THE DISCIPLINE OF THE REPUBLIC AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE CITIZENS: WHAT WE MAY LEARN FROM LATE MEDIEVAL ENDOWMENT PRACTICE

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A fairly general interrogation stands at the beginning of this paper: what knowledge, if any, does ethics need? This question is in many respects intriguing, especially in our days as it hints at the central political and intellectual issue of moral relativism.1 Historians can possibly contribute all sorts of useful insights to the debates surrounding this issue by looking at past societies. Yet there may be an even more immediate benefit in shifting the focus from the present to the past, at least for historians of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Indeed, some of the main notions of the history of that period and the phenomena they describe have been related to either knowledge or ethics, or both of them. This is obvious in the case of humanism, but it also applies to the Reformation and, to introduce a more recent set of analysis, to late medieval and Renaissance republicanism.

German church historian Berndt Hamm has worked out what he calls “normative centring” in the very process of the Reformation.2 According to his interpretation, late medieval reform movements and, later, sixteenth-century Reformation initiatives, both protestant and catholic, aimed to design an ethics that would provide a few simple and clear guidelines to people. On the other hand, these guidelines were to be concentrated enough to encompass all aspects of existence, as they were intended to ensure unity and peace to urban society that was undergoing rapid differentiation. In part, Hamm’s interpretation relies on evidences from the city of Nuremberg, to which this

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paper will also refer. Yet my paper is in the first place concerned with humanism and, to start with, republicanism.

Historians have defined republicanism on the ground of ethics. Most famously, Hans Baron explained the rise of Florentine republicanism through a moral shift, which he dated to the early decades of the 15th century, from a morality centred on the ideal of the *vita contemplativa* to an ethics of *vivere civile*—"a way of life given over to civic concerns and the (ultimately political) activity of citizenship", as John Pocock has eventually formulated it. Pocock himself and with him the Cambridge School of the history of political thought have, however, more than Baron stressed the knowledge revolution which, according to them, led to late medieval and Renaissance republicanism. Yet their interpretations of the intellectual background of late medieval and Renaissance republicanism differ greatly. While Quentin Skinner has insisted on the importance of the study of classical rhetoric and, eventually, of the very argumentation of republican Roman authors in the development of republicanism, John Pocock has deemed it shaped by the reception of Aristotle’s practical philosophy in the specific context of the Italian city-states.

Authors of the Cambridge School have been mainly interested in the tradition of political thought that arose from the rebirth of republican knowledge from the 13th century and that, according to them, would last long after the failure of the republican experience to which it gave rise in the first place. Even so, it is striking that these scholars have not posed the question of the input of republican knowledge into late medieval and Renaissance ethics. This is particularly intriguing in Pocock’s case, for Aristotle made some explicit assumptions about the link between knowledge and ethics.

Like Plato, Aristotle could not conceive of any ethics that was not rationally justifiable. Ethics could be enforced only if each person was convinced that he had good reason to live ethically and this reason appealed to him “in terms of something about himself”, as Bernard Williams put it. Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle made a basic

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6 Williams, *Ethics*, p. 32.