The Reformation of Virtue

Aristotle's *Ethics* in the University Ordinances of Wittenberg, Helmstedt, and Jena

James Dunn

For the small and shrinking enclave of the academy to which I belong—the proud and venerable guild of Religious Ethics—the last fifty years has probably not seen a work of greater historical influence than Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Indeed, for many in Religious Ethics, MacIntyre's study has come to provide a basic paradigm; the rise of modernity as fall-narrative; a descent into moral chaos resulting from the disintegration of Aristotle's virtue theory over the course of the early-modern period. Pivotal in MacIntyre's narrative was the role of the Reformation, and of Martin Luther in particular, who by dislodging Aristotle from his former pride of place, set the stage for all that was follow.[1]

There are many reasons for MacIntyre's story having taken hold in the way that it did, but among them, I want to suggest, is the fact that for more than two hundred years the pervasive Aristotelianism of the early-modern Lutheran university has remained comparatively underexplored.[2] Fifteen minutes does not afford sufficient space to correct a historical paradigm, much less two-hundred years of neglect, so my goal for my time here will be rather more modest. In the following

---

[1] See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 165. As examples of the general take-up of MacIntyre's narrative within Religious Ethics see Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting on Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[2] There have always, of course, been exceptions. See especially August Tholuck, *Vorgeschichte Des Rationalismus* (Halle: E. Anton, 1853); Ernst Troeltsch, *Vernunft Und Offenbarung Bei Johann Gerhard Und Melanchthon; Untersuchung Zur Geschichte Der Altprotestantischen Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1891); Peter Petersen, *Geschichte Der Aristotelischen Philosophie Im Protestantischen Deutschland* (Leipzig: F. Meiner, 1921); Max Wundt, *Die Deutsche Schulmetaphysik Des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Siebeck), 1939); Walter Sparn, *Wiederkehr Der Metaphysik : Die Ontologische Frage in Der Lutherischen Theologie Des Frühen 17. Jahrhunderts*, Calwer Theologische Monographien (Stuttgart: Calwer Verl., 1976).

pages, I hope to offer a sketch of the means through which the teaching of Aristotle's *Ethics* became an entrenched feature in the early-modern curricula of three Lutheran universities: Wittenberg, Helmstedt, and Jena. Every good conference paper needs a provocative and only thinly-supportable thesis, so here is mine: rather than precipitating the disintegration of the Aristotelian tradition, the Lutheran Reformation contributed instead to an intensification of the same, through a state-sanctioned promulgation of Aristotle's work, understood explicitly and from the outset as a valuable part of the wider apparatus of statecraft and social control.

In October 1518, Phillip Melanchthon arrived in Wittenberg to take up a new role as professor of Greek language. In his inaugural address, 'On Correcting the Studies of Youth,' Melanchthon outlined a series of proposals for curriculum reform that ran broadly in line with the humanist currents of thought already at work there. In certain areas Melanchthon's proposals represented points of departure from the late-medieval tradition, but in the foundational role given to Aristotle's philosophy, significant points of continuity were also preserved. While the true meaning of Aristotle's works had been obscured in places by the clumsiness of his scholastics interpreters, shorn of scholastic accretions, argued Melanchthon, they could still provide a platform for wider training in the liberal arts, including, significantly, moral philosophy.[3]

While in general outline, Melanchthon's proposals at this stage overlapped to a considerable extent with Luther's own, in their relative assessments of Aristotle's moral work, the two men differed wildly. A decade earlier Luther himself had begun his teaching at Wittenberg with a series of lectures on the *Nicomachean Ethics*; a standard fixture of the medieval arts curriculum since its adoption at Paris in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[4] During the 1510s, however, and through

---

[3] See Philip Melanchthon, 'On Correcting the Studies of Youth (1518)', in *A Melanchthon Reader*, ed. Ralph Keen (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1988), 54; [Lat.] SA 3:38-39.

[4] David A. Lines, *Aristotle's Ethics in the Italian Renaissance (ca. 1300-1600): The Universities and the Problem of Moral Education*, Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, v. 13 (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2002), 68–76.

the course of a further series of lectures on Psalms, Romans, and Galatians, Luther had come to the conclusion that an unbridgeable gulf existed between the Pauline doctrine of justification and Aristotle's virtue theory. In his 1517 *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* he openly attacked the *Ethics* as "the worst enemy of grace,"[5] and in 1520 in his *Letter to the German Nobility* called publicly for its removal from the curriculum—a campaign he had already been conducting in private through the Elector's Secretary, Georg Spalatin.[6]

Evidence from the early 1520s suggests that Melanchthon, for a time, was won to Luther's cause. His *Loci Communes* of 1521 exhibit a contempt for Aristotle already far removed from the spirit of the 'inaugural address,'[7] and with Luther away at the Wartburg, it fell, in fact, to Melanchthon, to keep up the pressure on Spalatin.[8] This finally bore fruit the following year with the *Nicomachean Ethics* removed once and for all from the Wittenberg teaching program.[9] *Or so it seemed.*

With a rising tide of social unrest, and the disturbances of Karlstadt, the Zwickau Prophets, and the German Peasants' War following quickly in turn, the utility of moral philosophy for the maintenance of public order became increasingly salient to the leaders of the Reformation. Such utility had been conceptually present in the thinking of both Luther and Melanchthon from a very early stage, but with the need for deployment now urgent, the time to enact it had come.

For inspiration, Melanchthon turned first to Cicero, lecturing from 1524-1525 on the *De Officiis*,[10] and publishing a commentary at Hagonae later in the year. In his preface, Melanchthon

---

[5] Martin Luther, 'To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate (1520)' in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, American ed., 55 vols (St. Louis: Concordia Pub. House, 1955–1986) 31:12, §41 [Henceforth LW].
[6] LW 44:200-201. For details of Luther's campaign with Spalatin, see Sachiko Kusukawa, *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy: The Case of Philip Melanchthon*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 39.
[7] See Philipp Melanchthon, *Commonplaces: Loci Communes 1521*, trans. Christian Preus (St. Louis Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 42, 50, 62.
[8] Kusukawa, *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy*, 40.
[9] See Heinz Kathe, *Die Wittenberger Philosophische Fakultät 1502-1817*, Mitteldeutsche Forschungen, Bd. 117 (Köln: Böhlau, 2002), 457.
[10] Karl Hartfelder, *Philipp Melanchthon Als Praeceptor Germaniae*, Monumenta Germaniae Paedagogica 7 (Berlin: Hofmann, 1889), 557–58.

praised Cicero for establishing the "cradles and rudiments of virtue," by which "civic duties" could be impressed on the youth.[11] But by the summer of 1526, he was already returning to Aristotle. In 1527 and 1528 he planned twice to hold lectures on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and by June of 1528 had begun work on a commentary.[12] This commentary appeared at Wittenberg in stages over the course of the next three years,[13] together with a separate commentary on Aristotle's *Politics*,[14] and eventually his own heavily Aristotelian compendium of moral philosophy.[15] These works were revised and expanded many times, and appeared in multiple editions over the course of the following decades, making of Wittenberg a new center of Aristotelian moral philosophy.

This remarkable turn of events is reflected in the university's statutes and ordinances of the same period, of which Melanchthon himself was *spiritus rector*, where not the actual composer. In 1526, reflecting his practice of the past two years, the *De Officiis* were established by ordinance of the Faculty of Arts as an official replacement for Aristotle in the Master's curriculum.[16] But by 1532 at the latest, Melanchthon was lecturing instead on the *Ethics*, which he would continue in fairly regular cycles, until the time of his death.[17] While the Wittenberg *Neuordnung* of 1536, in which an ordinary chair in moral philosophy was formally ratified, does not specify exactly what texts its occupant was to teach,[18] the 1545 statutes do, listing the primary task of the *Ethicus* as the explication of Aristotle's *Ethics* "*ad*

---

[11] See Philipp Melanchthon, ed., *Ciceronis Officia Cum Scholiis Phil. Melan.* (Haganoae: Secer, 1525), 2v.
[12] For further documentation of the turn to Aristotle in these two years, see Günter Frank, 'Einleitung', in *Ethicae doctrinae elementa et enarratio libri quinti ethicorum*, by Philipp Melanchthon, ed. Günter Frank and Michael Beyer, Editionen zur frühen Neuzeit. Lateinisch-deutsche Quelleneditionen, Bd. 1 (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2008), xxx.
[13] Philipp Melanchthon, *In Ethica Aristotelis* (Wittenberg: J. Klug, 1529); Philippus Melanchton, *In primum, secundum tertium & quintum Ethicorum commentarii Philippi Melanthonis.* (Wittenberg: J. Klug, 1532).
[14] Philipp Melanchthon, *Commentarii in aliquot politicos libros Aristotelis* ... (Wittenberg: J. Klug, 1530).
[15] The first edition of this handbook, which was never published the *Epitome Ethices* (1532) is reprinted in Hermann Heineck, ed., *Die aelteste Fassung von Melanchthons Ethik* (R. Salinger, 1893). For the first published edition see Philipp Melanchthon, *Philosophiae moralis epitome* (Argentorati: Apud Cratonem Mylium, 1538).
[16] See Kathe, *Die Wittenberger Philosophische Fakultät 1502-1817*, 79.
[17] See Hartfelder, *Philipp Melanchthon Als Praeceptor Germaniae*, 559–66.
[18] See '[No 193] 1536. Mai 5. Wittenberg. Kurfürst Johann Friedrichs von Sachsen Fundationsurkunde für die Universität Wittenberg' in Walter Friedensburg, ed., *Urkundenbuch Der Universität Wittenberg* (Magdeburg: Selbstverl. der Historischen Kommission, 1926–1927), 173ff.

verbum," "to the letter."[19] The date of these statutes, misrepresented by the *Corpus Reformatorum*, places the official return of Aristotle to the Wittenberg curriculum within Luther's lifetime.[20]

Following Melanchthon's death, the demand for the teaching of Aristotle would be reiterated at Wittenberg with remarkable consistency and clarity well into the seventeenth century, a consistency which is all the more remarkable given the various reversals in political and religious affiliation that characterized the Saxon Electorship, and consequently the university's ideological orientation, during that period.[21] In 1577, three years after the university's first swing to Gnesio-Lutheranism, the Elector's visitation report complains that the Professor of Ethics, Albert Lemeier, has been overly reliant on Melanchthon's textbooks, and charges him with introducing the youth to Aristotle directly.[22] Ten years later, after a swing back to Philippism and a considerable turnover of faculty, a new visitation report repeats essentially the same instruction.[23] Similar electoral directives can be found in 1603 and 1606, after a final turn to stricter Lutheranism.[24] As late as 1666, statutes of the philosophy faculty make plain that the primary task of the *Ethicus* had remained essentially unchanged for over one hundred years; he was to "explicate the *Ethics of Aristotle to Nicomachus*," and likewise the *Politics*, and, where he wishes, subjoin a compendium.[25]

What held true at Wittenberg, also held true at Leipzig, whose statutes were harmonized with Wittenberg's from the second half of the sixteenth century. A brief glance at the statutes and ordinances of Lutheran universities outside of Electoral Saxony, reveals much the same to have been

---

[19] See 'Leges Academiae Witeb. An. 1546' in *Philippi Melanthonis Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, in Bretschneider and Bindseil, ed., Corpus Reformatorum (C.A. Schwetschke et filium: Halis Saxonum, 1834-1860), 10:1011.
[20] For the correct dating see Walter Friedensburg, *Geschichte Der Universität Wittenberg* (Halle a. S: Max Niemeyer, 1917), 1:261. See also Kathe, *Die Wittenberger Philosophische Fakultät 1502-1817*, 103.
[21] For a full history of these various reversals, see Friedensburg, *Geschichte Der Universität Wittenberg*, 250–249.
[22] See '[No. 376] 1577. Januar. Visitationsbericht' in Friedensburg, *Urkundenbuch Der Universität Wittenberg*, 1:409.
[23] See '[No. 439] 1587. Mai 29. Visitationsbericht' in Friedensburg, 1:538ff.
[24] See '[No. 521]. Nach 1603. Juni 21. Wittenberg. Die philosophische Fakultät begutachtet die sie betreffenden Abschnitte des Entwurfs der Universitätordung Christians II' and '[No. 528]. 1606 Mai 6. Dresden. Kurfürst Christians II von Sachesen Entwurf letzer Fassung, wie es in den Universitäten Leipzig und Wittenberg mit der Lehre, Diziplin und sonst allenthalben gehalten warden soll' in Friedensburg, 1:628, 1:673.
[25] See '[No. 785]. 1666 Mai 7. Dresden. Satzungen der philosophischen Fakültat, den Verhältnissen und Anforderungen der Zeit angepaßt' in Friedensburg, 2:249.

true for them as well. Such statutes in the main were drawn up by close friends and associates of Melanchthon, and patterned closely on the Wittenberg model. The statutes of the University of Helmstedt, for example, founded in 1576 by Duke Julius of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, were written by David Chytraeus, a student and friend of Melanchthon's, who used Melanchthon's speech 'On the Order of Learning' as the basis for his work.[26] Chytraeus' statutes established ten chairs in the philosophy faculty, of which one was the *Ethicus*, and another an 'Aristotelicus,' or professor of Aristotelian philosophy. As at Wittenberg, the task of the *Ethicus* was to expound the *Nicomachean Ethics* "to the word," as well as providing definitions of the virtues for students to memorize.[27]

At Jena, the links to Melanchthon were just as strong. Following Johann Friedrich's defeat in the Schmalkaldic War of 1546-7, plans quickly developed for a new university to compensate for the loss of Wittenberg to his arch-rival Moritz.[28] Jena, then, at the time of its founding, was an ersatz-Wittenberg, with its first teachers, Johann Stigel and Victorin Strigel, ersatz-Phillips, to whom the Rectorship fell only when Melanchthon himself declined it.[29] Unsurprisingly then, its teaching curriculum was modelled explicitly on that of Wittenberg, a fact reflected in its *Gesetze* of 1548, as well as the 1558 statutes of the university's formal founding.[30] These later statutes, signed by Johann Friedrich's sons, and ratified by Imperial decree, establish among others an ordinary professorship in moral philosophy,[31] the essential remit of which, as at Wittenberg, remained essentially unchanged through the various ideological struggles of the following decades. Flacius, whose Professorship at

---

[26] See 'Einleitung,' in Peter Baumgart and Ernst Pitz, eds., *Die Statuten der Universität Helmstedt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 15; 39-40. Cp. Philip Melanchthon, 'On the Order of Learning (1531)' in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, ed. Sachiko Kusukawa, trans. Christine F. Salazar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3–8.
[27] See Baumgart and Pitz, *Die Statuten der Universität Helmstedt*, 150.
[28] See J. C. E Schwarz, *Das erste Jahrzehnd der Universität Jena* (Jena: Fromann, 1858), 1–22.
[29] See Schwarz, 15–22.
[30] The 1548 *Gesetze* are reprinted in Schwarz, 132–41. For the 1558 statutes, see Ibid., 94–102. According to G. Mentz, these statutes were preserved in essential form in the expanded Statutes of 1569 and 1591. The 1591 statutes remained valid into the second half of the seventeenth century. See G. Mentz, 'Die Statuten Der Universität Jena von 1591', *Mitteilungen Der Gesellschaft Für Deutsche Erziehungs- Und Schulgeschichte* 11 (1900): 1–2.
[31] See Schwarz, *Das erste Jahrzehnd der Universität Jena*, 77ff.

Jena marked the height of its Gnesio-Lutheran period, could write as eloquently as Strigel, his Phillipist opponent, of the usefulness of Aristotle's philosophy for the cultivation of virtue and the maintenance of civic order.[32]

Statutes, ordinances, and directives of the kind just described, produced over the course of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries a new-flowering of Aristotelian ethics in early-modern Germany, yielding an eventually massive literature of commentaries, disputations, and handbooks. Every pastor, lawyer, teacher, doctor, trained in a Lutheran university learned it as a matter of course. It was, to put no finer point on it, the law, and in spite of the very serious disagreements that Lutherans could have with each other, it remained the law, because—as everyone who mattered agreed—the teaching of Aristotle's *Ethics* was itself of fundamental importance to the law; both as its conceptual foundation, and as a primary means of securing obedience to its rule.

This last point was openly, and quite literally, a matter of indoctrination. According to the pedagogical theory of Melanchthonian humanism, documented so well by Strauss and others, ethical formation was achieved through a transfer of *doctrina*, an implanting of moral paradigms from the mind of the teacher into the minds of his students.[33] "As when Zeuxis painted Helen of Troy, he had within his soul a certain beautiful species of woman," writes Melanchthon, "so for those who judge about morals, it is necessary that they hold in the soul as it were certain forms, descriptions of the virtues, which they consult, [and] on which they fix their eyes, whenever they deliberate about the

---

[32] Flacius' words are as follows, "… nulla pars Philosophiae videtur divinior et utilior quam *ethica*, quae de formando homine ad virtutes seu de informandis in animo hominis habitibus virtutis et abolendis vitiis ac pravis affectibus, deque vera felicitate comparanda ac de fine hominis disserit, quae tamen si cum theologia conferetur, necquicquam adhuc veram pietatem attingit. … Quare cohibeatur intra suas metas, nempe ut tanutm de externa discipline et virtute ac iustitia coram hominibus (non coram Deo) et qualicumque huius vitae beatitudine disserat; ad quos usus eam proprie Aristotles direxit." See Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *Clavis scripturæ sacræ: hoc est de sermone S. litterarum recte cognoscendo* (Hafniæ: Iohanem Justum Erythropilum, 1695), 914. Cit. Petersen, *Geschichte Der Aristotelischen Philosophie Im Protestantischen Deutschland*, 261. Cp. Victorinus Strigel, *In Epitomen Philosophiae Moralis Philippi Melanchthonis Hypomnemata*, ed. Christoph Pezel (Neapoli Casimiriana: Harnisch, 1580).

[33] See Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

honorable."[34] The task of the Ethicus then was to instill such descriptions in his minds of his hearers; descriptions of virtues like 'justice;' the subject of *Ethics* Book V, and described following Plato as a hierarchical ordering of soul corresponding to the hierarchical order of the state, or defined shorthand as "as an obedience to all laws."[35] Such 'universal justice' also included a narrower 'distributive justice,' the virtue of preserving a right distribution of money and power; that is of more for the rich and noble, and less for those at the bottom of the pile.[36]

In this way, the teaching of Aristotle's *Ethics* as *doctrina*, was also a form of *disciplina.* The university statutes of Wittenberg, Helmstedt, and Jena, acknowledge this point explicitly. For the peace and order of society to be preserved, Chytraeus writes, the morals of men must be ruled by discipline;[37] for this they require "definitions of the virtues," and for this the work of Phillip, and ultimately, of Aristotle.[38] At Jena, the statutes themselves take the form of a Virtue Ethic, concluding with summaries of six virtues to be pressed on the student body especially.[39] Such statutes then are not only theorizations of Aristotelian virtue or validations of its place in a wider scheme of learning, they are legally binding documents through which the teaching of Aristotle takes its place in a wider apparatus of social discipline and control. Anti-Aristotelian protests flared up with periodic regularity, commonly invoking Luther to their cause. But these resulted systematically and without fail, in the loss of office, imprisonment, or exile, of any who were foolish enough to persist with them.[40] The preservation of order demanded it.

---

[34] Melanchthon, *Ciceronis Officia Cum Scholiis Phil. Melan.*, 2v–3r.
[35] Heineck, *Die aelteste Fassung von Melanchthons Ethik*, 22. Cp. Melanchthon, *Philosophiae moralis epitome*, 62.
[36] Heineck, *Die aelteste Fassung von Melanchthons Ethik*, 23–24. Melanchthon, *Philosophiae moralis epitome*, 66–68.
[37] Baumgart and Pitz, *Die Statuten der Universität Helmstedt*, 117.
[38] Baumgart and Pitz, 149–50.
[39] Schwarz, *Das erste Jahrzehnd der Universität Jena*, 137–41.
[40] The Hoffman controversy at Helmstedt and the *Habitualstreit* at Wittenberg and Magdeburg both bear witness to this. See Markus Friedrich, *Die Grenzen Der Vernunft: Theologie, Philosophie Und Gelehrte Konflikte Des Helmstedter Hofmannstreits Und Seiner Wirkungen Auf Das Luthertum Um 1600*, Schriftenreihe Der Historischen Kommission Bei Der Bayerischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften, Bd. 69 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004).

What then of MacIntyre's thesis? Does the reality of Protestant Aristotelianism fundamentally vitiate the claims of *After Virtue*? MacIntyre though not, and devoted, in fact, most of a subsequent monograph, to his own lengthy study of Aristotelian Calvinism.[41] Here we learn of an "inherent instability" of the Protestant synthesis, and an obsession with interiority fostered by Protestantism's devotional literature, that would eventually wrench western ethics from its earlier social moorings.[42] Something like this may be true; though Protestantism's devotional literature, with its roots in Rhineland mysticism, is hardly unique for its focused attention on the interior (has MacIntyre read, one wonders, Teresa of Avila?). Perhaps though virtue's entanglements in the well-regulated machineries of social control, make a desire for the loosening of these moorings more readily and presently understandable.

[41] Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
[42] MacIntyre, 269–70.