confirmations. And every virtue in the six external catalogues maps into the 101, so a reader who distrusts its idiosyncratic entries can restrict the audit to that overlap without changing the result.

Six external catalogues

Table 4. Summary of the six external catalogue audits.

Catalogue	Source	Entries audited	Inversions recorded	Representative case	Full table
Four cardinal virtues	Plato; Aristotle; Cicero; Aquinas	4 of 4	4	Justice → bureaucratic execution / terror	S2
Three theological virtues	Aquinas, *Summa* II-II	3 of 3	3	Charity → engineered dependency	S3
Moral and intellectual virtues	Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.*	10	10	Truthfulness → compliant repetition	S4
Five constants (*wǔcháng*)	Confucius, *Analects*	5 of 5	5	*Lǐ* → ritual as social control	S5
VIA character	Peterson &	20 of 24	20	Kindness → surveillance	S6

Catalogue	Source	Entries audited	Inversions recorded	Representative case	Full table
strengths	Seligman (2004)			framed as care	
Thirteen virtues	Franklin (1791)	13 of 13	13	Silence → internalised self-censorship	S7
Total		**55**	**55**		

The assignments of domain and inverted form are interpretive. A specialist may hold that *phronēsis* is more than deliberation on means, or that *rén* is not captured by benevolent regard. The claim does not rest on any single row but on the pattern: under each tradition's best domain-reading, active deprivation yields a determinate opposite in that domain with the name retained. The *Nicomachean Ethics* does not fix a closed list, so the Aristotelian denominator depends on the enumeration in Supplementary Table S4. Twenty of the twenty-four VIA strengths were audited, and no claim is made about the other four.

Three catalogues deserve comment. The cardinal set is the most demanding test. The classical definition of justice as giving each their due cannot, on its own resources, explain how a fully working legal order gives each the opposite of their due while still being called justice. The theological set bears on the uniqueness argument. Aquinas held charity to be the form of all the virtues (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 23, a. 8), yet charity deprived of freedom becomes the administered dependency of the poorhouse, which marks it as a compound. The VIA classification matters most to the sceptic, because it was assembled by psychologists with no commitment to freedom as an element. Every one of the twenty strengths audited returns an inversion verdict. This is convergence with an independent taxonomy, not replication, since the verdicts were assigned by the same hand.

In total, the seven catalogues yield 155 inversion verdicts and no diminishment verdicts across 156 entries, together with the one predicted fixed point.

Discussion

RQ1: inversion, and why it looks like order

The first question asked what happens to a virtue and its institutions when freedom is replaced rather than reduced. The answer is that the virtue inverts. Its discipline keeps running under the old name and serves the power that now holds it. The account derives this from the conservation of form, and the audit finds the pattern across the seven catalogues on the readings adopted.

The most consequential implication is that inversion looks like order. Theories of corruption as decay teach citizens to look for inefficiency, disorder and visible abuse. A captured institution often shows none of these. It may be more efficient than the free institution it replaced, because the occupier needs it to work and has removed the friction of freedom. A result developed elsewhere in the same research programme explains why this makes inversion more dangerous, not less. Where verification does not keep pace, the damage done by a counterfeit rises with the fidelity of its form, because fidelity delays detection and reliance accumulates during the delay (Mattos, 2026b). Where the verifier is itself a score or an audit of performance, verification relaxes as the form improves, and the damage grows fastest. An occupied court that runs flawlessly is therefore not a lesser evil than one that runs badly. Under these conditions it is a greater one.

RQ2: what the account adds to existing accounts

The second question asked how inversion differs from the phenomena that rival accounts describe. The review located three gaps, and the account closes each. Against the mean, inversion is a change of direction on a second axis, not a point on the axis of quantity. Against privation, it separates freedom absent from freedom replaced, and it credits the structure of the splendid vices to Augustine. Against the sociology of capture and the theory of institutional corruption, it adds three things those accounts do not supply together. It distinguishes deviation from reversal and predicts which opposite appears. It explains why the name remains available to be retained. And it predicts a recovery lag after the occupier leaves.

The account also refines its own scope in a way the sociological literature makes visible. Occupation does not always produce an inverted performance. Work elsewhere in the same

programme distinguishes three residues of a successful occupation (Mattos, 2026a). In *redirection*, the act continues and serves the occupier; this is inversion in the full sense. In *ceremony*, the act continues as display with no end at all; this is the channel Meyer and Rowan (1977) described. In *withdrawal*, the act simply stops, because it yields nothing the occupier can take or show. Withdrawal falls outside the Inversion Theorem, since no discipline is left running, but it matters most for institutional analysis. The teacher who no longer protects a struggling child and the colleague who no longer refuses to inflate a grade leave no record of what they have stopped doing. Any audit built on observable structure is blind to this channel.

RQ3: power, coercion, responsibility and institutions

Power: why occupation is preferred to abolition

A power that wishes to control a domain of social life can abolish the institution that houses it or occupy it. Abolition destroys the discipline, and with it the domain and the name, leaving the power to rule by naked force without legitimacy. Occupation inherits the trained habits of the staff, the expectations of the public, and a name that both trust. An occupied court still produces verdicts that people obey because they are verdicts. The legitimacy of the virtue is borrowed by the power that has replaced it. In this sense inversion is parasitic, as privation theory said of evil in general: the parasite needs the host alive.

This logic explains the order in which modern powers capture institutions. The first targets are the institutions that could detect the capture: courts, electoral authorities, the press and official statistics. These are society's *verifiers*. Once they are captured, every other occupation becomes undetectable from inside. A comparative reading of party-state and pseudo-democratic regimes found that the damage they did tracks the capture of independent verification rather than the doctrine of the regime (Mattos, 2026c). It is consistent with Rummel's (1994) thesis that concentration of power, not ideology, best predicts state violence. The same reading applies to autocratic legalism of the right and of the left alike (Scheppele, 2018; Landau, 2013). Competitive authoritarianism, autocratic legalism and informational autocracy are thus not deviations from the logic of tyranny but its most efficient form, because they maximise borrowed legitimacy by maximising conserved form.

The inversion of provision illustrates the mechanism. A transfer paid by rule can be received by a citizen who votes against the government every year of her life. A transfer that a ruler can withdraw for a political act turns provision into a leash. Stokes (2005) described this as *perverse accountability*: parties hold voters accountable instead of voters holding parties accountable. Combined with captured verifiers, it produces an inversion of accountability, in which worsening hardship increases dependence on discretionary relief rather than costing the government support (Mattos, 2026d). On the present account this is the inversion of generosity in the domain of provision. It explains why the line between welfare and domination runs not through the amount given but through the discretion of the giver: political conditionality, not welfare, is what subjugates.

Coercion: three registers, and why inversions outlast their causes

The three forms of occupying power correspond closely to Lukes's (2005) three dimensions of power. Open coercion over decisions corresponds to external tyranny. Control of the agenda corresponds to social pressure. The shaping of preferences, so that the subject wants what the power wants, corresponds to internalised vice. The third register explains why inversion does not end when its cause is removed.

Havel's (1978/1985) greengrocer places a slogan in his shop window that he does not believe and nobody reads, and by displaying compliance he helps make it the visible norm. Wedeen (1999) showed the same politics of acting "as if" in Hafez al-Assad's Syria. Kuran (1995) modelled the mechanism as preference falsification. A further mechanism of social pressure has been described within the programme as the *virtue worm*: the public defence of a seized power that praises trivial, often true, features of its conduct while the acts that matter go unanswered (Mattos, 2026e). The worm is truthful propaganda performed by citizens rather than by the censor. Through mechanisms of this kind, external coercion becomes social pressure, and social pressure becomes an internalised discipline that agents run on themselves.

This conversion explains the stability of inversion. A diminished virtue springs back when pressure lifts. An inverted one does not, because the occupying power is partly inside the people who staff the discipline. The point can be stated as a modelling postulate: under sustained suppression, resistance converts to an internalised form, and after liberation it relaxes only

gradually. The postulate is not derived, but there is external evidence consistent with it. In East German regions with a higher density of Stasi informers, interpersonal trust was lower and remained lower after reunification (Lichter et al., 2021). Learning that anyone might be an informer is a discipline that survives the regime that taught it.

The predominance of managed and administered inversion in the audit fits the analyses of Foucault (1975/1977) and Scott (1998), on which modern power works less through spectacular violence than through record, schedule and classification. It also fits Anderson's (2017) argument that much domination in liberal societies is exercised by employers through ordinary management. Such power is hard to name as domination because it arrives in the forms of care, efficiency and order, and under their names.

Responsibility inside an inverted institution

Who is responsible for what an inverted institution does? The question is pressing because inversion keeps the institution staffed by people trained in its discipline, many of whom still believe in it. Arendt (1964/2003) rejected the "cog theory", which treats functionaries as interchangeable parts. She held that in politics obedience is support, and that those who refused showed that refusal was possible. Levi (1986/1988) described the "grey zone", in which victims were drawn into the machinery of their own persecution, and warned against judging them too quickly. Thompson (1980) named the "problem of many hands", in which responsibility diffuses until no one bears it.

The account offers a criterion that respects all three. It distinguishes the act from the agent. The act of a functionary who runs an occupied discipline is, as an act, an inversion: the verdict of the captured court is terror, whatever the judge intends. That gives no comfort to the cog theory. But the *agent's* responsibility is graded by the freedom that remains to her, and specifically by her exit. Because sourcehood includes the standing possibility of revocation, responsibility for an inverted act tracks the exit she retains, in Hirschman's (1970) sense of exit and voice: refusal, resignation, slowing down, quiet non-compliance, protest. Where exit is open and unused, the functionary is not a cog but the instrument through which the power runs the domain. Where exit has been removed, by threat of death or ruin to herself or others, her freedom has been replaced, and she stands at least partly among the victims of the operator rather than its agents.

The criterion explains why refusal mattered morally even where it changed nothing: it was the exercise of the freedom the occupier sought to replace. It explains why the grey zone is grey, since responsibility varies with remaining exit rather than switching on or off. And it gives the problem of many hands a determinate answer: responsibility is distributed according to each agent's unused exit, not according to causal contribution.

The criterion also orders the acts available to people living under capture. Deceiving the occupying power to protect someone diverts power rather than replacing anyone's freedom. Denouncing a neighbour runs the deprivation operator in the neighbour's field, and it is usually done when refusal was still possible. Under capture, the last virtue that remains fully in citizens' hands is therefore *horizontal* honesty, truthfulness and loyalty among themselves. The regime depends on its absence. Equally, a person who keeps protecting the struggling child while ceasing to record that she does has not withdrawn. Her virtue has gone underground, as a burdened virtue in Tessman's sense, or as Havel's "living in truth". The account must classify her conduct as reduced, not inverted, and it does.

Institutions: diagnosis, design and recovery

Diagnosis. If inversion conserves and often intensifies the discipline, then any assessment that measures the discipline will fail to detect inversion and may reward it. A captured court can clear its docket faster than a free one. Meyer and Rowan (1977) showed that an organisation can meet every formal criterion of legitimacy while its activity is decoupled from its purpose. The account specifies what that decoupling conceals. The output has not merely drifted from the institution's purpose; it has been redirected by whoever holds the form. And the withdrawal channel shows that some of the damage leaves no trace at all. Diagnosis must therefore examine the *source* of an institution's direction rather than the quality of its output. It should ask who can remove its staff, who can redirect its output, and whether those subject to it can exit or contest it.

Design. If an occupier's power consists in holding the discipline, the central protection is to make the discipline hard to hold. No single non-removable actor should control the means by which it is directed, and the people who staff it should keep a protected right to refuse. Applied to the organised force of the state, this yields a principle of non-monopolisation. It can be implemented in many ways: divided command, multiple services, a protected right of individual

refusal, civilian removability of commanders (Mattos, in press). Applied to institutions that evaluate conduct, it yields the rule that they should verify acts rather than score persons. A score of a person's virtue is a discipline that whoever holds the score can occupy. The general lesson is that safeguards aimed at performance are neutral or even favourable to an occupier, whereas safeguards aimed at the distribution of control over the form are not.

Recovery. If inverted disciplines are partly internalised, removing the occupier does not restore the virtue. For a time, the courts, presses and schools of a liberated society will go on running the inverted discipline they were trained in. Three populations can be distinguished, and they recover differently (Mattos, 2026f). Those who only performed compliance as cover re-emerge at once and need only open archives. Those in whom the discipline was installed drift back slowly and need unlearning alongside colleagues and community rather than punishment. Those who believed persist longest and should be judged only for documented acts under ordinary law, without purges. Recovery therefore requires more than a change of leadership. The domain must be *reopened*: exit, contestation and self-direction must be restored to those who staff it, and the verifiers must be made independent before anything else. This bears directly on transitional justice and institutional reform.

Contemporary phenomena

The account was built on classical cases, but some of its sharpest applications are contemporary. Three are noted here as readings, not audited results. First, China's Social Credit System is, among other things, a programme to cultivate sincerity and trustworthiness through monitoring, rating and sanction (Creemers, 2018). A system that rewards displayed honesty occupies the domain of honesty. The citizen who behaves sincerely because sincerity is scored exercises compliance with honesty's form, and by the competence result the best-scored performances are checked least. Second, digital platforms often present the surveillance of their users as personalisation or protection (Zuboff, 2019). The account names this care occupied by a power that does not answer to the cared-for, and it supplies the test that separates care from its inversion: whether the cared-for can exit, contest or redirect it. Third, artificial systems trained toward outputs their evaluators approve of can display the form of helpfulness and honesty while their direction is set by the reward. For these systems, as for human institutions, an audit of the form alone would certify the inversion.

Theoretical and practical implications

Theoretically, the account adds a second axis to virtue ethics: whether freedom or a power directs a virtue's discipline, alongside how much of the virtue there is. It generalises Augustine's splendid vices and Kant's radical evil from souls to institutions, and it gives the sociology of capture a moral frame that distinguishes deviation from reversal. It also offers a criterion of responsibility under domination that sits between the cog theory and indiscriminate condemnation.

Practically, it implies five things:

- vigilance should move from names and performance to sources and exits;
- verifiers should be protected first, because their capture makes every other capture invisible;
- the right of refusal should be protected for soldiers, judges, officials, employees and engineers;
- transfers should be paid by rule rather than by discretion;
- reform after a tyranny should reopen domains rather than merely replace those in charge.

Distinguishing predictions

Six predictions follow, and none has yet been tested (Supplementary Table S12):

- **P1.** A domain from which freedom is removed produces a determinate named opposite, not generic weakness.
- **P2.** Inverted institutions keep the virtue's name, and genuine reform reopens the domain rather than renaming it.
- **P3.** After liberation, recovery lags, and the lag varies with the depth of prior internalisation.
- **P4.** Any rival master virtue itself inverts when deprived of freedom.
- **P5.** Domains contested by competing powers show oscillating inverted forms.
- **P6.** Inversions held for longer than the timescale of semantic drift shed the virtue's name or split it into honorific and pejorative doublets.

P3 is the most tractable. The post-1989 transitions offer a dated removal of suppression across societies whose institutions had run inverted disciplines for four decades. The protocol in Supplementary Note 3 tests whether indicators of judicial deference, press dependence and curricular formulae decay gradually rather than at once. The recovery account above predicts a mixture: a rapid initial drop as cover falls away, followed by a slower tail.

Objections

Three objections bear on the contribution, and Supplementary Note 2 gives these and others in full. *This is institutional corruption under another name.* The account accepts those mechanisms as routes to occupation and credits them where they are prior. What it adds is the distinction between deviation and reversal, the explanation of the name's availability and the prediction of a recovery lag. Until P1–P3 are tested, the claim to greater explanatory economy remains an argument rather than a demonstration. *Names do change, as Thucydides and Orwell show.* What they document is the migration of an honorific term to the conduct that now occupies its domain, which is the naming result seen from the side of the word. P6 predicts when names are eventually shed. *Why freedom? (partly conceded).* The deprivation test treats rival candidates symmetrically, but it establishes freedom's uniqueness only for this operator and under this conception of freedom. A critic who rejects sourcehood as the relevant conception has not been answered.

Limitations

Six limitations bear weight.

1. **The derivation is conceptual.** Its empirical purchase lies in predictions not yet tested.
2. **The audit verdicts are single-coder and unblinded.** They were assigned by the author, who formulated the account, and no inter-rater statistic exists. The 155 inversion verdicts are a systematic application of the account by its proponent, not an independent test of it. Blind re-coding of at least one external catalogue is the most informative next step.
3. **The external mappings are interpretive.** A rigid protocol for assigning domains has yet to be written.

4. **The strong reading of "opposite" is argued only in some domains.** The occupied form is the determinate contrary of the virtue in the moral and assertoric domains. In aesthetic and some skill domains, the argument establishes only a different object under a conserved name. The implications drawn above do not depend on the strong reading.
5. **Freedom's uniqueness is relative.** It holds only for the deprivation test and for freedom understood as sourcehood.
6. **The scope is agency.** The account applies to agents and the institutions they run.

In addition, the results imported from the author's research programme (Mattos, 2026a–f) are deposited working papers that have not been peer reviewed. The present argument uses them as supporting analyses, not as established findings.

The next steps, in order, are:

1. blind re-coding of one external catalogue;
2. specialist review of the classical and Confucian readings;
3. independent re-derivation of the theorem;
4. pre-registered testing of P3 against the post-1989 transitions.

Conclusion

The tradition could describe virtue and it could describe vice, but between them lay a silence. It had no account of what a virtue becomes when its life is removed and its body kept working. This article has argued that such a virtue does not fade. It inverts into a determinate opposite that keeps its form, keeps its domain and, because the domain survives, keeps its name. Situated against the mean, privation and Augustine's splendid vices, Kant's radical evil, Foot, MacIntyre, the sociology of capture and the tradition of political language, the account explains three things together: which opposite appears, why the name remains, and why recovery lags. Its implications reach beyond the classification of virtues. They explain why the most dangerous corruption looks like order, why power captures verifiers before anything else, why responsibility under domination tracks the exit that remains, and why removing an occupier does not restore what it occupied.

These results are offered with their limits stated. The audit is the proponent's own, and the predictions are untested.

The opening case can now be read again. The court that sits daily and serves a single power is not a weak court. It is a strong court that has changed masters, and its name is accurate about the office and false about the substance. Restoring it requires more than replacing the person at the top. Its domain must be reopened, so that those who staff it and those who come before it can again contest, refuse and direct it. The name of a virtue cannot be trusted in place of the freedom that makes it one.

Author contributions

The author conceived the study, developed the argument, assembled the catalogue, conducted the audit and wrote the manuscript.

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Data availability

All data supporting the findings of this study are contained within the article and its Supplementary Information. The study is a work of conceptual philosophy: no datasets were generated, and no empirical datasets were analysed. The complete audit records are provided as Supplementary Tables S1–S7, so that every verdict reported in the article can be inspected and independently re-coded.

Use of AI

The author used a large language model as a drafting and consolidation tool, including the Alguilas method. The philosophical claims, the catalogue, the audit verdicts and the final text are

the author's own, and the author takes full responsibility for the content. A detailed record is given in Supplementary Note 4.

Declarations

Competing interests. The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval. This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors. The research is entirely theoretical, and no personal data were collected or analysed.

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