

Martin Luther's and Philip Melanchthon's Aristotle

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In recent years, several studies have contributed to overcoming widespread stereotypes concerning Luther's relation to philosophy and »Aristotle.« They do not start with a contemporary understanding of Aristotelian philosophy but ask what Luther had in mind when he used the name »Aristotle.« These analyses of his conflicts with and his reception of »Aristotle« allow for deeper insights into both Luther's theology and the positions to which he referred. A rapidly increasing interest in philosophical problems within Protestant theology has allowed for dealing with the philosophical contents and debates in Reformation theology with fewer prejudices than before. The fact that Melanchthon often commented on Aristotelian texts and made positive use of the ideas of this philosopher is now seen in a more open-minded way. It seems remarkable that Luther and Melanchthon worked side by side while having such different attitudes towards »Aristotle.« The intention of this seminar was to present new insights into Luther's and Melanch-

thon's views of »Aristotle.« The participants reported on their respective research. Topics were very different in terms of content and methodology.

Theodor Dieter (Strasbourg) elaborated on Luther's famous saying: »Non enim, ut Aristoteles putat, iusta agendo iusti efficimur, sed iusti [...] fiendo et essendo operamur iusta.« This has often been taken in order to identify the basic difference between Aristotle's and Luther's ontology. But Luther himself became aware that Aristotle spoke only about civil righteousness, while for scholastics like Gabriel Biel morally good acts gained significance for salvation through the *pactum Dei* (*facienti quod in se est ...*). Only through this theological reception could the Aristotelian concept of becoming just receive a soteriological meaning. In fact, the decisive point was the understanding of human freedom. But Luther would not have needed to deny this claim; it would have been enough to emphasize that a morally good act is something quite different from fulfilling the law of God in a theolo-

gical sense. After the condemnations of 1277 in Paris, the concept of human freedom was further developed but as a criticism of an alleged Aristotelian tradition of necessitarianism. Luther could find that understanding of freedom (critical of Aristotle) in commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* (e.g. Buridan's). Thus Luther criticized an anti-Aristotelian concept of freedom as if it was Aristotle's own view.

Timothy Dost (Clayton) pointed to Luther's critique of Aristotle in the theological theses of the *Heidelberg Disputation*. He emphasized that Luther used scholastic techniques in order to criticize Aristotelizing scholastics while he himself was prone to employ Renaissance humanism and presented himself as being less critical of Plato.

In order to define Luther's and Agricola's understanding of the relation between law and gospel in the Antinomian controversy, *Annelise Eeman* (Chicago) made use of the Aristotelian terms »correlative« (for Luther) and »contradictory« (for Agricola). In her dissertation she elaborates that for Luther law and gospel require each other and only together form a whole or, as she says, a co-constitutive, dynamic system.

Markus Matthias (Amsterdam) developed the thesis that Luther's understanding of *experientia* can be understood with respect to and to a certain degree in line with Aristotle's concept of *experientia*. In the latter, *experientia* has a mediating role between the many individual occurrences and the respective common concepts, while in Luther's concept doctrinal truth gains or increases its certainty by being applied to concrete situations of life. In addition, Luther often appeals to *experientia* in order to falsify a certain claim, e.g. that human beings by their own power are able to love God above all. From early on, Luther understood theology as a form of »practical« knowledge as it was later seen in Lutheran Orthodoxy.

Matti Nikkanen (Helsinki) reported about his dissertation project *Ecclesia, oeconomia, politia. Eine Untersuchung zur Ideengeschichte der altlutherischen Dreiständelehre*. This study investigates whether there was an Aristotelian-Lutheran political or social doctrine in the 16th and 17th centuries that can be traced back to Luther's and Melancthon's interpretation of Aristotle. Nikkanen presented Aristotle's theory of *polis* with reference to his metaphysics and compared it

with Luther's social theory as it can be found in his Genesis lectures, identifying both structural analogies and differences. This suggests that Luther's theory of the three estates may have depended on Aristotle's social thought.

How are we to understand the phenomenon, notion, and function of »conscience?« *Claudia Welz* (Copenhagen) investigated this question by comparing two influential approaches, namely Martin Luther's and Martin Heidegger's. Both of them connect the movements of volition, emotion, and cognition taking place in conscience with Aristotle's notion of *phrónêsis*. If conscience can be seen as a sphere of intentionality, of moving willingly, of being-moved passionately, and of understanding oneself as being in union or division with oneself, conscience conditions human action in one way or another – but what does this imply for the ethical significance of conscience in relation to its soteriological and ontological meaning?

Robert von Friedeburg (Rotterdam) dealt with *Melanchthon's Aristotle: His 1531/32 Comment on Book V of Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*. Under the title *De iustitia particularis*, Melanchthon introduces the distinction between nat-

ural and positive law that cannot be found in Aristotle's text. In addition, he provides a detailed catalogue of six natural laws so that it became a law code (»Rechtsregel,« M. Schmoeckel) as foundation of any positive law. The understanding that natural law is inscribed as *no-titiae* in our souls gains increasing significance for Melanchthon in the course of time.

Mads Jensen (London) argued that existing scholarship has missed Melanchthon's central objective in writing the 1530 *Commentarii in aliquot politicos libros Aristotelis*. Rather than merely criticizing peasants and radical preachers, Melanchthon sought to refute the Ockhamist political thought of Gabriel Biel and John Mair. Using Aristotle's naturalism within the theological framework of the political order as ordained by God, Melanchthon criticized the conventionalist account of the Ockhamists, specifically the arguments underlying the case for popular sovereignty or the power of the community over the ruler. Instead, he forwarded a theory of politics and constitutional monarchy grounded in natural law with the ruler as the representative of God.

John A. Maxfield (Edmonton) analyzed Melanchthon's preface to

the first volume of Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*, 1544 (WA 44; XIV-XX). He interpreted Melanchthon's use of philosophy as follows: Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers from the ancient world are not viewed as authorities, in natural philosophy any more than in theology, but rather are ancient witnesses who thought about the existence and nature of God in relation to creation. Different from the scholastics was that Melanchthon was not focusing on reconciling various ancient authorities with Scripture through the method of the *quaestio*, but rather simply cites their ideas, often with criticism, as he presents a view based on the Bible and emphasizes the centrality of the Bible for understanding God and man.

Joar Haga (Oslo) investigated Melanchthon's treatment of immortality in his 1540 commentary on Aristotle's psychology. This entailed a different attitude towards the Greek philosopher than his Wittenberg colleague, Martin Luther had. While two decades earlier Luther had accused Aristotle of being responsible for the corruption of theology, Melanchthon had a far

more friendly approach to Aristotle, except concerning the understanding of the soul's immortality. From Cicero, Melanchthon adopted the concept of *entelechia* as a fitting description for the soul as the form of the body. The reason for leaving Aristotle's *entelechia* lies in the possibility of removing the soul from the corruptible body. Being closely related to the concepts of potentiality and actuality, *entelechia* was not easy to combine with the Christian understanding of the soul's capacity of an afterlife, formulated in the doctrine of the resurrection. It tied the soul to the physical body. With the Neoplatonic concept of *entelechia* from Cicero, however, Melanchthon can claim that the soul is not merely the form of the body. It adds a notion of perpetual motion, describing the soul as a process which is not accomplished in this life but only in heaven. Thus, Melanchthon rescues the Aristotelian doctrine of the soul from its pagan materialism. He is not primarily interested in the exegesis of Aristotle's text, but uses it as a starting point for his own Neoplatonic position informed by Christian theology.