FROM VIRTUE ETHICS TO NORMATIVE ETHICS?
TRACING PARADigm SHIFTS IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY
COMMENTARIES ON THE NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

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1. Introduction

The Later Middle Ages and Early Modern Period are strongly linked and at the same time marked with obvious differences with respect to the teaching of ethics and to theological reflections on ethics, yet it is difficult to decide how to frame and label these shifts that took place between these time periods. Many questions need to be raised: To what extent did the teaching of ethics undergo change during the fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth century? Did human actions come to be evaluated differently? Can we observe a shift from an ethical paradigm where good was pursued by means of virtuous behavior, to an ethical orientation that was established chiefly by societal norms and laws?

Some precaution is necessary, since these questions suggest that historical periods can be approached exclusively from either a virtue-ethics or a normative-ethics perspective. Although this bi-polar option is almost certainly too restrictive, it does seem that different ethical paradigms predominate in different historical periods. In the Higher Middle Ages, virtue ethics would seem to have been the dominant paradigm if we take its most renowned representative, Thomas Aquinas, as our gauge—though it should be remembered that St. Thomas’s Summa theologiae is also famous for its treatise on law.1 Significantly, there were already discussions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as to what virtue was precisely. These discussions criticized the concept of habitual virtue in order to defend an understanding of virtue as an individual decision made according to right reason. From this perspective, the

strengthening of habitual virtues was viewed as less important. Did this more individualistic vision of moral action prepare the ground for a neglect of virtue ethics in the following period? Did it provoke stronger normative developments in the teaching of ethics and moral theology that preferred to orient people’s actions from outside?

Answering this question is not a simple task. Difficulties start when we attempt to classify the ways in which ethics developed during the fifteenth century and at the beginning of the Early Modern Period. There are a number of tendencies that are ethically relevant, and these need to be considered in the light of developments that occurred in educational institutions, especially the universities. Laws and normative regulations were being taught at the faculties for law and canon law, and pastoral texts that were intended for the formation of priests and laypeople were also being written. The pastoral texts were often written by teachers working at the universities and frequently followed the structure of the Ten Commandments or the classical set of virtues and vices. Theological commentaries on the Bible and the Sentences of Peter Lombard were also a standard part of the theology curriculum. Both entailed discussion of the nature of virtue, as well as of the connection between the virtues. Finally, there were the philosophical commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics, which elucidated the text and explained Aristotle’s approach to the virtues.²

We will obviously be able to look at only a small part of this wide range of texts in this article. But what could those parts, which we will put to the side, add to the picture? We would not expect to find many changes of significance to ethics in the field of canon law, at least with respect to the form of its pronouncements. It is not a promising field, therefore, to study in search for a shift from virtue to normative ethics during the Later Middle Ages, even if related changes can be observed such as a trend towards centralization in questions of legal practice due to an increase in the number of written protocols.³ In regard to the pastoral

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² Around the middle of the fifteenth century, the Eudemian Ethics and the magna moralia (put together as “De bona fortuna”) were also commented upon. For recent studies of this work see e.g.: Valérie Cordonier, “Rêussir sans raison(s). Autour du texte et des gloses ‘Liber De bona fortuna Aristotilis’ dans le manuscrit de Melk 796 (1308)”, in 1308. Eine Topographie historischer Gleichzeitigkeit, eds. Andreas Speer and David Wirmer (Berlin, 2010), 705–770, and the volume edited by Luca Bianchi, Christian Readings of Aristotle from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (Studia Artistarum 29) (Turnhout, 2011).