

[Stanford] ARISTOTELIANISM IN THE RENAISSANCE

Aristotelianism in the Renaissance

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"Renaissance" is used as a useful short label for the period ca. 1348 to ca. 1648. But the use of the term "Aristotelianism" as applied to texts, contents and contexts of that period is problematic.^[1] Some authors did indeed consider themselves as part of a "peripatetic" (i.e., Aristotelian) current or school,^[2] but it would be counterintuitive to limit the application of the term "Aristotelianism" only to those authors of whom such statements are known (since it probably would exclude most Renaissance commentators on Aristotle).^[3] On the other hand, if we use the term "Aristotelianism" to denote everything in Renaissance philosophy that with some high degree of probability makes direct or indirect use of Aristotle's texts: this would mean that "Aristotelianism in the Renaissance" and "Philosophy in the Renaissance" are equivalent terms (cf. Keßler 1990).

However, there are texts in Renaissance philosophy that are obviously more "Aristotelian" than others, namely, the *commentaries* on texts by Aristotle. There are more of them than we have from any other period of the history of philosophy. And in many of the Renaissance universities philosophy training was keyed to the interpretation of texts by Aristotle and often involved the use of textbooks derived from works by Aristotle and his commentators. In addition to this, the *corpus Aristotelicum* was used as a matrix for textbooks and encyclopedias and as a starting point for treatises on more or less special philosophical questions.^[4]

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1. Commentaries on Texts from the *Corpus Aristotelicum*

In no other period of the history of philosophy, as far as we know, have so many commentaries on works by Aristotle been written (both per year and in total) as in the Renaissance.^[5] Even on the incomplete basis of Lohr's first version of his catalogue of Renaissance Latin Aristotle Commentaries^[6] Richard Blum has counted 6653 such commentaries for the period 1500 to 1650.^[7] The magnitude of this number should be considered significant—especially in comparison to the ca. 750 commentaries listed for the *fifteenth* century in Lohr's catalogue of "mediaeval" Aristotle commentaries.^[8]

The real reasons of this increase of interest are yet unknown. However, the reasons might include:

- the rising number of universities (probably connected with a rising number of persons in charge of expounding works of Aristotle to their students),
- enhanced access to existing scholarship on Aristotle and the *corpus aristotelicum* by the advent of printing^[9]
- enhancement of propagation (and thus broader visibility) of commentaries by the advent of printing^[10]
- changes in the role of philosophy education at universities and a resulting need for new commentaries,
- advances and new trends in Aristotle scholarship (including strong reception of the Greek Aristotle commentaries!), and the need to react to them,
- impact of texts from outside the Aristotelian tradition,
- reaction to extra-philosophical problems and phenomena.

It is possible to name Renaissance Aristotle commentaries influenced by one or

more of each of these. As a whole, the reasons given above contribute to the great variety of what can be found in Renaissance Aristotle commentaries^[11]. It may even be that such delightful variety is what chiefly attracts current scholars to studying this *genre* of philosophical literature. And yet most of these commentaries have not yet been studied by anyone since the Renaissance.^[12]

There have been some attempts to sort Renaissance Aristotle commentators into groups according to their use of or degree of adherence to pre-Renaissance Aristotle commentaries (e.g., “Averroist”, “Alexandrist”, “Thomist” schools/groups/traditions). However, it is doubtful that such a sorting contributes to a better understanding of their texts and contexts. This is because many authors of Aristotle commentaries—including some who had a particular preference for one or more of the earlier commentators—used the earlier commentaries on a case by case basis.

As far as we know, most of these commentaries were written for use in a university setting (see below). As a consequence, the choice of texts commented upon and the degree of detail given to a certain passage is often due, at least in part, to its use in a classroom, a universitarian debate or its relevance for exams.

There are no sharp borderlines between commentaries proper, textbooks, encyclopedias, and treatises. (Philipp Melanchthon’s works on ethics might be a good illustration of this: “Melanchthon on Ethics” starts as something which is a commentary on parts of the *Nicomachean Ethics* [Melanchthon, 1535] and—in the 1550 and later versions, now edited and translated by Günter Frank—was developed into something which is a textbook in which rather few traces of and similarities to the commentary genre are left [Melanchthon, 2008].) And even where the work in question is a commentary in the most narrow sense of the word, the text can be some sort of *bibliographie raisonnée* of the previous literature (e.g., some of Augustinus Niphus’s texts), a decent guide to some probable meaning of Aristotle’s text (e.g., some of Cesare Cremonini’s commentaries on the *Parva naturalia*), or a text written in order to influence the political world of the day (e.g., Antonio Montecatini’s commentary on the third book of Aristotle’s politics [Montecatini, 1597]), or anything in-between.

Although most of the commentaries apparently deal with those texts from the *corpus aristotelicum* that have been the focus of interest from the 13th century to today, the Renaissance is a period where the percentage of commentaries and other texts dealing with the works of Aristotle less frequently read today (e.g., the *Problemata*, the *Parva naturalia*) is higher than one might expect.

2. Philosophy at Renaissance Universities

Although there seems to be no simple answer to the question of which Renaissance institutions of “higher education” should be considered as “universities”;^[13] there is neither doubt nor conflict about the fact, that there were many universities, and that many of them were founded in the Renaissance.^[14] And at virtually all of them much of the philosophy taught there was directly or indirectly founded on parts of the *corpus aristotelicum*. And, given the wide range of texts (commentaries, treatises, textbooks, collections of theses for disputations ...) making use of that *corpus* and being related directly or indirectly to some sort of “universitarian” context and/or use, and the fact that the overwhelming majority of the texts this entry is about are texts related directly or indirectly to some sort of such context and/or use, perhaps “Renaissance University Texts in Philosophy” might be an even better description for what this entry is about than its real title “Aristotelianism in the Renaissance”.

In general, only some of the fields covered by the *corpus aristotelicum* were part of any single university curriculum. We do not yet have a survey on what was taught where and when, so we cannot yet give a complete assessment,^[15] but permitting some margin of error, we can say:

- *Logic* was taught everywhere (in some cases with a special stress on the Prior Analytics material and in some cases with special stress on the Posterior Analytics material, and in some cases with a special stress on Topics and argumentation, and in later times—perhaps starting with Antonius Rubius^[16]—also on the Categories).
- *Philosophy of nature* was widely taught: more intensively in universities where philosophy students tended to pursue a medical degree (e.g., in Bologna and Padua) and less intensively in universities where philosophy students were trained for going on with theology (e.g., many Protestant universities and the institutions of higher education run by religious orders). Apparently the material taught most prominently was what can be found in *De anima* II and III and *Physics*, rather prominently what can be found in *De cælo* and *Meteora*, and only rather rarely what can be found in the rest of the *libri naturales*.
- *Metaphysics* was sometimes a niche subject without any relevance for the regular degree examinations (e.g., in Padua), sometimes of utmost importance

(as in some Protestant cases), and sometimes somewhere in-between (e.g., in Ingolstadt).

- The stress laid on *moral philosophy* differed considerably, and generally ethics was far more prominent than politics—let alone economics.^[17]

It seems difficult (or even impossible) to find a single statement on which *all* known Renaissance “Aristotelians” agree. This may be due, in part, to the specialization of teachers (Melanchthon not agreeing that all knowledge rises from the senses, Cremonini disinterested in moral philosophy and thus not making statements on virtues, ...).

There are a few explicit statements of the reasons for basing the teaching of philosophy at universities on the *corpus aristotelicum* or works derived from it. Augustinus Niphus (died 1538)—who probably gave the fullest treatment of this question—gives the following reasons (Niphus, 1544, f. †††† 2vb): The parts of philosophy are treated by Aristotle one by one in books each of which is dedicated to just one part of philosophy; he proceeds from what is better known to us to that which is less known to us; he finds out about things by discussing views held by others; he treats everything with apt amplex and conciseness; his style is that of a philosopher and not that of an orator; he is consistent.

Philipp Melanchthon states, in his 1536 oration “On Philosophy” (Melanchthon, 1843), that you have to choose a *genre* of philosophy which is not sophistic, and which adheres to the correct method, and that the one taught by Aristotle is such a philosophy.^[18] (He then continues to reject stoic, epicurean and platonic alternatives ...)

Note that neither Niphus nor Melanchthon claim that a reason for using the *corpus aristotelicum* as the basis of teaching philosophy at universities is the *truth* of any of Aristotle’s statements.^[19] Melanchthon goes on to request that, in addition to Aristotle, other authors should be used for some fields, something that is admitted also by Niphus.^[20] Philosophy taught at Renaissance universities uses Aristotle as its main starting point and main basis, but (at least in many cases) Aristotle (together with his commentators) is not the only basis of philosophy taught at Renaissance universities.^[21]

Interest in Renaissance university philosophy has been rekindled by Ernest Renan who investigated several philosophers teaching at Padua (Renan, 1866), and “Paduan” Renaissance university philosophy is the part of “Renaissance Aristotelianism” that has been most thoroughly studied. But as research progresses and more knowledge is gained about more universities and authors, the image gets more complex and less apt for generalizations. This adds insight into the diversity of the traditions at each university and the diversity of philosophies taught by teachers at each one.^[22] These teachers are probably best studied as single philosophers, and not as mere adherents or members of some school.^[23]

3. Textbooks and Encyclopedias

Textbooks and encyclopedias are not necessarily contrasting *genres*, as sometimes encyclopedias were used as textbooks. In spite of being (again) based on Aristotle (and his commentators), some textbooks did provide more “untraditional” views by integrating material found in Aristotle (and his commentators) with material found in other authors.^[24] Other textbooks provided untraditional views by their choice of what they retained and what they left out and how they paraphrased what they retained.^[25]

Although these textbooks are not proper ‘commentaries’ on the works of Aristotle, in some cases they provide sensible interpretation of statements by Aristotle beyond many commentaries.^[26]

Schmitt’s “The rise of the philosophical textbook” (1988) remains the definitive text to read on philosophical textbooks in the Renaissance.

4. Treatises etc.

Commentaries and textbooks are not the only types of texts used for interpreting, discussing, defending, adapting and transforming the doctrines of Aristotle (and his commentators) in the Renaissance. Specialized treatises cover a wide range of subjects: on the immortality of the soul, on innate heat, on the agent sense, on the *regressus*, on vapour, on rhetoric imitation, These treatises often treat a certain subject more or less for its own sake, and not just in order to find out what was Aristotle’s opinion on it—though the author will often settle for a position that he believes to be the position of Aristotle.

Many printed collections of theses (for doctoral dissertations or other purposes) can also be considered as specialized monographs — though in the form we have them most of them do not provide us with the argumentations that lead to the assumptions made.

Francisco Patrizi's *Discussiones peripateticæ* (Patrizi, 1581), although not a pro-Aristotelian text, is one of the most learned works on the subject of Aristotle and the Aristotelian traditions we have from the Renaissance. And it does not easily fit into any of the sections used here.

5. Some Remarks on the History of the Habit of Sorting Renaissance Philosophy into Schools

The ancient habit of sorting philosophers into schools or groups seems first to have been applied to Aristotelian philosophers by Francisco Patrizi [Franciscus Patritius]^[27] in his *Discussiones peripateticæ*. It is an approach, that is useful to give order to a text that treats a great number of Renaissance Aristotelians.^[28] But in a text not trying to give at least superficial doxographical information concerning the single philosophers and their works, it might (correctly) be interpreted as a pretext not to study these philosophers and their works.^[29] And the charming character of Renaissance "Aristotelian" texts is more situated in their (considerable) diversities than in their (limited) similarities.

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- [GGRENir: Internet resources on Aristotelianism](#): a list (with descriptions) of (in version 3.1b) 13 internet resources dealing with Renaissance aristotelianism; GGRENir was last updated in 2003.
- [Antecedents to the American University](#): a useful basic bibliography, mainly on mediaeval and earlier post-mediaeval university history. (from 1997)

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