

Matthias Roick, *Pontano's Virtues. Aristotelian Moral and Political Thought in the Renaissance*, London 2017, Bloomsbury, 336 pp.

For some years now there has been a notable injection of new vigour into the study of Renaissance Aristotelianism. Revived interest in the subject is borne out by numerous initiatives, ranging from study of the vernacular versions of Aristotle's works in various languages to investigation of their circulation in non-academic milieus. Even the complex relationship between the development of modern scientific thought and the Aristotelian scholastic system has been reconsidered in the light of little-known documents. In the same context, important research has been carried out on certain eminent humanists active between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries whose debt to Aristotelian doctrine has not yet been sufficiently brought to light. To give just a few examples of the many fascinating contributions, we would mention the book by Kuni Sakamoto on Julius Caesar Scaliger (*Julius Caesar Scaliger, Renaissance Reformer of Aristotelianism. A Study of His 'Exotericarum Exercitationes'*, Brill, 2016), and the essay by Marco Sgarbi on Bernardino Tomitano ("Francesco Robortello on Topics", published in *Viator*, 47, 2016: 365–388).

Various initiatives within the editorial market are aimed at giving maximum visibility to these contributions. One of the most interesting is the series "Bloomsbury Studies in the Aristotelian Tradition", which includes the recent work by Matthias Roick, *Pontano's Virtues. Aristotelian Moral and Political Thought in the Renaissance*, published in 2017 and reviewed here.

Pontano was one of the most charismatic characters on the Italian Renaissance scene, a versatile and prolific writer whose work explored a variety of different fields including philosophy, history, politics, astrology and grammar. His fame during his own lifetime was nevertheless chiefly related to his work as a poet and Latinist. His celebrated *Accademia Pontaniana* was a pioneering initiative that paved the way for the numerous academies that sprang up all over Italy and elsewhere in Europe over the following decades. From the start the academy attracted eminent artists and intellectuals, and its debates were enlivened by figures of the calibre of Jacopo Sannazaro and Giovanni Cotta, who also undoubtedly helped to boost Pontano's success as a poet.

Like other of his contemporaries, Pontano's fate was to be imprisoned in a sort of temporal limbo – to borrow Roick's effective expression – namely the period between the end of the Middle Ages and the arrival of modernity and the realism of Machiavelli. This was a time in which, according to the most authoritative historiographic interpretations, the scholastic doctrines continued to be wearily churned out as sterile exercises no longer capable of describing reality.

Consequently, an assumed lack of originality in Pontano's philosophical-moral thought prevented scholars from addressing a circumstantiated analysis of his work, leaving a gap that Roick has set out to fill.

The book is divided into three parts, further broken down into progressively numbered chapters. The first part, "The Great Pontano", deals with the most salient aspects of Pontano's political and diplomatic career. The reconstruction of his service in the House of Aragon is not merely an overview of the prestigious offices that were assigned to him, since these aspects of his activity are cogently related to one of the works produced by him: *De prudentia* (1498/1500). In this treatise Pontano also supplies personal information, so that his own activity in the political and civilian sphere becomes a model through which the ethical virtues and their field of application can be observed. Starting from Aristotle's definition, he also introduces the reader to considerations about the value of ethics in relation to active and contemplative life and the correct use of the same in the civilian sphere.

Part Two, "Rewriting Moral Philosophy", addresses Pontano's role on the complex stage of Renaissance humanism, exploring both his method of investigation and the philosophical character of his work more generally. In the third chapter Roick's reconstruction starts with the different reactions of the Italian humanists to the great social and political upheavals which they had witnessed. Between those who read the contemporary situation in a conservative key and those who embraced progressive ideas, Pontano attempted instead to develop an ethical system that could hold together a classical vision and new approaches. Starting from Aristotle, who continued to be an undisputed authority, he adopted certain features of Roman moral philosophy and also devoted close attention to the work of Leonardo Bruni, who translated the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics* into the vernacular. He was also considerably influenced by Petrarch, especially regarding the relationship between language and philosophy. The criticism of the scholastics in Petrarch's *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* fuelled humanist debate in the early decades of the fifteenth century. However, although Petrarch's chief polemical target here was the naturalistic-scientific Aristotle – seen as a collection of notions incapable of improving man and hence demanding the revival of Platonic moral philosophy – Pontano's interest was more focused on another key point of the treatise: eloquence. Petrarch attacks the scholastics for the technical and obscure language they adopt in their disputes, and Pontano takes this as the cue for a revival of Aristotelian eloquence, considering moral virtues that remain true to the Aristotelian system while at the same time embracing the rules of rhetoric.

Part Three, "Virtue, Inside Out", explores the distinctive features of the virtues in Pontano's philosophical thought. Considerable space is devoted to the description of human nature and the relation between man and destiny, analysing in particular his treatise *De fortuna* and his reworkings of

Aristotle's *Physics* and the *Liber de bona fortuna* (derived from the *Eudemian Ethics* and the *Magna Moralia*).

Like Aristotle, Pontano maintains that it is possible to investigate human nature through research into the good life. This is why development of the principles of virtues is guided by the reason and draws on different areas of knowledge. It is clear that Pontano is firmly opposed to the stance of Lorenzo Valla, who sets pleasure as the highest good thus shifting attention towards the sensual and irrational aspects of human life. Already in *De voluptate*, and to an even greater degree in *Dialecticae Disputationes*, Valla presents the constituent elements for a new theory of virtue. In effect, he modifies Aristotelian moral thought, transforming all the cardinal virtues, except for prudence, from "habits" into "passions" (*affectus*). Such passions become virtues only to the extent that they follow the rules of reason, otherwise they become vices. In other words, the intellect is overcome by the will, since the virtuous action is determined by the subject's will rather than by knowledge of what is good and what is not. It is interesting that Pontano too makes a personal reworking of the cardinal virtues, giving priority to prudence and fortitude over justice and temperance. The stress placed on fortitude is particularly striking; like temperance this resides in the concupiscible and irascible parts of the soul. Roick explains that this imbalance is due to the fact that, for Pontano, the decisive characteristic of the passions is their intensity, and this intensity is regulated chiefly by fortitude. It is fortitude therefore that renders men's actions assertive and efficacious in the face of vice, curbing excessive behaviour. By the same token, moderate behaviour is a consequence of the correct dose of fortitude.

In the last chapter the discussion turns to ethical virtues in the political dimension, starting from Poggio Bracciolini's *De infelicitate principorum* which posits the impossibility of the man of power being virtuous. Roick then goes on to describe the efforts made by the humanists gravitating around the Aragonese court – with Pontano in the vanguard – to propose an alternative to Bracciolini's view. Their treatises sustain the paradigm of the wise and good sovereign, seeking to elaborate an education in the ethical virtues capable of moulding the ruler. It was an attempt of uncertain outcomes: crowned with success in the case of the "virtuous" Alfonso I, but doomed to failure in his successors.

The book ends with three appendices: a chronological list of Pontano's works, a chronology of the significant events in his life, and a comparative list of the moral virtues of Aristotle and Pontano.

This brief sketch shows clearly that *Pontano's Virtues* is the result of lengthy and meticulous research that builds into a solidly-argued and stylistically elegant study which is certain to be extremely useful to historians of philosophy in the early Modern Age. The author's aim was to define the distinctive traits of Pontano's thought while placing it within the broader context of Renaissance moral philosophical doctrine.

In a historical and cultural scenario of major change the use of Aristotle's philosophical system presented many facets, and Pontano was part of this phenomenon. His notion of virtue is far from being a stale repetition of Aristotelian teaching, since it comprises both a synthesis of philosophical doctrines and speculation on attitudes and approaches to life. Through the works of writers such as Petrarch, Bruni and Valla, he reflects on the moral and political thought of Aristotle in a humanist key. However, appraising the eclecticism with which Pontano mingles Aristotle's thought with that of Seneca, Cicero and the humanists is not sufficient to fully grasp his virtues: one must also focus the notion of virtue more generally elaborated in the Renaissance. Roick argues that historians have failed to grasp the impact of this notion, undervaluing its importance in the constitution of modern society. The contribution made by this book to the study of ethics in the early Modern Age not only enriches our knowledge of Pontano as a man and as a philosopher, but also offers us a new slant on the political and moral thought of the time.

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