

PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF PHILIPP MELANCHTHON'S ŒUVRE

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The purpose of the collective volume “Der Philosoph Melanchthon” edited by Günter Frank and Felix Mundt is to move the famous Reformer Philipp Melanchthon in the focus of research qua philosopher. The philosophical aspects of Melanchthon’s work and thought have been almost entirely passed over by scholars of philosophy and intellectual history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is commonly accepted among Reformation scholars that the theologian Melanchthon can only be properly understood in his influential role as Lutheran Reformer when set against his philological and philosophical educational background. Nevertheless, the unprecedented approach that regards Melanchthon primarily as an important and independent character of the history of philosophy leads, as this volume endorses, to partially new and surprising insights into the philosophical premises of his humanistic and theological achievements. Therefore, the authors that contributed to this groundbreaking volume try to illustrate the numerous fields of interest that make up Melanchthon’s extensive work, by tackling the relevance of ethics and philosophy for the Wittenberg Reformer and addressing topics such as anthropology, philosophy of law and free-will debates, all taken up and dealt with in various parts of his oeuvre.

The introductory article, written by Günter Frank, focuses on the various meanings of the term “philosophy” that can be identified and distinguished in Melanchthon’s work. Against the background of reductionist interpretations,¹ Frank offers three distinct definitions of philosophy that are taken up by the author in his treatises, introductory textbooks and orations at various stages in his theological and humanistic career. A singular understanding of the term “philosophy” belongs to Melanchthon’s early time in Wittenberg when he was deeply influenced by Luther’s sharp criticism regarding philosophical inquiry. It reveals the meaning of philosophy as a *philosophia Christiana*, concerned with the life and practice of the friars and inspired by the lives of the Church Fathers. However, Melanchthon does not abandon his humanistic understanding of philosophy during this time and also regards philosophy as a discipline constituted of the seven liberal arts. He expands them with two other important arts: poetics and history, and integrates them in the following years in his teaching practice. In his mature works, Melanchthon believes that all arts and sciences, not only the liberal arts but also natural philosophy, medicine and theology - with the

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exception of metaphysics - are connected by a circle and depend upon each other.²

In her article "Assensio: Wahlfreiheit in Melanchthons theologischer Grundlegung einer philosophischen Ethik," Anne Eusterschulte undertakes a denouement of the Lutheran tension between Law and Gospel which is central to Melanchthon's understanding of philosophical ethics. Eusterschulte claims that there is a way to consistently connect the philosophical elements of Melanchthon's ethics, influenced by ancient moral doctrines, with his theology of salvation. In her view, this can only be done by recognizing that philosophical ethics and revelation are grounded in the same theology of creation and in faith. Man's philosophically espoused realization of the inborn, God-given natural law and of his likeness to God leads, according to Melanchthon, to knowledge of God's existence and attributes, as well as to the enforcement of virtuous acts, the search for God and, ultimately, to faith. Faith, on the other hand, helps realize the unanimity of reason and heart, and therefore helps enforce virtue. For Melanchthon and his fellow Lutherans, no individual effort can call in God's grace. Nevertheless, as Eusterschulte carefully displays, in his late works the Lutheran reformer is ready to acknowledge the individual's power of consent (*assensio*) in accepting or denying the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Philosophy, in its moral relevance, functions as a disciplining and consolidation of the powers of the soul. These, in turn, may support the assent that man gives to the reception of the Holy Ghost. In principle at least, Melanchthon admits the compatibility between a theology of justification and the free will of the human being. Eusterschulte's analysis represents a very strong objection to the views that depict Melanchthon as a rigid Lutheran and refuse his work any philosophical relevance on this ground.

The inquiry into Melanchthon's concept of ethics, this time with special emphasis on the interpretation and integration of the Aristotelian ethics in the wider context of his writings, is taken up by Günter Frank in his paper "Melanchthon - der Ethiker der Reformation." The main goal of Frank's article is to answer the heatedly debated question regarding Melanchthon's intention to restore the Aristotelian doctrine (*instauranda Aristotelica*), expressed in his epilogue to his grammar textbook (1518). Frank shows that, in spite of the established belief that Melanchthon wanted to edit a new philological Aristotle, the Wittenberg reformer and humanist merely meant to expatiate the Aristotelian philosophy on the basis of its salient topics or *loci praecipui*. Thus, after offering a short textual history of Melanchthon's ethical writings in the context of the humanist reception of Aristotle, Frank explains how Melanchthon takes over and methodically reshapes the Aristotelian works. Because the humanist draws on the pragmatic-persuasive method of the topics in his interpretation of the Stagirite, it becomes clear that Melanchthon is not interested in revealing the "real" Aristotle. Instead, he abandons the systematics of the Aristotelian Ethics and bestows a topical structure on the themes he wants to point out. Centering his ethics around main topics and discussing them under the aspects of Lutheran theology, Melanchthon reshapes the Aristotelian ethics under the premise of the reformed dialectic of Law and Gospel.

Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann's following study of the traditions of topics that Melanchthon had inherited at the beginning of the sixteenth century sheds some more light on the semantic diversity of the term *topoi* or *locus*, the central concept of the

humanist dialectical textbooks.³ Aristotle undertakes the first systematic treatment of topics, in his theory of informal argumentation, conceived for the general exercise of arguing from *endoxa* and deducing dialectically.⁴ For Cicero, who claims to be taking over Aristotle's *Topics*, argumentation is less important. In the center of his *Topica* lies invention, the method of finding all possible predicates of a term and afterwards using them argumentatively in some particular, rhetorical case.⁵ Boethius passes the Aristotelian-Ciceronian tradition on to the Middle Ages.⁶ Biggemann does not follow the absorption of the topical doctrine into the medieval dialectical treatises, but he mentions Peter Lombard and his use of the topics as fundamental theological terms in his *Sentences*. Melanchthon is acquainted with these meanings of the term *locus* but follows the dialectical method of his fellow humanists, Agricola and Erasmus, who understand topics in a Ciceronian sense. Biggemann claims that by means of the humanistic tradition he was educated in, Melanchthon had access only to this rhetorical-topical method. Thus, the only way he could have structured the Lutheran theology was by means of the topics, which afterwards were used to systematize the Christian doctrine in all other denominations. He thus seconds the view according to which the informal logic propagated by the humanist was at least partially a consequence of lack of familiarity with the formal logic of the scholastics.⁷

The humanistic turn to ancient works also implied a turn to Roman rhetoric and poetry. To Thorsten Fuchs, Melanchthon belongs to the group of humanist poets and any attempt to evaluate his poetry along the poetical norms of Romanticism misses the value and relevance of humanist poetry. The aim of his article, "Krächzender Rabe oder singende Nachtigall? Der Dichter Philipp Melanchthon und sein poetisches Werk", is thus to emphasize Melanchthon's poetry and its humanistic features, filling the gap that most of the Melanchthon scholars have left open. Therefore, Fuchs analyses one of Melanchthon's epigrams written during the Diet of Worms.⁸ Using the classical meter of hendekasyllable, Melanchthon versifies about the danger concerning the Protestant theologians. By using vivid images, he compares the howling tempests of the sea with the attacks the Protestant Church has to fight against and equates the resisting rocks with the evangelic theologians that bear resistance, following Christ's demands. It is the vocabulary of war that Melanchthon uses to illustrate the conflict between the Protestants and their enemies. He uses topics of discrediting to depreciate his opponents and draws on ancient legends and myths. Finally, he emphasizes the glory of Christ over his enemies and summons to prayer. To Fuchs, Melanchthon appears as a typical humanist scholar. His poems were mostly occasionally written, drew on ancient poetry and held on to the old meter. For Melanchthon, as for other humanists, poetry was regarded as a medium of scholarly communication and, as a reformer, he transmitted by means of his verses important biblical content.

Gideo Stiening's contribution to the volume singles out Melanchthon as the conceiver of a theory of law rooted in his Protestant theology. Stiening compares Melanchthon with his Catholic Salamancan contemporary Francesco de Vitoria and contrasts the theologians' understanding of the relationship between philosophy and theology, their views on the correlation between the concepts "law" and "right," their accounts on the validity of right and their theories of obligation. Stiening's aim is to

present the two theories of law as different jurisprudential doctrines grounded in philosophical and theological assumptions, and to contrast them with Machiavelli's political philosophy and theory of law. He sees in Vitoria's *Relectio de potestate civili* and Melanchthon's doctrine of the law, the way he displays it for example in his *Loci communes theologici*, a renewed theologisation of political theory. This process is interpreted as a reaction to the degradation of the theological absolutism of the Middle Ages, representatively displayed by the famous work of the Florentine contemporary of Melanchthon and Vitoria: Niccolò Machiavelli. Stiening emphasizes in his analysis that Melanchthon's subjectivisation of the traditional theory of law, the way it was known to the medieval thinkers, can only be understood in its trenchant theological context. It should, therefore, not be seen as a direct path to a modern concept of consciousness. However, although he draws on Frank for this claim (his *Theologische Philosophie Philipp Melanchthons*), he reinterprets the aim of Frank's work. Rather than calling into question the possible impact of Melanchthon's philosophy on modern thought, Frank cautions against the attempt to dissociate the Reformer's philosophy from its theological assumptions.

Felix Mundt's article, "Melanchthon und Cicero. Facetten des Eklektizismus am Beispiel der Sellenlehre", enlarges upon a subject that had already been addressed in an early stage of Melanchthon scholarship:⁹ the influence of Cicero's philosophy on Melanchthon's philosophical reflections. Mundt concentrates, in this regard, on Melanchthon's conception of the soul. He starts by comparing Cicero with Melanchthon, precisely because both have been regarded as eclectic thinkers rather than systematic philosophers.¹⁰ After he tackles the problem of the concept of eclecticism in the history of philosophy, Mundt analyses several elements of the German Reformer's *Commentarius de Anima*: the theory of the *notitia naturales*, the doctrine of the free will and Melanchthon's usage of the concept of *entelechy*. His goal is to find out to what extent these constitutional elements of Philipp Melanchthon's doctrine of the soul have been directly influenced by Cicero's own views. After Melanchthon is shown to use Cicero and Aristotle whenever he thinks their philosophical views suit his purposes, it becomes clear that, like Cicero, he bestows a subordinate role to philosophical views and selects those that prove to be of use for maintaining the political order and for the legitimation and realization of knowledge of God. Like Cicero, Melanchthon's assembling of ancient doctrines reaches far beyond philosophical knowledge to justifying particular reformed views and backing up his didactic goals. This effort is marked by a particular skeptical approach of Ciceronian provenience, which allows a successful way of meeting his above mentioned goals.

Focusing on the theory of the soul and its implications in Melanchthon's philosophy, Bernd Roling offers a very interesting insight into debates concerning the genesis of the soul in Lutheran and Calvinist anthropological and physiological works in seventeenth century Central Germany - the authors of which all directly or implicitly draw on Melanchthon's own arguments for the origin of the soul. The heated debate, to which Leibniz claims to have put an end with his model of the monad is that between a traducionist and a creationist origin of the soul, i.e. the soul is either transmitted by the parents to the child through the form of their own soul, or

it is created by God *ex nihilo* every time. Roling shows that, although Melanchthon doesn't give a clear-cut answer to the question of the genesis of the human soul, he considers in his writings the biblical arguments for and against the godly generation of souls. Melanchthon concludes his reflections by saying that acknowledgement of man's limited insight into this problem is the best way of bringing the discussion to a close. Johannes Magirus, the Marburg theologian, identifies in his commentary to Melanchthon's "De Anima", "Anthropologia" (1613) two arguments in favor and one against traducionism. These will be taken over by the Lutherans, among them by the famous physician Daniel Sennert, and turned into a fully-fledged traducionist theory. Calvinists, on the other hand, will side with the Catholic theologians like Suarez, Vasquez and Arriaga and claim a creationist view. In the argument between the Lutheran Johannes Sperling and the Calvinist Johannes Zeisold, this debate is brought to its summit, before physicists like Harvey continue the discussions on other grounds. The question regarding the correct reading of Melanchthon remains open, his undecided arguments on the matter providing support for both schools of thought.

The last paper of the volume treats the Reformer and humanist Philipp Melanchthon under the aspect of the pictorial tradition, inquiring into the extent to which Philipp Melanchthon had entered this tradition primarily as a philosopher. Maria Lucia Weigel announces her attempt to open, thereby, new paths for further research. She starts by offering an insight into the understanding of portraits in Early Modernity and the part played by Melanchthon in the pictorial discourse. It is not surprising that Weigel returns to Philipp Melanchthon's topical method, discussed by Frank and Biggemann in the previous parts of this volume, which Melanchthon had promoted for both arts and sciences. Melanchthon was not only perceived as humanist and Reformer in the visual materials of that time but seems to have also influenced their methods of pictorial representations. He practiced a scholarly exchange with his known contemporaries like Albrecht Dürer or Lucas Cranach and discussed with them problems of art theory. Moreover, the topical method employed in his writings is taken over by the artists of his time and put to work in the practice of visual topoi to develop a pictorial argumentation that illustrates Melanchthon first of all as philosopher and rhetor. How these topoi had been employed and how they function as a rhetorical means of persuasion next to the written word of Melanchthon's works, is shown by Weigel by reference to a graphic collection found in the Melanchthonhaus in Bretten, including representations of the sixteenth but also eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The change of the pictorial message and the representation techniques of Melanchthon's portraits in the eighteenth and nineteenth century is analysed in the remainder of the article.

Weigel's article closes this collection of studies which represent the attempt of the newest Melanchthon scholarship to deal with unknown and prolific material. This material is to be found in Melanchthon's numerous written legacies awaiting for fair acknowledgement of their philosophical worth. Although subjects like Melanchthon's natural philosophy, anthropology or the analysis of his method have not been approached in this volume, the extent to which the Refomer Melanchthon was influenced by his humanistic commitments has been clearly pointed out.

Melanchthon's repeated and attentive use of ancient philosophies, his meticulous concern with method and the constant preoccupation with educational and political reform single him out as an autonomous, disciplined thinker, if only one focused on harmonizing philosophy and theology. This position itself runs counter to the Lutheran contempt for philosophizing and supports the different perspectives under which Melanchthon has been read by the authors that have contributed to this volume. It also announces a new and welcome start in the philosophical Melanchthon scholarship.

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