CHAPTER SIX

ARISTOTLE AND SCHOLASTICISM

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In 1969 Brian Armstrong expressly attributed to Peter Martyr Vermigli a ‘scholastic methodology’ and a special ‘affinity with Aristotle,’ quoting as evidence for his opinion a statement of B.B. Warfield, according to whom ‘the scholastic theologian among the early Reformers was Peter Martyr.’ Perhaps inspired by Armstrong’s vague allusions, further research in the following decades has contributed to showing the extent to which the Aristotelian and scholastic tradition influenced Vermigli, and what consequences this had for the structure and contents of his theology. In order to sketch the contours of Vermigli’s ‘Aristotelianism’ and ‘scholasticism,’ in the present essay we will of course rely on the achievements of past research, but also try to add some new elements by concentrating our attention on specific issues of Vermigli’s theology, as well as on Vermigli’s one philosophical work, namely his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*. However, before undertaking the task of investigating Vermigli’s approach to Aristotelian philosophy and scholasticism, it is necessary to sketch briefly the way in which Reformed theologians looked at Aristotelianism and scholasticism around the middle of the sixteenth century, i.e. in the period in which Vermigli also was active.

Reformation and Philosophy

If we consider the works of some Reformed authors such as Otto Werdmüller (1513–1552), Girolamo Zanchi (1516–1590) and Andreas Hyperius (1511–1564), all active as professors of theology and/or philosophy in Zurich, Strasbourg and Marburg in the middle of the sixteenth century, we can easily detect some features of the general

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Reformed understanding of philosophy in that period. All these authors were not only convinced of the legitimacy of philosophical studies from a Christian point of view, but decisively emphasized the usefulness of philosophy for the theologian. Relying on arguments which Melan- thon had already used for the same purpose, they recognized first of all the indispensability of logic as the discipline which taught the rules of correct thinking and of scientific methodology. Secondly they signalled how fruitful can be the application of such disciplines as geography, geology, botanics and physics—all considered part of ‘philosophy’ in the broadest sense of the word—to the investigation of holy scriptures. Werdmüller and Zanchi were especially emphatic in formulating their preference for Aristotelian philosophy on account of its internal coherence and clarity, which made it particularly apt to pedagogical purposes. However, the appreciation for philosophy found in the works of these authors is always accompanied by words of caution about the dangers which an overestimation of philosophy can import. For all of them it was clear that the only authority in matters

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4 Werdmüller, De dignitate, 22; Hyperius, De recte formando, 49; Girolamo Zanchi, De naturali auscultatione cium praefatione doctoris Zanchi (Strasbourg: Rihel, 1554), b4v: ‘Secunda [philosophiae utilitas] est, quod ad phrases scripturae, quae abundat metaphoris a natura desumptis, intelligendas plurimum adfert adiumenti. […] Quis non videat, quam utilis (ne dicam necessaria) sit haec scientia physica ad scripturas recte intelligendas?’

5 Werdmüller, De dignitate, 133f.: ‘Fatendum est tamen figurata dictione, socraticis inductionibus, pythagoricis numeris Platonem philosophiae suae nebulas offundere. A quibus Aristoteles alienus perspicuam magis et methodicam philosophiam composit.’ Zanchi, De naturali auscultatione, b7v–c1r: ‘Contendo utiliorem esse rationem, quam in tradenda philosophia secutus est Aristoteles, ea, quam secutus est Plato, […]proper methodum, quam in docendo praecelaram ita persecutus est Aristoteles, ut alius neque meliore meque similem secutus sit nemo. Omnia enim suo ordine tractavit, ut quae prius, quae postierius erant tractanda, pertractaverit; et in rebus probandis eo ordine procedit, qui nobis est utilior, adde et necessarius, omnesque bonae methodi (ut uno verbo dicam) partes absolut.’