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PART I

Learning from Aristotle and Aquinas

CHAPTER I

*Rival Aristotles: Aristotle against some
 Renaissance Aristotelians*

A systematic history of Aristotelianism would be an immense undertaking populated by a great variety of rival Aristotles: Theophrastus's, the Aristotle of the Neoplatonists, a whole range of medieval Aristotles – Farabi's, ibn Rushd's, Maimonides's, Aquinas's – and after them an equally impressive set of Renaissance Aristotles, followed by Coleridge's, Thomas Case's, and the whole variety of twentieth-century Aristotles from Werner Jaeger to Terence Irwin and beyond. I shall deal only with a very small selection from this set of rival Aristotles and even with them I shall be concerned only with a limited set of issues, issues concerning the relationship of moral and political theory to moral and political practice and of both to moral education.

I

Towards the end of the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle argues that arguments by themselves are insufficient to make human beings good. Arguments may encourage and incite those of the young who already have some propensity for virtue – they may have, that is to say, rhetorical power. But with the majority they do not even have this kind of power and indeed it is one of the marks of already achieved goodness to be willing to submit to argument.¹ So practical habituation in the exercise of the virtues has to precede education in moral theory. But it is not just that such habituation is required for those who are to be able to understand and be responsive to argument. It is also that only those who have undergone such habituation will be in a position to theorize well about issues of practice.

To be virtuous is to act in accordance with a mean and to judge rightly about the mean is to judge as the *phronimos*, the practically

¹ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1179b4–16 and 1180a10–12.

intelligent human being, would judge.² The *phronimos* has in the act of practical judgment no external criterion to guide her or him. Indeed practical knowledge of what criteria are relevant in this particular situation requires *phronēsis*. The good human being *is* the standard of right judgment, passion, and action: “In all such matters that which seems so to the good human being is held really to be so” and “virtue and the good human being are the measure in each case.”³ It is in this light that we must understand what Aristotle says about moral perception at the end of the second book. Judgment concerning the mean is a matter of particular facts and judgment concerning these “rests with perception.”⁴ But the perceptions must be the perceptions of a good human being. Perception is not a source of moral judgment, independently of the character of the perceiver and judge.

Only the good then are in a position to make justified true theoretical judgments about the nature of moral practice. The construction and evaluation of sound moral theories, unlike the construction and evaluation of sound theories in the physical sciences, require more than intellectual virtues. They require a particular kind of initiation into and participation in a particular kind of moral and political practice. And this view puts Aristotle very much at odds with the whole notion of ethics as presently conceived by most members of the American Philosophical Association. Jobs in ethics go to those with the appropriate analytic and dialectical skills and knowledge of the relevant academic literature. If good moral character, understood as Aristotle understood it, is sometimes exemplified by the practitioners of contemporary ethics, it is so only *per accidens*. And if moral and political philosophies can be rationally commended within the arenas of contemporary academic ethics and politics only by appeal to principles and premises that are shared at least by the vast majority of their practitioners, then, if Aristotle is right, it is going to be impossible to succeed in commending moral and political Aristotelianism rationally in the areas of professional academic debate.

Yet of course there are within academic ethics a variety of philosophers, among them myself, who profess what we take to be Aristotelian principles and uphold Aristotelian positions in debate with Kantians, utilitarians, contractarians, and others. In so doing we are recurrently going to be tempted to treat Aristotle’s moral and political theory as if it were a theory

2 NE 1106b36–1107a2.

3 NE 1176a15–18.

4 NE 1109b22–23.

that could be understood and presented independently of the contexts of practice, as though its positions could be made adequately intelligible to those who do not understand themselves as participants in the relevant kind of practice. But, if we attempt to avoid yielding to this temptation, we will be confronted by more than one set of problems. The first of these arises when we try to answer the questions: what is the kind of practice in which Aristotelian theory claims to be rooted? And where can we find examples of it?

Part of Aristotle's own answer to these questions ought to be treated as more unsettling than it usually is. Aristotle tells us that ethics is a part of politics and a clear implication of this is that we cannot adequately understand the claims made in the *Nicomachean Ethics* except in the context provided by the *Politics*. Contemporary academic practice generally presupposes that Aristotle was mistaken in this view of his own work. Almost always the *Ethics* is read in one set of courses by one set of students, usually in departments of philosophy by teachers with a philosophical training, while the *Politics* is more often read in quite another set of courses by quite another set of students, usually in departments of political science by teachers with a training in political theory. This divorce of the *Ethics* from the *Politics* has of course a long history. And one of its effects has been to enable us to ignore the fact that the ethics of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the ethics of and for a citizen of a *polis* and that the social practice articulated by Aristotelian theory is the practice of a *polis*. So the claim can very plausibly be made: no ethics except as part of politics and no politics except as the practice of a *polis*.

Yet Aristotle's was after all one of the last generations of Greeks to inhabit a *polis* – and he was not a citizen. His pupil Alexander helped to write the epitaph of the *polis*. And the notion of reviving the *polis* at some later time – not only a recurrent phantasy of some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century romantics, but a phantasy recurrently imputed to Aristotelian critics of modernity, such as myself, no matter how vigorously we disown it – has always been absurd, as the emperor Hadrian unintentionally demonstrated, when he attempted to restore the *polis* by imperial edict. So that we may be inclined to infer that, since there is and can be no *polis*, there can be no Aristotelian politics and, since there can be no Aristotelian politics, there can be no Aristotelian ethics.

I shall argue against this conclusion. But I shall also suggest that we are only entitled to reject it, if we have been able to give an account of what kind of practice it is that, after the *polis* has disappeared, is able to supply the social context required for an Aristotelian ethics and politics. In order

to give such an account, I will first consider and criticize one important wrong-headed attempt to do so, that of certain Renaissance Aristotelians. If I am severely critical of that account, it is only in order to put that criticism to constructive use in providing what I hope will be a more adequate account.

In addressing this question “What is the practice to which Aristotelian moral and political theory is the counterpart?” it is important not to lose sight of a second major problem about the relationship of theory to practice. Consider how theory and practice will be related in a *polis* that is, by Aristotle’s standards, well ordered. Each successive generation of the young will be habituated in virtuous practice and the kind of teaching and institutional framework necessary to provide this habituation will have been established by legislators guided by Aristotelian theory. Such legislators will be regarded as well qualified to make use of theory in framing laws and devising institutions, just because they themselves have in their youth been educated into that same practice of which their theory is the articulation.

Suppose that we now enquire of them what grounds they have for their allegiance to Aristotle’s rather than to any rival type of moral and political theory. On a variety of issues their answers will have to appeal either to the nature of practice or to judgments made by those who are regarded as excellent by the standards of practice. As Aristotle remarks, after having considered a variety of theoretical arguments about the nature of happiness and the concurrent opinions of “the wise,” ultimately “in matters of practice truth is judged on the basis of what we do and how we live.”⁵ But with this it becomes difficult to avoid a charge of question-begging circularity. For when this or that theoretical contention is put in question, we are to appeal to practice; but the practice to which we are to appeal was itself elaborated in accordance with the canons of the very same theory, so that the test seems not to be a genuine one.

Suppose, for example, that someone puts in question Aristotle’s account of courage as a virtue in order to test Aristotle’s claims that the virtue of courage can only be possessed by those who also possess the virtue of *phronēsis* and that courage and *phronēsis* together can only be possessed by those who possess the other moral virtues. We test these claims by examining practices and by considering actual examples of courage, distinguishing in so doing genuine courage from various simulacra of

⁵ *NE* 11179a18–19.

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courage – the apparent courage of the experienced soldier or of the spirited personality, for example – and primary and paradigmatic cases of courage from secondary and marginal cases. The problem is that, unless we draw our examples from the practice of the morally well educated, we can have no grounds for confidence in our choice of examples, but, if we do draw our examples from the practice of the morally well educated, then we have to recognize that their habituation into courage was prescribed in accordance with Aristotle's theory, so that the distinctions that they make in practice will mirror the distinctions defended within the theory. Hence it seems that those examples cannot be adduced as providing confirmation for the theory. Circular justifications, as Aristotle himself taught us, are no justifications.

Any protagonist of Aristotle's standpoint in ethics and politics has therefore at least two obligations to discharge. She or he must not only be able to give an account of the kind of practice in which Aristotelian theory needs to be rooted and without which it is incomplete, but also to provide a rational justification for the whole body of theory-and-practice which does not involve this kind of empty circularity.

II

Some Renaissance Aristotelians took both obligations seriously. They did so by presenting the justification of theory as itself an entirely theoretical matter and by presenting good practice as the systematic application of theory. As teachers of moral and political philosophy such Aristotelians were in one way remarkably like us, in another way very different. They were like us in their mode of teaching: they commented on texts, they discussed and evaluated rival interpretations of passages, they analyzed arguments, and they explained their disagreements with rival views. The differences between the content and form of their lecture courses and ours are relatively insignificant compared with the differences between both and, say, standard thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century discussions of Aristotle.

They differ from us however in a striking way. For they presented as the aim of their teaching and they claimed as the effect of their teaching the moral improvement of their students. Reading the *Nicomachean Ethics* and listening to lectures on it are activities, so they insisted, that will issue in the development of the moral virtues. I choose as a notable example of someone advancing these claims, Francesco Piccolomini. Piccolomini was born in Siena in 1523 and died there in 1607. After teaching at Siena,

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Macerata, and Perugia, he was appointed as professor of natural philosophy at Padua, where he taught from 1560 until 1598. In 1583, when he was sixty years old, he published at Venice his *Universa philosophia de moribus*, a work that has not yet been translated. It is a remarkable book, both for its originality and its independence of mind, the same independence of mind that Piccolomini exhibited in his extended controversy with Zabarella on philosophical and scientific method. Although Piccolomini is always deferential to Aristotle, and although his book is generally and by intention Aristotelian, it does not take the form of an exposition or of commentary upon the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but that of an independent enquiry by Piccolomini into the place of the virtues in civic life. And he is not always Aristotelian, sometimes knowingly, sometimes not.

Piccolomini avowedly departs from Aristotle at the beginning and again at the end of his book. At the beginning⁶ he contrasts his method with that of Aristotle. Aristotle's method was that of resolution, his is to be that of composition. Where Aristotle was concerned to resolve civil – that is, political – science into its constituent parts, Piccolomini is concerned to begin from the parts of civil science, so as to exhibit our movement from the habits needed for civic life, the virtues, to a developed apprehension of our final good and then to use that apprehension as a standard to guide right action, action in accordance with the virtues. “That is requisite, since the right ordering (*rectitude*) of human actions is to be sought from the highest good as from a rule and measure.”⁷ The first principles on the basis of which Piccolomini conducts his project of composition are to be the same first principles that emerged from Aristotle's resolute enquiry.

So there follow in order sections on the matter of the virtues, on the principles of the virtues, on what Piccolomini calls semivirtues, that is, states of continence, on the moral, intellectual, and heroic virtues, on “a certain use of virtue,” namely friendship, and on various means that may assist virtue in being effective, such as good fortune, external goods, honor, and physical beauty. All this is an extended prologue to two final chapters, one on the highest good and one on the relationship of virtue to the highest good, a topic of consequence not only to individuals, but also to cities and peoples.

Piccolomini's second avowed departure from Aristotle is more radical. In his discussion of Aristotle's account of the highest good he accuses Aristotle

6 *Introductio*, cap. XXXII.7 *Ibid.*, cap. XXXII.

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of contradicting himself, since, according to Piccolomini, Aristotle assigns unqualified superiority to the contemplative life, but only by ignoring what he himself has said about the active life. If we follow that account, we have to recognize that in some respects the good to be achieved by the active life is superior. “Which grade of the highest good is more grounded in steadfast character and more lasting (*constantior et firmior*)?”⁸ Piccolomini asks, and he replies that the effects of the practice of the virtues of the active life, the part that habituation plays in their acquisition and the fact that their exercise is less open to interruption by external circumstance than is the contemplative life all support his conclusion about the superiority of the active life.

It is true that in the progress towards the good through different levels of virtue, natural, moral, and civil, rational, heroic, and divine, the ultimate end is still that of achieving contemplative wisdom, understood in Christian terms. But Piccolomini’s whole emphasis is upon a training in the virtues directed towards the ends of the active life. To become a good citizen of heaven, guided by Christian theologians, may be our ultimate end, but what should preoccupy us here and now, especially if we are nobly born and well prepared for higher education, is how to become a good and successful citizen of Venice, guided by Aristotle and by his contemporary exponents.

Piccolomini’s praise of the active rather than the contemplative life is of course not new. It was already found in that earlier Aristotelian, the Florentine Leonardo Bruni. Like Bruni’s, it is closely related to concerns deriving from his civic allegiance, concerns that he shares with his intended readers. The audience to whom the *Universa philosophia de moribus* is the most obviously directed fall into three classes. The first are his fellow-scholars. Piccolomini was unusually learned, both in ancient philosophy and in the literature devoted to commentary on Aristotle. And he was well aware that at many points he was making and defending scholarly claims, whether about the relationship of Aristotle’s views to those of Plato or the Stoics or about the interpretation of this or that Aristotelian text, claims that were highly contestable. This gives a scholarly dimension to his work that is lacking in the writings of some earlier Renaissance Aristotelians, such as Bruni. But his fellow-scholars were not Piccolomini’s only intended audience. For what he supplied his readers with was in effect a detailed syllabus for university lecture courses on

8 Ibid., section nine, XLIII.

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Aristotle's ethics and politics, designed for and addressed to the Venetian students of the University of Padua. Yet oddly enough Piccolomini never himself delivered such lectures. All his own teaching was on natural philosophy. But here he sets out the lecture course that he might have given. So that in the background there are not only his scholarly rivals, but also the past and future students of the university, while in the foreground there is a third and primary audience. Piccolomini dedicated the *Universa philosophia de moribus* to the Venetian senate and it is the senate whom he addresses directly. Both in his dedicatory introduction and in his discussion of prudence⁹ he cites as examples of those who have excelled in prudence the present and past members of that body. What he is offering to the members of the Venetian senate is both explanation and prescription. How is the enduring greatness of the Venetian Republic to be explained? A number of Venetian historians had addressed this question and Piccolomini's claim that it is to be explained in key part by the virtues that have informed Venetian civic life was already in one way a familiar one. The dominant mode of enquiry in sixteenth-century Venice had been historical, not philosophical, a kind of history designed to teach moral and political lessons through narrating episodes from the Venetian past. What the story of the Venetian past demonstrated, according to such official historians of the Republic as Andrei Navagero, Giovan Pietro Contarini, and Paolo Paruta, was that it was the peculiar excellence of Venetian institutions that not only accounted for their stability and their enduring excellence, but also for the preservation of Venetian liberty.

Piccolomini agreed with them. His treatment of the question, which is the best practically achievable type of constitution, is much briefer than Aristotle's and this is clearly because he takes it that the history of Venice rather than Aristotle's text has provided the definitive answer to this question. Just as Aristotle had argued, the best practicable constitution is a constitution of a mixed type, combining elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, as Venice does. But for Piccolomini the interesting question is not whether Venetian institutions are excellent, but what has made them so. And here he has his own avowedly Aristotelian answer.

The Venetian historians had acknowledged the importance of the virtues. Indeed they take it for granted. What was original to Piccolomini was his catalogue and analysis of the relevant virtues and his further prescriptive claim that the cultivation of those virtues now requires an education in civil science, the very same education that is available

9 Ibid., section five, cap. XXXVI.

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II

at Padua. Excellent institutions are the result of the cultivation of the virtues and the virtues are to be understood by and inculcated through the teaching of the exponent of civil science, the moral and political philosopher. Venice needs philosophy.

It is in defending this latter claim that Piccolomini's Aristotelianism begins to look very different from Aristotle's. After all, Aristotle had, as I already noticed, declared that it would be a mistake to teach moral philosophy to the adolescent young. And it seems to follow that, if Aristotle is right, lectures on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* would be quite inappropriate matter for undergraduate teaching. Yet such teaching was the stock in trade of many Renaissance Aristotelians, including Piccolomini, and this without any sense of a disagreement with Aristotle. They were of course aware of the relevant passages in Aristotle. Indeed that Aristotle had said what he did was a Renaissance commonplace. In *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare has Hector compare Paris and Troilus to "young men, whom Aristotle thought/unfit to hear moral philosophy" on the grounds that they are moved by "the hot passion of distemper'd blood." So how did such Renaissance Aristotelians reconcile the text of Aristotle with their own educational practice? They did so in two ways, both exemplified by Piccolomini. They provide glosses on *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a2–8 designed, if not to remove, at least to make less obvious their difference from Aristotle. And they provide an account of moral education, revised so that it assigns to the teaching of moral and political philosophy a function other than and greater than that which Aristotle assigned to it.¹⁰

Piccolomini makes his prescriptive case to the senators about the need for teaching moral philosophy to the young in the course of his discussion of the nature of *paideia* (Latinized as "paidia"), which he understands as preliminary to a genuine education in the virtues. After rejecting an assortment of what he takes to be false opinions,¹¹ he assigns to *paideia*¹² the task of preparing the young so that they may later become fit students of civil science. *Paideia* comprises not only intellectual, but also practical instruction, a combination of appropriate teaching with friendly advice and preliminary, although only preliminary habituation in right action. And this provides just the kind of experience that prepares one both for a training in the arts and in civil science.

10 II, ii, II. 164–69.

11 Francesco Piccolomini, *Universa philosophia de moribus in decem gradus redacta*, Venice, 1583, V, 12.

12 *Ibid.*, V, 13.