VIRTUS IN THE NAPLES COMMENTARY ON THE ETHICA NOVA (MS NAPLES, BIBLIOTECA NAZIONALE, VIII G 8, FF. 4RA–9VB)

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How did the study of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics by Latin academics in the thirteenth century influence Christian moral discourse and in particular its discourse about virtue? This is a large and difficult question, to be sure, and one of obvious interest to any genealogist of Western moral consciousness. In order to answer it, we must first understand how thirteenth-century Latin academics understood Aristotle’s text and, more narrowly, the relation of its doctrines to Christian ones. Evidence pertinent to those questions can of course be found in many sources.¹ This article collects and assesses evidence from one early and largely unknown source: the lectio cum questionibus on chapters 4–10 of the Ethica nova preserved in MS Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, VIII G 8, ff. 4ra–9vb.²

The “Naples Commentary” appears to derive from lectures delivered by a master in the Faculty of Arts at Paris at sometime between 1225 and 1240.³ It is one of the six extant Latin commentaries which examine all or part of the first three books of the Ethics, and are

¹ Among the most promising sources are commentaries on Peter Lombard’s Sententiae written by theologians acquainted with the entirety of the Nicomachean Ethics; in distinction 33 and elsewhere, the Lombard treats the cardinal virtues explicitly and at length.

² A fourteenth-century compiler placed the Naples Commentary in a codex together with excerpts from Albert the Great’s Super Ethica commentum et quaestiones and Thomas Aquinas’s Sententia libri Ethicorum, yielding a continuous commentary on all ten books of the Ethics. For a description of the codex, see René-Antoine Gauthier, “Praefatio”, in Thomas Aquinas, Sententia libri Ethicorum, Opera omnia (Rome, 1882–) 47: 22*-25*. Cf. Wilhelm Kübel, “Prolegomena”, in Albert the Great, Super Ethica, ed. Wilhelm Kübel, 2 vols., Opera omnia (Münster, 1951–) 14: X.

based on a translation that antedates Robert Grosseteste’s translation of 1247/48.4

Relatively little has been written about the work, which was lost to medievalists until 1937.5 To date only two scholars have discussed its contents in detail. They have done so, moreover, on the basis of a small number of loci and in respect of two main subjects: our Commentator’s understanding of felicitas and scientia moralis.6 Until very recently, those who would read the Naples Commentary were obliged to do so in manuscript; a critical edition was not published until 2006.7

The subject of virtus is not an easy one to trace in the Naples Commentary, because, unlike other pre-1250 commentaries, it does not include any discussion of Aristotle’s “treatise on virtue” in books 2 and 3 of the Ethics. More challenging still, our Commentator never mentions by name any particular virtue, such as fortitudo or temperantia. He consistently uses the word virtus in the sense of the power of soul; in his text, it is most commonly a synonym for potentia. It rarely denotes “moral excellence” in general or any particular moral excellence. If one were to make a list of human virtutes based on the Naples Commentator’s characteristic use of the word, bravery and temperance would not be on it but reason and imagination would.

Aristotle’s teaching on virtue was not as difficult for thirteenth-century Latin academics to assimilate as were some other parts of his moral

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4 For discussion of the manuscript tradition, authorship, and dating of these commentaries, see Georg Wieland, Ethica-scientia practica: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Ethik im 13. Jahrhundert (Münster, 1981), 44–51. The Ethica nova and the Ethica vetus are now believed, along with the Ethica hoferiana and Ethica borghesiana, to be the work of the twelfth-century Greco-Latin translator Burgundio of Pisa. For an overview of the evidence supporting this conclusion, see Gudrun Vulllemen-Diem and Marwan Rashed, “Burgundio de Pise et ses manuscrits grecs d’Aristote: Laur. 87.7 et Laur. 81.8”, Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales 44 (1997), 139 n. 9.


7 Anonymous, Scriptum super librum Ethicorum, ed. Tracey, “An Early 13th-Century Commentary”.