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CHAPTER I

The Renaissance background

INTRODUCTION

Three of the great figures who were the heroes of the Enlightenment histories of morality were born within five years of each other: Hugo Grotius in 1583, John Selden in 1585 and Thomas Hobbes in 1588. The social and intellectual world in which they grew up, and in which all three were star performers before they came to reject it in various ways, was thus the world of the last years of the sixteenth century. That world had itself been shaped in complex ways by the events of the Renaissance, Reformation and Counter-Reformation, by the growth of Habsburg power and by resistance to it, so that an extraordinarily rich and pluralist culture was available to any intelligent and sensitive adolescent in Western Europe.

By our standards, they were born into a sparsely inhabited continent: the total population of the lands where the Roman Catholic or Protestant Churches were dominant (which will be the area of our enquiry, corresponding to Europe west of Muscovy and the Ottoman empire) was probably some 60 million in 1600, roughly the same as that of the islands of Britain and Ireland today (Braudel 1972 pp. 396–7). (England, to continue this parallel, had about the same population as the Republic of Ireland today.) Despite this generally sparse population, there were two areas of intense urbanisation and great wealth, on either side of the continent – one in northern Italy, and the other in the Netherlands. These were still the economic centres of Europe, as they had been for two or three hundred years, and they generated a remarkable artistic and intellectual life alongside their commercial activity. It will be as necessary for us to concentrate on what happened in those two areas as it is for historians of the earlier Renaissance.

By our standards Grotius, Hobbes and Selden were also born into

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an illiterate society – probably about 60 or 70 per cent of the population of the major European states were illiterate. But they were not, paradoxically, born into an uneducated society: a very high proportion of the literate population received what we would regard as a high level of education, first in a grammar school or its equivalent, and then at a university. So great were the numbers, indeed, that in the early seventeenth century it was a common cause for complaint across the continent that there were far too many unemployed and dissatisfied graduates. Accurate computation has only recently become possible with the advent of more accurate estimates of the size of populations and of the different proportions in each age-group, and a fully persuasive picture is really only possible for England, on the basis of Wrigley and Schofield's work combined with that of Venn and Stone. (The fact that England had only two universities, both very large, makes things very much easier.)

In England, from the date when proper records of university entrants became available in the 1560s, until the 1680s, the proportion of the male year-group entering Oxford and Cambridge is never less than one in seventy, and in the peak periods of the 1580s and 1630s it is one in fifty (this is understandably not true for the 1640s, when the proportion is much lower (calculated from Wrigley and Schofield 1981 p. 528 and Stone 1964 p. 51)). It is worth observing that in 1921 it was one in forty-three (calculated from the *UGC Returns from Universities and Historical Tables*). If about 70 per cent of the male population were illiterate, and almost all the female population, too, this means that one in fifteen of those able to read and write might proceed to higher education, approximately the same proportion as in Britain today, and greater than the proportion going to modern universities. England may well have had a rather mean provision of university places by European standards: in the last quarter of the sixteenth century Spain seems to have had about twice as many people going to university, about one in thirty-one (Kagan 1975 pp. 360–2). We do not have such a good idea of what the figures in England were for the period before 1560, but following the best current estimates for the size of the English population and the numbers admitted to the universities, the figures for the period 1500 to 1540 seem, remarkably, to have been more or less the same.

The boys who received this education were by no means all from

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the upper classes. There are famous cases of very poor boys rising to the top of the system – Tommaso Campanella, the Italian philosopher, was the son of a cobbler from Campania (*Dizionario Biografico* xvii p. 373). This must have been unusual, but children of what in England were called ‘the middling sort’ regularly received a higher education – Selden’s father, for instance, was a yeoman farmer from the uplands of Sussex, worth only £40 p.a. at a time when a day labourer could earn £10 (Aubrey, *Brief Lives* II p. 219; Wrightson 1982 p. 34). Pierre Gassendi, one of the two most important French philosophers of the early seventeenth century, was the son of a peasant, and Pierre Charron, the great sceptical philosopher, was the son of a Parisian printer (Renouard 1965 p. 75). Most European societies organised themselves in such a way that poor children could receive an education if they showed exceptional promise – in England, many of the students at Oxford and Cambridge were what was called ‘sizar’ at Cambridge, working their way through college by acting as waiters or porters. The professions offered such boys great rewards; as Selden said, *à propos* of the abolition of episcopacy in England, ‘Twill be a great discouragement to scholars, that bishops should be put down: For now the father can say to his son, and the tutor to his pupil, *Study hard, and you shall have vocem & sedem in parlamento*; then it must be, *Study hard, and you shall have a hundred a year if you please your parish*’ (*Opera Omnia* III col. 2016).

The education these boys received, at least in the grammar schools, was largely in the Latin language; in the equivalent of the sixth form they might also learn Greek or even Hebrew, but these were much less deeply embedded in the culture. There were regional differences: it was a cliché that the Italians were poor at Greek, whereas in northern Europe it was studied more closely (no doubt because to native speakers of a Germanic language, Latin and Greek were equally exotic tongues). Latin was taught as a modern, spoken language: many schools forbade the use of the vernacular in a class-room, and many of the works which the pupils studied were by modern authors (this is again particularly true in the North, where, for example, the writings of Erasmus were treated as texts; it was less true in the South or in Jesuit schools, where there was a greater concentration on purely ancient works. We shall see something of the reason for this discrepancy later.) The need to treat Latin as a living language even led to the bizarre proposal in the mid-seventeenth century that a city in central Europe should be

turned over to Latin speakers, so that students could travel there to learn it like a modern language. The result of all this effort was that the linguistically heterogeneous population of Europe had a monoglot educated elite, much as present-day India uses English as its language of culture and government. It should be said, however, that communication between different nationals was often easier on paper than in person – in 1608 Scaliger received an English visitor at Leiden who addressed him in Latin. After listening to him for a quarter of an hour, Scaliger apologised for not replying, but said that he knew no English (Sandys 1908 p. 234). Scholars like Scaliger, however, conducted an extensive written correspondence with like-minded people all over Europe; Selden's correspondents even included a rabbi of Venice, an indication that Jews, too, were involved in this interchange (Bodleian MS Selden supra 108 fol. 241; see also Modena, *Life of Judah* pp. 170–1, though its editor missed this letter).

This rich and complicated culture, resting on an extensive common literature comprising works from antiquity down to the present day, offered an enormous variety of intellectual positions. But – like our own pluralist culture – theirs was one where the way of looking at the world which anyone adopted depended very much on what kind of activity they were committed to. One of the most striking features of late sixteenth-century European intellectual life is the divorce between an academic moral science, the material of university courses, and the ethical and political attitudes of the people actually involved (even if at some remove) in the business of government. Since the Renaissance, all over Europe, the anterooms of princes and the council-chambers of republics had been filled with young men educated in the humanist manner who saw their role (whether as loyal servants of their government, or its radical critics) as in some way implementing the ideals of humanist culture. They provided advice for their rulers; they acted as ambassadors; they might be called upon to act as tutors to their prince's children, or to the children of great magnates who would one day be involved in public life like their fathers. This was a culture – it should be stressed – that was complex, morally serious and in many ways independent of the philosophical attitudes in contemporary universities; it was an imaginative and literary culture, in which poetry and the theatre played a major role.

This is familiar as the world out of which fifteenth-century Italian

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humanism developed – the world of the *dictatores*, of secretaries and chancellors of cities and advisers to princes. But it was still the world which Grotius, Selden and Hobbes all inhabited, at least in their early adult life. None taught in a university; all were involved in some way with the political life of their nation. Grotius was first an aide to the Dutch statesman Oldenbarnevelt and then a politician in his own right, while Selden was first an adviser to various noblemen and then an MP, and Hobbes was a tutor and secretary to the Earls of Devonshire. All were sensitive to the imaginative literature of their time. Grotius was the most distinguished neo-Latin poet of his day, while Selden, too, wrote poetry, was a great friend of Ben Jonson and the ‘wits’ gathered round him, and was a regular and enthusiastic member of the audience for the Jacobean theatre (something which would have shocked a later and more technically minded figure like his friend Matthew Hale, who was born in 1609 (Burnet, *Life of Hale* p. 4)). Hobbes also devoted a great deal of his time throughout his life to writing both English and Latin verse, and to thinking about literary aesthetics.

The fact that this central strand of seventeenth-century thought about politics emerged from what was still a humanist culture is of major importance. It means that the history of the *studia humanitatis* in the sixteenth century must be the principal theme of these introductory chapters, and this in turn means that the original debates from which distinctively humanist ideas emerged are relevant even to our concerns. In particular, we must understand a major change which came over humanist studies shortly before the birth of these three writers: a change so great that we can talk about it dividing an ‘old’ and a ‘new’ humanism. ‘Old’ humanism was dominated by the ideas and the style of Cicero; ‘new’ humanism by those of Tacitus, an author barely looked at during the period of the old humanists. *Style* is going to be important in our survey: as Petrarch said,

an actor can wear any kind of garment; but a writer cannot adopt any kind of style. He should form his own and keep it, from fear that we should laugh at him, dressed grotesquely in other’s clothes . . . Certainly each of us has naturally something individual and his own in utterance and language as in his face and gesture. (*Letters* p. 183)

The men of the Renaissance were hypersensitive to stylistic nuances and what they might imply about fundamental attitudes to the

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world. This chapter will be devoted to outlining the old humanism, the cult of Cicero, and the vicissitudes it suffered before the 1570s.

ROMANS AND ARISTOTLE

Since the thirteenth century there had been two ways of talking about ethics and politics in Europe, marked out by quite separate technical Latin vocabularies – Latin of course being the general language of high culture in Europe down to the end of the seventeenth century. One, which dominated the ‘schools’ (that is, the universities) of late-medieval Europe, was based above all on the *Ethics* and *Politics* of Aristotle, as translated into Latin by Robert Grosseteste (the *Ethics*, c. 1240) and William of Moerbeke (the *Politics*, c. 1270). Major commentaries on these works were supplied by the scholastic writers, particularly Thomas Aquinas, while themes and terms from them were fundamental to the enterprise of scholastic ethics which formed part of such works as Aquinas’s *Summa theologiae*. Alongside this way of talking about moral matters was the other one, which dominated the courses of rhetoric and the activities of the *dictatores*; it was based on the three main Roman rhetorical models, Seneca, Quintilian and, above all, Cicero, and on the historians who exemplified the orators’ teachings, notably Livy and Sallust (see Skinner 1988a pp. 3–6).

These Roman texts naturally did not require translation, and in general their themes were much clearer and less contentious than those of the Latin Aristotle. All three offered versions of late Hellenistic philosophy, in particular elements of both Stoicism and Academic scepticism (the Academy of Plato having by the time of Cicero become a centre of scepticism). In general philosophical matters, indeed, Cicero was avowedly a sceptic, providing in his *Academica* one of the central texts of ancient epistemological scepticism: the sceptics argued that there can be no secure knowledge of the physical world, vitiated as our perceptions are by illusion and uncertainty. But equally avowedly, Cicero did not extend this scepticism fully to moral matters: in this area, the common concern of the Roman writers was the pursuit of a *beata vita*, something conventionally translated as a ‘happy life’.

In the Stoic tradition which they all more or less followed, man (like all animals) was taken to be fundamentally self-interested: ‘Every living creature loves itself, and from the moment of birth

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strives to secure its own preservation; because the earliest impulse bestowed on it by nature for its life-long protection is the instinct for self-preservation and for the maintenance of itself in the best condition possible to it in accordance with its nature', wrote Cicero in his *De finibus* (v.24), and similar passages could be cited from his *De officiis* and from Seneca (particularly his *Epistula moralis* 121). This view immediately set up a tension in the pursuit of *beatitudo* between what was directly beneficial to oneself – described by the Romans as *utile* – and what was conventionally 'moral' – *honestum*. All the Roman moralists worried about the relationship between these concepts, particularly as they had constantly to look over their shoulders at the Epicureans with their message that all that mattered was what was *utile*. They also had to be concerned about the sceptics, represented above all by Carneades, who denied the possibility of any stable universal principles of morality, but were prepared to accept that men are always motivated by the desire of preserving themselves. As we shall see in Chapter 2, there was a strand in Stoicism (far more marked in Seneca than in Cicero) which entirely endorsed this, and which stressed the need for a complete intellectual and emotional detachment in order to preserve oneself psychologically – a condition they termed *apatheia*.

The standard Roman answer to these views was that given extensive discussion in Cicero's *De officiis*: that what was *honestum* was what was *utile* to human society. Cicero in fact very often identified the requirements of human society with those of one's own state, eloquently defending the idea that 'there is no social relationship more close, none more dear than that which links each one of us with our country' (I.57). Usually, the requirement of one's *respublica* was that one lived a life defined by the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude, and Cicero in general denied that the interests of the state could lie in any other kind of conduct. 'The occasion cannot arise when it would be to the state's interest to have the wise man do anything immoral' (I.159). But in certain passages he conceded that political interest could override orthodox moral rules; thus promises might be broken for political reasons. 'Suppose that a man who has entrusted money to you proposes to make war upon your country, should you restore the deposit? I believe you should not, for you would be acting against the state, which ought to be the dearest thing in the world to you' (III.95, Loeb trans. corrected).

Playing one's appropriate role in the service of the *respublica* was the source of glory amongst one's fellow-citizens, and all these Roman writers stressed the importance of glory as a goal for action: the public esteem attached to one's conduct was a powerful motive to behave in the way the public good required. Cicero wrote a whole treatise *De gloria* which was still extant at the beginning of the Renaissance, though it has subsequently disappeared, and the term resonates throughout both his works and those of Seneca. The Roman historians explored the implications of this in the history of Rome: it has been a 'glorious' republic by virtue of its imperial expansion, and both Livy and Sallust enquired into the reasons for this greatness (Sallust, particularly, stressing the importance of free republican institutions).

The idea that your state represented the focus of your moral life might be taken to imply that only political action was truly *honestum* or virtuous. Quintilian was fiercest in arguing this (especially XII.2.7), but neither Cicero nor Seneca were single-mindedly in favour of the life of action. In the *De officiis* Cicero did say (e.g. at I.153) that political action should be ranked higher than any other virtuous activity, and in particular than the life of *contemplatio* or *cognitio* (i.e. philosophy); but even in that work he could say that 'earnest and thoughtful men' might be justified in certain circumstances in retiring to a contemplative life of *otium* or leisure (I.69). Seneca wrote extensively on just this topic, with ambiguous results; in one treatise devoted entirely to it, the *De otio*, he made the compelling point that both the Epicureans and the Stoics 'consigned us to *otium*' though by different routes: 'Epicurus says, "the wise man will not take part in politics, except upon some special occasion"; Zeno [the founder of Stoicism] says, "the wise man will take part in politics, unless prevented by some special circumstance"' (242).

What these special circumstances were was rather indeterminate: old age or ill health certainly qualified, but so could disgust at the corrupt state of political life – a circumstance which Seneca enlarged on in his *Epistulae morales*. Philosophical *otium* could be defended as itself in the interests of the *respublica*, and in *De otio* and his *Epistulae* Seneca argued both that philosophy could be of greater service to some republics than political action, and that there was a wider human community than the state whose interests were certainly served more by philosophy than by political action. In a lost work entitled *Hortensius* Cicero himself probably argued the same. Appar-

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ently (according to Cicero and Quintilian) the question, 'should a wise man take part in public affairs?', was a regular exercise in the rhetoric schools of the late Republic and the Principate, and it is clear that the Roman orators were not tied by their general theory to any particular answer to this question (see Griffin 1976 pp. 315–67).

The commitment to serving the republic in some form, even through appropriate *otium*, might also be thought to imply a commitment to what we would call republican forms of government, in which such political participation was widely possible. Cicero is famous for just such a deduction, but again there are qualifications to be made: Seneca in his *De clementia* (1.4.1) provided an eloquent defence of virtuous *princely* rule, arguing that such a prince would be the most effective protector of his state: 'It is their own safety that men love, when for one man they lead ten legions at a time into battle . . . For he is the bond by which the commonwealth is united' (*Moral Essays* 1 p. 369).

This Roman moral philosophy was of course avowedly pagan – indeed, virtually atheistical, for though *contemplatio* might include thinking about divine matters, it need not; and Cicero in his *De natura deorum* gave prominence to a number of sceptical arguments about religious belief. Accordingly it suffered a direct and often bitter and jeering assault from early Christian Latin writers. Themselves often trained up in the rhetoric schools, the Christians did not merely put an alternative view alongside that of the Romans; they directly disputed the meaning of the key terms which the pagan philosophers used, and sought to give a narrowly Christian connotation to each of them. This process was taken to its extreme in Lactantius' *Divine Institutes* (c. 320 A.D.), which methodically changed the meaning of all the principal classical moral terms such as *honestum*. This period of attack ended with terms such as *beatitudo* and *contemplatio* having taken on their familiar Christian meaning, and the Roman philosophy having become something which committed Christians found difficult to reproduce sympathetically.

The one element in it which Lactantius at least *could* endorse was the occasional use by the Roman Stoics of the term 'law of nature'. They had used it to refer to the basic natural instincts and capacities of men and animals, though one should not overestimate its centrality within their writings; but Lactantius picked up some passages (now lost) from Book III of Cicero's *De republica* extolling the

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importance of the natural law, and remarked 'who that is acquainted with the mystery of God could so significantly relate the law of God, as a man far removed from the knowledge of the truth has set forth that law?' (1 p. 371). As this illustrates, the *legal* character of the 'law of nature' was crucial to the Christians, for they straightforwardly associated the law of nature with the law of God upon which they relied for their distinctive ethical beliefs.

It is this critical attitude of the Latin Fathers to the Roman moralists which in large part explains the immense popularity of Aristotle among theologians from the thirteenth century onwards. Precisely because Aristotle was *not* available in a Latin text, he could be made immune to the attacks which the Fathers had launched on the theories of Cicero and Seneca; for the Latin Aristotle could be given a technical vocabulary quite different from that of the Romans and the Fathers. Robert Grosseteste did this in his translation of the *Ethics*: thus, while classical Latin writers would have rendered Aristotle's *eudaimonia* straightforwardly as *beatitudo*, Grosseteste reserved that term for Aristotle's much less central *makarios*, and translated *eudaimonia* throughout as *felicitas*. Similarly, he rendered *theoria* not as *contemplatio* but as *speculatio*; while the term *honestum* does not appear in the Grosseteste text, despite the fact that Aristotle used the Greek word *kalon* which classical Latinists always translated as *honestum* (see *Aristoteles latinus* xxxvi.1-3, fasc. 5, indices s. vbb.). Aristotle even remarked at one point that 'the *kalon* is the object of virtue', something which Cicero would have endorsed; but Grosseteste translated this as 'the good (*bonum*) is the object of virtue' (1115b12; *Aristoteles latinus* xxvi.1-3, fasc. 2 p. 192; see also Dod 1982 and Wieland 1982).

William of Moerbeke's translation of the *Politics* exhibits the same tendency; most striking of all, as Professor Rubinstein has pointed out, is the fact that Moerbeke chose to introduce into Latin the technical term 'politics' at all, thereby breaking the link between the Greek term and the life of a *city*. The natural Latin translation of *politikos* is, of course, *civilis*, but that term would have drawn his readers' attention far too directly to the concrete conditions of urban, civic life (Rubinstein 1987 p. 42).

Having done this in the mid-thirteenth century, the medieval Aristotelians were free to exploit the ambiguities and complexities of Aristotle's text in isolation from any extraneous information about what the technical terms in the *Ethics* and *Politics* may originally