

ACADEMIA | Letters

Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Protestantism

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The past generation has witnessed a remarkable revival of virtue ethics, and with it a renewed interest in Aristotle's classic text on the subject—*Nicomachean Ethics*. Despite this renewed interest, many scholars, including Protestant ethicists, are unaware of the importance of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* for Protestantism historically. Indeed, we read of Protestants' "rejection of virtue ethics" (Gregory 2012: 269), or that following the Reformation, Protestants "grew increasingly wary of exhortations to practice the virtues" (DeYoung 2020: 28). One Protestant scholar believes that the adoption of something akin to "the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of virtue ethics" would require "that we abandon our tradition" (Haas 2002: 91). We also find Protestants who argue for a concept of virtue but "do so from Scripture without reference to their own heritage" (Rehman 2012: 490). As a historical fact, however, Protestants produced an astonishingly rich corpus of ethical texts based on *Nicomachean Ethics*, and new historical narratives are beginning to correct the record (Vos 2020: 85-108; Svensson 2019). This essay, therefore, will introduce readers to the origin and development of Protestant ethical works in the tradition of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

At the outset of the Reformation, Martin Luther famously attacked Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as the "worst enemy of grace" (Luther 1957: 12; Kusukawa 1995: 33). Already in 1518 he wanted the *Nicomachean Ethics* removed from Wittenberg's curriculum, and in 1520 he wrote in *Address to the Christian Nobility of Germany* that Aristotle's ethics "should be completely discarded along with all the rest of his books that boast about nature" (Luther 1966b: 200; Kusukawa 1995: 39, 42). Luther's hostility to Aristotle was initially shared by Philipp Melancthon (Kusukawa 1995: 42-44), whose writings show that "a positive evaluation of the Stagirite completely disappeared from 1519 to 1525" (Kuropka 2011: 17). In 1526 Cicero's *De officiis* replaced the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the Wittenberg curriculum (Kuropka 2011: 18), but this was short lived, since the following year Melancthon began planning lectures

on the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Kusukawa 1995: 69). In 1528 Melanchthon mentioned a plan to publish the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Wittenberg, and although this plan did not materialize, the following year Melanchthon produced a commentary on books I and II of *Nicomachean Ethics* under the title *In ethica Aristotelis commentarius* (Wittenberg, 1529). By 1532 Melanchthon had expanded his commentary to cover books I, II, III, and V. Melanchthon thus covered the basic ethical topics of happiness (book I), virtue (book II), voluntary and involuntary action in external affairs (book III), and justice (book V) (Kuropka 1995: 22-23). Various editions of this expanded commentary were printed during Melanchthon's lifetime at Wittenberg (1543, 1545, 1550, 1554, 1557, 1560), Strasbourg (1535, 1539, 1540, 1542, 1544, 1546), and Paris (1535).

Despite Luther's early polemic against Aristotle, he did not altogether reject the usefulness of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Just as Melanchthon had joined Luther in his initial critique of Aristotle, there are indications that the influence went the other way as well. In his later years, after Melanchthon had reintroduced Aristotle's ethics at Wittenberg, Luther expressed remarkable appreciation for Aristotle's text. In 1543, Luther said that although philosophers such as Cicero and Aristotle do not teach "how I can be free from sins, death, and hell," they nonetheless wrote excellently on ethics: "Cicero wrote and taught excellently about virtues, prudence, temperance, and the rest. Aristotle similarly also [wrote and taught] excellently and very learnedly about ethics. Indeed, the books of both are very useful and of the highest necessity for the conduct of this life." (Luther 1930: 608) Luther also appropriated Aristotle's concept of equity (*epieikeia*) from book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a consistent part of his theology (Kim 2011: 91-98; Gehrke 2014; Arnold 1999). In his *Lectures on Genesis* wrote that "peace and love are the moderator and administrator of all virtues and laws, as Aristotle beautifully says about *epieikeia* in the fifth book of his *Ethics*" (Luther 1960: 340; Kim 2011: 94). Alongside his praise for Aristotle's concept of *epieikeia*, Luther even affirmed Aristotle's concept of virtue as a mean between extremes:

Aristotle deals with these matters in a very fine way when he writes about geometrical proportion and *epieikeia*.... The law must be kept, but in such a way that the government has in its hand a geometrical proportion, or a middle course and *epieikeia*. For virtue is a quality that revolves about a middle course, as a wise man will determine. (Luther 1966a: 174; Gehrke 2014: 90)

Such remarks indicate that while Luther initially objected to perceived theological abuse of Aristotle's ethics, he came to accept its usefulness in certain respects (Gerrish 1962: 34-35). Whether or not this is the case, however, Luther's own views are not definitive for the larger history of Protestantism, for his early anti-Aristotelian polemic was not taken too seriously

by later ethicists at Protestant universities, who on this matter “looked for guidance from Melanchthon rather than Luther” (Svensson 2020: 189).

Indeed, Melanchthon initiated a philosophical tradition of Protestant commentary on Aristotle’s *Ethics*. There exist at least fifty Protestant commentaries published ca. 1529-1682. Besides commentaries by philosophers, three theologians also wrote commentaries: Andreas Hyperius (Marburg, 1553), Peter Martyr Vermigli (Zürich, 1563), and Antonius Walaenius (Leiden, 1620). Along with Melanchthon, the commentary by Vermigli was often cited by later philosophers, and Walaenius’s commentary went through at least fourteen additional printings at Leiden, Rouen, Paris, London, and Amsterdam between 1625 and 1708 (Svensson 2019: 221-22). Although such theologians were influential, the commentaries were dominated by philosophical authors who were concerned with philosophical questions. These Protestant philosophers were part of a “supra-confessional movement” wherein basic topics of philosophy were discussed with “the same understanding of basic issues in practical philosophy that one can find among their Catholic peers” (Svensson 2019: 227-28).

This Protestant commentary tradition is only the most obvious aspect of a wider academic culture of ethics shaped by the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Since Protestant university curricula during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often required Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* to be used as a textbook for the ethics professor (Sinnema 1993: 15-19; Freedman 1993: 243-44, 246; Veitch 1877: 87, 89; Costello 1958: 64; Commissioners for Visiting the Universities of Scotland 1837: 3:184, 205-206), there was great demand for new editions. There were at least twenty distinct editions of the *Nicomachean Ethics* published in Protestant cities ca. 1530-1720, not counting all the various subsequent editions and printings. Some of these editions were edited by ethicists who wrote significant introductions to the text. The edition of Samuel Rachel, for example, boasted an apparatus of parallels to *Magna Moralia*, *Eudemian Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Rhetoric*, in addition a general introduction to the moral philosophy of Aristotle by way of preface (Rachel 1660).

In Protestant ethical systems of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Aristotle typically appears as the foremost authority for method and content, even though many other sources are also used. In the ethical textbooks of Clemens Timpler, for example, Aristotle is cited 258 times, Cicero 67, Scripture 51, Seneca 42, and Plato 26 (Freedman 1993: 249). The authority of Aristotle is also reflected in the method of ethical systems, with some of these announcing this fact, as with Melchior Adam’s *Ethical Syntagma arranged according to the Method of Aristotle* (1602). Following the method of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, many ethical systems order their books at least with chapters on happiness or the supreme good (*summum bonum*), the nature of moral virtue, and the principles of human actions, specific moral virtues (fortitude, temperance, justice, etc.), the intellectual virtues, and friendship. If

we combine such ethical systems with commentaries, there are easily hundreds of books that discuss a broad range of topics originating with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In addition, there exist at least 5,000 ethical disputations at Protestant universities until the year 1750, and a fairly large percentage of these address specific topics from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There are thousands of disputations on such topics: the supreme good, virtue in general, moral virtue, intellectual virtue, heroic virtue, fortitude, temperance, justice, friendship, and so on. Over 500 disputations directly credit Aristotle or the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the title with such phrases as "from Aristotle's ethics" [*ex ethicis Aristotelis*] (Willebrand 1599), "according to Aristotle" [*secundum Aristotelem*] (Queccius 1620), "from Aristotelian sources" [*ex Aristotelicis fontibus*] (Aidy 1611), or "from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*" [*ex Aristotelis Ethic. Nicom.*] (Justa 1603).^[1] These short disputations relate organically to the genre of the ethical system, since in many cases published ethical systems are simply an edited series of previously published disputations. For example, Adrian Heereboord's *Collegium ethicum* (1648) is basically identical (with the exception of additional explanatory notes) to a series of individual disputations published from 1643 to 1648 under the title *Disputationum practicarum*. If we consider ethical disputations as a source of commentary and systematic elaboration on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, this amounts to a massive body of academic literature, which remains largely neglected by modern scholars.

When Protestantism and the Reformation are discussed in histories of ethics, there is usually mention of the first generations of Reformers and the subsequent tradition of natural law beginning with Hugo Grotius. But the tradition of commentary and systematic elaboration on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which flourished for some 150 years in Protestant academia, is generally ignored (e.g., Irwin 2007-2009). This is not only a grave injustice to the historical record, it also prevents modern scholars with an interest in Aristotle's virtue ethics from engagement with the larger tradition of interpretation. Students of virtue ethics, especially Protestants, would do well to know that "[i]n academies and universities in Lutheran and Reformed territories throughout the Reformation era, the exposition of [*Nicomachean Ethics*] continued to form the backbone of moral education" (Svensson 2019: 232). Although most of the sources remain in Latin, English readers who wish to engage the sources can pick up and read available translations of Melanchthon (1988), Vermigli (2006), Walaeus (1997), John Case (2002), Pierre de La Place (2021), and James Dundas (2022).

^[1] These observations are based on my own bibliographical research currently in progress.

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