

Abstract

The Reformation of the Arts: Phillip Melanchthon and the Aristotelian Blueprint of the Early Modern University

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This paper will explore the institutional role played by the Lutheran Reformer, Phillip Melanchthon, in the restructuring of the Faculty of Arts at Wittenberg, and the blueprint this set for other Protestant universities in early-modern Europe. Special attention will be given to Melanchthon's proposals for the teaching of moral philosophy, where the institutional codification and promulgation of Aristotle's *Ethics* suggests a radically different picture of the relationship between Aristotelian virtue and the legacy of the Reformation than the one presented in many popular meta-narratives.

In 1518, the same year that Luther posted his famous 95 Theses, Melanchthon arrived at Wittenberg with a series of ambitious proposals for curriculum reform. These proposals ran along broadly humanist lines, and in doing so, overlapped significantly with Luther's own hopes for the university. Melanchthon's early proposals differed from Luther's, however, in their generally high assessment of Aristotle's philosophy, and of the value of his moral philosophy in particular.

Although in the later 1510s and early 1520s there is evidence that Melanchthon became swayed by Luther's more negative outlook, by the later 1520s Melanchthon's high regard for Aristotle's *Ethics* had returned, and eventually won out in a series of changes to the organization and curriculum of the Arts Faculty, reflected in the university's ordinances of the 1530s and 1540s.

These ordinances provided not only the basic outline for teaching at Wittenberg for well over a century, but also a template for other major Protestant universities, who turned to Melanchthon, or after his death to his friends and associates, for help in framing their own constitutional documents. Here the statutes of the universities of Jena and Helmstedt both provide excellent examples.

Charting the remarkable success and influence of Melanchthon's proposals is to make plain the well-organized and state-sanctioned means through which Aristotle's *Ethics* and virtue theory became *the* officially codified, promulgated, and disseminated ethic of early-modern Germany. Understanding this is already to see the faults in a number of contemporary meta-narratives, which see the Reformation as uniquely, or at least partially to blame for the destruction of the Aristotelian tradition.