The Aristotelian Doctrine of the Mean and John of Salisbury's Concept of Liberty

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One tenet of conventional wisdom among historians of medieval moral and political philosophy holds that the dawn of the thirteenth century marked the beginning of a new direction in the trajectory of social ideas. An intellectual reorientation is said to have been necessitated by the reintroduction into the West of the body of Aristotle's writings on ethics and politics. It is thus commonplace for scholars to declare that Western social theory underwent a "conceptual revolution" during the period from 1200 (when fragments of the Nicomachean Ethics came into circulation) until 1250 (by which date the whole Politics seems to have been translated). These five decades are taken to be a watershed in the development of European philosophy.¹

In turn, two conclusions are ordinarily drawn from the postulate of an Aristotelian revolution in the early thirteenth century: first, after about 1200, and certainly by 1250, the foundations of ethical and political thinking in Latin Christendom were wholly and irredeemably Aristotelian; and second, it is senseless to look for the influence of Aristotle's ideas on moral and social treatises composed prior to 1200.

Although these canons of interpretation have become paradigmatic, they are by no means engraved in stone. On the one hand, it may be demonstrated that even the most Aristotelian of thirteenth and fourteenth century authors were often less indebted to Aristotle than to other classical and medieval sources. Aristotle, once recovered, in no way supplanted, but instead supplemented, the other authorities upon which the Middle Ages depended.² On the other hand, Aristotle's social ideas were not entirely unknown to, and uninfluential with,

¹ It would, of course, be a massive undertaking to document all of the authors who have adopted this view. For a representative sampling, see: Walter Ullman, Medieval Political Thought, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1975, p. 159; Quentin Skinner, The Foundations of Modern Political Thought, 2 vols., Cambridge 1978, I, pp. 50-1; and Brian R. Nelson, Western Political Thought, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1982, p. 89.

² I intend to establish this in a forthcoming series of investigations into the influence of Aristotle on medieval political theory after 1250.
Latin philosophers prior to the thirteenth century. Indeed, earlier research has already shown that one of the most prominent twelfth century treatises on moral and political matters, John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus*, is unmistakably imbued with Aristotelian doctrines.\(^3\) John’s access to these doctrines indicates the existence of an “underground” tradition of Aristotelian thought about man in society running throughout the Middle Ages prior to the recovery and transmission of Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*.\(^4\) Admittedly, knowledge of the structure of the Aristotelian argument was fragmentary until the thirteenth century. But Aristotle did exert a philosophically interesting influence over earlier moral and political concepts in the medieval West.

The mere presence of Aristotelian terminology and ideas in texts completed before 1200 does not, it is true, prove their importance to medieval philosophizing. Rather, what is required is an analysis of how Aristotelian principles were assimilated and integrated into significant aspects of medieval philosophical discourse. With this broader issue in mind, the present paper will argue that a key element of Aristotle’s moral thought, his definition of virtue as a mean, was not only known to and used by John of Salisbury in the *Policraticus*, but also was the indispensible basis for the doctrine of individual and political liberty espoused by John.\(^5\) Defense of this claim necessitates the investigation of three matters: first, the range of sources from which John may have drawn the idea of virtue as a mean; second, John’s application of the concept of the mean within the *Policraticus*; and third, the conclusions about liberty reached in the *Policraticus* as a result of John’s notion of the mean. By focussing our attention on John of Salisbury, we shall discover how, in at least one instance, the


\(^5\) For the sake of a broader, non-specialist audience, references to the *Policraticus* will be drawn from the existing translations (with occasional modifications). The “political” sections of the *Policraticus* have been translated by John Dickinson under the title *The Statesman’s Book* (New York 1927); the “courtly” chapters have been rendered into English by J. B. Pike as *Froivolities of Courtiers and Footprints of Philosophers* (Minneapolis 1938). Both translations are based on the excellent 1909 critical edition of the *Policraticus* (lately reprinted) produced by C. C. J. Webb (Frankfurt a.M., Unverändelter Nachdruck, 1965), 2 vols.; citations will also be given to the marginal numbers in Webb’s edition. In future references, the critical edition will be abbreviated as *P*, *The Statesman’s Book* as *S*, and the *Froivolities of Courtiers* as *F*. 

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