BEYOND STOICISM AND ARISTOTELIANISM:
JOHN OF SALISBURY’S SKEPTICISM AND
TWELFTH-CENTURY MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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In his widely read and influential book, *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre describes the predicament of ethics during the Middle Ages generally as one of eclecticism bordering on fragmentation, a situation engendered by the multiplicity of available sources and contexts for the flourishing of ideas of virtue. Drawing his examples mainly from the twelfth century, MacIntyre argues that a struggle is evident, in particular, between the “interiorization of the moral life” (derived from the New Testament and, especially, Stoicism) and the political and teleological ethic of Aristotelianism.¹ The former he associates particularly with Abelard, the latter with John of Salisbury and Alan of Lille.² Ultimately, MacIntyre concludes, the Aristotelian conception of virtue as public action toward a common good proved victorious: “The medieval moral stage in that tradition [of moral theory and practice] was in a strong sense Aristotelian.” Such medieval Aristotelianism was, admittedly, “various and untidy”—hence, MacIntyre’s plausible claim that Aquinas’s “strict Aristotelianism” renders him “a highly deviant medieval figure”—but it still privileged the external and the active over the interior and the contemplative, as represented by Stoicism and its Christian appropriation.³

Given the broader intellectual agenda directing MacIntyre’s highly provocative historiography of medieval ethical theory, it might be easy to dismiss his account as whimsical. But I think that he captures in brief compass a pronounced tendency implicit in a wide range of recent scholarship: the view that philosophical ethics during the High Middle Ages was bifurcated between Abelardian (Stoic/

² Ibid., 170–71.
³ Ibid., 180, 178.
Christian) and Aristotelian understandings of natural virtue. In my view, this dichotomous characterization of ethical theory in the twelfth century fails to acknowledge the eclecticism of the actual thinkers and the diversity of their espoused views. A case in point is John of Salisbury. John provides perhaps a more difficult case than MacIntyre credits him with. On the one hand, MacIntyre is certainly correct in saying that John adopts distinctively Aristotelian constructions, not least in his moral psychology, according to which the formation of one’s character derives from “external” sources: the repetition of specific sorts of actions until a fixed disposition toward virtue (or vice) is ingrained. Yet John also demonstrates a Stoic/Christian mood, by proposing that the realm of political activity (which he knew intimately) was fraught with moral danger and that the earthly summum bonum resides outside the public domain in the life of withdrawn contemplation. In sum, John displays strong elements of both the Stoic and the Aristotelian traditions, without any apparent awareness of a contradiction between them.

I have little doubt that many scholars will determine this to be simply another instance in which John may be found guilty of the philosophical incoherence of which he often stands accused. It is my contention, however, that such a conclusion constitutes an unwarranted rush to judgment. I shall argue instead that John’s moral philosophy represents an attempt to cope with ostensibly contradictory visions of ethical life (such as those identified by MacIntyre) by charting a third way: specifically, a strategy of philosophically-informed eclecticism and non-dogmatism derived from his self-professed New Academic adherence to moderate skepticism, stemming from his reading of Cicero. This moral doctrine has a specific, albeit chastened, content built around the promotion of two paramount values: first, that individuals enjoy a right, and perhaps a duty, to intellectual liberty in judging for themselves about matters of right and wrong (an “internal” dimension); and second, that the yardstick of human action

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