

MARTIN LUTHER'S VIEWS ON AND USE OF ARISTOTLE: A THEOLOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: TRAN, Huong Thi. *Martin Luther's Views on and Use of Aristotle: A Theological-Philosophical Assessment*. Martin Luther, the 16th century religious thinker and reformer of Western Christendom, is usually depicted as a staunch opponent of Aristotle, especially when it came to using Aristotle's ideas in religious intellectual reflection. Our article aims at examining Luther's use of selected key concepts and ideas from Aristotle, while at the same time criticizing other concepts as dangerously misleading. The selection of concepts is based on their occurrence and relevance for scholastic theology, which Luther evaluates critically. Moreover, we propose to distinguish between Luther's relationship to Aristotle's ideas as these became known to Luther through the available Latin translations of his works, and between Aristotelian concepts that had been employed by selected scholastic theologians. There appears to be a development of emphasis in Luther from his early years to more mature (and expressive) views. Another important distinction that we wish to propose in assessing Luther's attitude to Aristotle is whether his ideas are used *coram hominibus* (i.e., dealing with realities of this earthly realm without a direct linkage to salvation) or *coram Deo* (i.e., dealing with the relationship between God and humans in the history of salvation). A proper evaluation of Luther's views and use of Aristotle has direct theological and ethical consequences, both in the realm of individual ethics as well as in the dimension of social and political interaction of humans.

Keywords: *Martin Luther, Aristotle, Aristotelianism, philosophy, theology*

Introduction

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546), the famous German thinker and reformer of the Latin (Western) Christian medieval church, made an indelible mark on the history of not only the Christian religion but arguably also the Western civilization. Though many reformers before him – such as John Wycliffe (1320 – 1384), John Hus (1372 – 1415), or Girolamo Savonarola (1452 – 1498) – attempted to introduce new ways of thinking into the ecclesiastic and intellectual circles of their day, their efforts had been quenched, relegating their influence to local municipalities or a handful of staunch supporters. With Luther, however, the situation was different, not only due to his own, creative 'genius,' but also thanks to changed geopolitical, social, and technological conditions at the beginning of the 16th century. (Brecht 1993)

My aim is not to attempt to identify and further analyze the historical circumstances that can be considered conducive to Luther's revolutionary thinking about the human predicament and his individual ethical and social responsibilities. The goal of my paper is rather to critically evaluate Luther's philosophical underpinnings by focusing specifically on his treatment of Aristotle (384 – 322 BCC) in his religious and scholarly endeavors. I aim to assess what we believe to be a simplified and shallow view that portrays Luther as an enemy of philosophy who rejects Aristotle (Dieter

2015; Eckermann 1978; Nietzsche 1883), while preferring the thinking of Paul of Tarsus (St. Paul) and Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430). However, the situation appears to be more complicated, requiring a more nuanced approach and assessment of the Reformer's attitude to Aristotle and his philosophy as it had been mediated to Luther through his teachers and the works available to him at that time. (Oberman 1963; Dieter 2014) The thesis I propose is that there are identifiable 'fundamentals' pertaining directly to the kind of Aristotelianism that Luther was confronted with that influenced Luther's religious intellectual reflection. These 'fundamentals,' or, fundamental presuppositions, are sometimes 'anti-Aristotelian' but they still need to be taken into account as directly pertaining to the shaping of Luther's religious mindset. Following a concise analysis of relevant passages from the writings of the German Reformer, I explore the basic concepts and their interpretations relevant to the question of Luther's use of Aristotle in his works.¹ While Luther's theological anthropology stands in stark contrast with Aristotelian anthropology, we can identify constructive points of engagement of Aristotelianism in Luther's expositions of other important topics. More importantly, Luther's opposition to Aristotle should be primarily understood as his opposition to the typical scholastic intellectual reflection of Aristotle rather than to Aristotle himself (Oberman 1966). Another methodological challenge of my study stemmed from the fact that there are almost one thousand references to Aristotle or Aristotelianism in Luther's writings (LW and WA), spanning interdisciplinary topics. Rather than focusing on their categorization, I have chosen to concentrate my attention to the question of theological anthropology (i.e., what is a human being?) and the issue of the relationship between philosophy and theology.

Luther's Early Engagement with Aristotle: Some Examples of Positive Evaluations

It has been firmly established that Aristotle exerted an immense influence on the history of philosophy as well as religious thinking on the European continent and beyond. (Dieter 2015; Brecht 1993) His works continued to be transcribed and translated into numerous languages, including Latin, Arabic, and Syrian, achieving the peak of their influence on the European medieval intellectual reflection in the 13th – 15th centuries CE. Even if, in Luther's time (16th century CE), Aristotelianism began to be challenged with newer philosophical and scientific conceptions of reality, it is fair to say that much of Luther's theological and philosophical training stemmed from the traditional scholastic understanding and critical appropriation of Aristotle's ethics, logic, and even metaphysics (though to a lesser degree). (Brecht 1993)

It is reasonable to assume that Luther's exposure to Aristotle's thinking through the lenses of medieval scholasticism began as early as during his studies in Erfurt (1502 – 1505) (Dieter 2015). Ironically, his first view of Aristotle was shaped by a neo-platonic interpretation of Aristotle by Porphyry (234 – 305 CE) in his commentary on the Greek philosopher. Part of Erfurt's school curriculum were also Aristotle's works *On the Soul* (*De anima*), *Physics* (*Physica*), *Prior Analytics* (*Analytica Priora*), *Posterior Analytics* (*Analytica Posteriora*), *On the Heavens* (*De Caelo*), *Meteorology* (*Meteorologica*), *On Sophistical Refutations* (*De Sophisticis Elenchis*), *On Generation and Corruption* (*De Generatione et Corruptione*), *Metaphysics* (*Metaphysica*), *Nicomachean*

¹ I explore and analyze the electronic edition of Luther's works translated into English: Luther's Works [cit. LW] - American Edition, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Pub. House and Fortress Press, 1955-1986. More than 970 references to Aristotle can be identified in this corpus. However, I needed to consult the Latin and German originals in some instances. These were taken from the Weimar Ausgabe [cit. WA] of Luther's writings (1883-).

Ethics (Ethica Nicomachea), and *Politics* (Politica). (Brecht 1993, 33; Dieter 2015, 14-15) Besides reading Latin translations of Aristotle's works, Luther was also exposed to various commentaries on Aristotle from well-known figures of the medieval scholastic period. These include Pierre d'Ailly (1350 – 1420), Peter Lombard (1096 – 1160) with his famous *Four Books of Sentences* (Libri Quattuor Sententiarum), Duns Scotus (1266 – 1308) as well as the two critics of the scholastic *via antiqua*, Gabriel Biel (1420 – 1495), and William Ockham (1285 – 1347). Of course, Luther's direct teachers and mentors in Erfurt and later his closest coworker, Philip Melancthon (1497 – 1560), exerted influence on Luther's early appropriation of Aristotelianism. Some of this influence, namely that of Biel and Ockham, seemed to have persevered until Luther's later years.

The early formation years of the Reformer include his stay in the Erfurt Augustinian monastery (1505 – 1511). In contrast to the typical emphasis on logic and rational reasoning of high, 'Aristotelian' scholasticism, the Augustinians tended to emphasize element of mysticism and preference for Biblical revelation as opposed to *revelatio generalis*. It was during this period, especially under the tutelage of Luther's spiritual father, Johann von Staupitz (1460 – 1524), when Martin Luther began to feel the unyielding tension between revelation based and divinely-initiated knowledge of the faith and rationally based and human-originated knowledge of reason that was proper to philosophy. A wedge was slowly becoming apparent in Luther's thinking when he reflected on the relationship between philosophy and theology. However, even this statement, though true to a large extent, as far as Luther is concerned, is not an absolute. This needs to be further clarified. Suffice it to say for now that Luther came to know Aristotle directly through a collection of his writings that had been translated into Latin and presented to him by his teachers in his Erfurt city school, and indirectly through the commentaries and critical reflections on Aristotle's works by selected renowned medieval scholastic teachers. In addition, his experience as new professor of Biblical studies at the newly opened University in Wittenberg² also came to bear on the development of the mind and piety of the Reformer. In fact, shortly after he came to Wittenberg, Luther gave lectures on Aristotle at the university (in 1508). Particularly formative seemed to have been the years 1513 – 1517 and 1517 – 1525. It is the year 1525 that marks the end of Luther's early development when it comes to his reflection on Aristotelianism and philosophy in general as he tried to grapple with questions of epistemology, the nature and role of special revelation, ontology, and human nature.

Luther's attitude to Aristotle seemed to have been much more positive in this early stage of his teaching career than in the later years. In his expositions on the Book of Psalms (1513 – 1515), Luther does not shy away from using Aristotelian categories when distinguishing between the moral and intellectual virtues of humans. "For the Christians have been multiplied and 'enlarged' throughout the world as a result of suffering. Tropologically it means that any soul 'is enlarged' both in *moral* and *intellectual* virtues." (Luther 1999a, 74) We can see here a clear reference to *Nicomachean Ethics* (II, 1), according to which "moral virtue comes about as a result of habit," whereas "intellectual virtue owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time)." (Aristotle 2009, 23) We see a similar affirmation of Aristotle in Luther's exegesis of Psalm 11, where Luther reflects on the question of human conscience. Referring to the passage from the Book of Revelation 3:20, Luther claims that "no one is so evil that he does not feel the murmur of reason and the voice of conscience, according to the statement, 'reason always speaks for the best.' And this explanation is indeed *very attractive*." (Luther 1999a, 99) Again, Luther invokes Aristotle's dictum from *Nicomachean Ethics* (I, 1102b, 15) that: "ὁ λόγος

² Staupitz transferred Luther to Wittenberg in 1511. It is here where he got his doctor degree in theology. His first lectures (on the Psalms) started in 1513.

[...] ἐπὶ τὰ βέλτιστα παρακαλεῖ” – which can be translated as “The rational principle [...] urges them on to the best objectives.” (Aristotle 2009, 15)

Another good example of Luther's endorsement of Aristotle concerns the topic of *privatio* (privation) related to the nature and being of the human. On this topic, Luther says approvingly that “it is most correct to say that man is always in privation, always in becoming or in potentiality, in matter, and always in action. Aristotle philosophizes about such matters, and he does it well, *but people do not understand him well*. Man is always in nonbeing, in becoming, in being, always in privation, in potentiality, in action, always in sin, in justification, in righteousness, that is, he is always a sinner, always a penitent, always righteous.” (Luther 1999b, 434) Besides the explicit positive language about Aristotle, it is important to notice that Luther takes issue with what he believes to be fateful misunderstandings of the Greek philosopher by many of his peers, when he says: “but people do not understand him well.”

These instances may lead us to believe that early Luther was an almost uncritical fan of Aristotle. While the German Reformer certainly shows a high appreciation for the Philosopher, especially when it comes to understanding some ethical and anthropological issues, he is quick to remind his students (and his readers) that one must distinguish between the holy books of Revelation and the books of philosophers (including Aristotle).

Commenting on Psalm 67:17, Luther shows his indignation:

“But because we have learned from Aristotle to argue about things verbosely and boldly, we think that the same verbosity and boldness should be transferred to divine matters. It is for this reason that I have a hatred for those bold opinions of the Thomists, Scotists, and others, for they so handle without fear the sacred name of God and extol it above the tongue but put it down under the tongue, that name with which we were signed, that heaven and earth and hell tremble.” (Luther 1999a, 322-323)

Furthermore, in his comments on Psalm 69:3, Luther proclaims: “Some are devoted to gain, some to pleasures, some to ambition, many even to the laws and traditions of men, and not a few to the philosophy of Aristotle. Because all of these are deserting the study of the divine Word, the eyes of Christ are failing in the church.” (Luther 1999a, 359) And finally, in his summarizing comments on the first part of his Lectures on the Book of Psalms (1-75), Luther explains:

“Therefore we must not do with the Holy Scriptures as we do with Aristotle, where a wise man is permitted to contradict a wise man, for there as the master is, so is also his teaching; a profane master and profane teaching. But here we have a holy Master and holy teaching. Consequently, wherever and by whomever some meaning which does not conflict with the rules of faith is brought forth, no one should reject it or prefer his own, even though his own is much more evident and harmonizes much better with the letter.” (Luther 1999a, 462)

The topic that Luther considers especially ‘toxic’ when one tries to understand it on the basis of the accounts of philosophers as opposed to based on Biblical witness, is the topic of justification. In fact, Luther proclaims the correct understanding of justification the article on which true Church of Christ stands or falls. It is thus understandable that he is sensitive when philosophical views are seen as substitutes to theological notions that are founded on a careful Biblical exegesis and theological hermeneutics. Again, we can see this concern in Luther very early on, i.e., already in his Lectures on the Psalms. The Latin text from the Weimar Ausgabe of Luther's works speaks clearly:

“Unde nec Aristoteles sic intelligendus est, quod quis iusta operari possit nondum iustus. Sed non potest perfecto habitu. Oportet enim esse iustum in voluntate et sic in opus procedere. Contra autem superbi, qui ex eo quod operantur, volunt sibi imputari iustitiam, et non prius imputari sibi iustitiam, ut operentur. Et hec est iustitia humana, que ex operibus fit et imputatur. Sed illa est iustitia Dei, que est ante omne opus.”³ (WA 4:19, 22-28)

Luther complained that Aristotle had been misunderstood by some of the best minds of the medieval scholastic tradition, including St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274). In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), Luther complains that Aquinas’ opinions on important theological matters sometimes “hang so completely in the air without support of Scripture or reason that it seems to me he knows neither his philosophy nor his logic. For Aristotle speaks of subject and accidents so very differently from St. Thomas that it seems to me this great man is to be pitied not only for attempting to draw his opinions in matters of faith from Aristotle, but also for attempting to base them upon a man whom he did not understand, thus building an unfortunate superstructure upon an unfortunate foundation.” (Luther 1999e, 29) Such misunderstandings, in turn, resulted in devious theological expositions of key biblical, Christian topics, such as the nature of grace, justification, or sacraments. (Schwarz 1962)

It is interesting to observe that although Luther shared much of Ockham’s criticism of the late medieval scholastic philosophy, and its insidious inroads into theology, he fails to use this leverage in his early disputes and religious treatises. More precisely, he did not exploit Ockham’s criticism of Aristotelian foundations of late scholastic philosophy even though he had been well aware of it.

Luther’s Critical Views on Aristotle

Luther was convinced that what he called “the pseudo philosophy of Aristotle” began to infiltrate Western Christendom from the beginning of the 13th century, namely after the adoption of the controversial dogma of eucharistic transubstantiation.⁴ Up until then, Christian intellectual discourse had been marked by a close adherence to the Augustinian ideational heritage and Christian mystical Neo-Platonism. (O’Meara 1978) However, as more European scholars began to familiarize themselves with Aristotle’s works which had long been considered lost (through Arabic translations), including his *Metaphysics*, the tide turned. In the 13th century, scholastic theology found itself at a crossroads. It was through the works of Thomas Aquinas that what then was considered a viable synthesis of Aristotelianism and Christianity started to emerge as the new, governing trends (though not without major setbacks).

Luther’s use of the Aristotelian semantics and ethical concepts (see examples above) does not preclude him from being overtly critical of the Greek philosopher and of philosophy in general. We can observe the beginnings of this critical attitude in Luther as early as his *Lectures on the Book of Psalms* (1513), though it was more fully developed in Luther’s *Lectures on the Book of Romans* (1515 – 1516) and later in his *Scholastic Disputations* (or: *Disputation against Scholastic*

³ Authors’ own translation: “Aristotle should not be understood here in such a way as if saying that he who is not yet just, can do just deeds. This he cannot do even on the basis of perfect preconditions (*perfecto habitu*). One must first be just in his will, then he can move forward to the deeds. Those, however, who want to be counted as just on the basis of what they do and not in the manner that righteousness is first given to them so that they might act justly, are conceited. This is human righteousness, which arises and is recognized on the basis of deeds. But the divine righteousness is different; it comes before every deed.”

⁴ The dogma according to which the earthly elements of bread and wine of the Eucharist are “transformed” substantially into the body and blood of Christ, while retaining their outside properties (*accidens*).

Theology, 1517). Crucial here is the issue of justification understood in its theological context as the justification of sinner before God (*coram Deo*). The roots of what theologians call the 'evangelical turn'⁵ in Luther can already be identified in his Lectures on the Book of Psalms, as becomes obvious upon a close examination of key passages dealing with the topic of justification/righteousness. God's righteousness is radically different from human righteousness (*illa est iustitia Dei*). It is not based on a meritorial scheme of fulfilled deeds but is rather revealed in faith in Christ: "Thus righteousness in a tropological sense is faith in Christ. Rom. 1:17: 'The righteousness of God is revealed therein, etc.'" (Luther 1999a, 404) Commenting on Psalm 72:1, Luther invokes St. Paul's Letter to Romans 3:21-22 as the key passage: "The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law and the prophets, ... even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ." (Luther 1999a, 403)

This understanding is in stark contrast to Aristotle's view according to which righteousness (or '*iustitia*') stems from righteous deeds and always follows such deeds ('*ex actibus*'). Luther's mature views on the topic of righteousness and justification can be found in his Lectures on the Book of Romans. He writes: "The righteousness of God is so named to distinguish it from the righteousness of man, which comes from works, as Aristotle describes it very clearly in Book III of his Ethics. According to him, righteousness follows upon actions and originates in them. But according to God, righteousness precedes works, and thus works are the result of righteousness." (Luther 1999b, 152)⁶ Wherever Luther senses a deviation in Aristotle's reasoning from the message of the Sacred Scriptures, which is, according to Luther, Gospel-centered, the Reformer is quick to point it out and warn his readers of the grave danger of mistaking philosophical wisdom for the divine wisdom. While the former is fit for a decent living *coram hominibus* (i.e., when dealing with people and other parts of God's creation in the temporal world), the latter is meant as the only true and viable representation of God's attitude and action with humans (*coram Deo*), the purpose of which is their reconciliation and salvation. For Luther, this is not just a matter of a mental exercise but a matter of true obedience in faith with eternal consequences for the human subjects. His refutations of Aristotelianism and philosophy in general need to be understood in this strictly 'theological' context. Before God (*coram Deo*), according to Luther, the human is unable to will, initiate, or complete any genuinely good deed, that is, one that would earn him/her God's favor and salvation.

It is in this light that we should view Luther's rejection of commonly held opinions that elevated the capacities of unregenerate human individuals (that is, those under the condition of original sin) and tried to rationalize some important matters of faith in his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* (WA 1: 221-228; LW 31: 9-16). He wrote the 97 theses in an attempt to undermine the almost unassailable role of the 'god of the scholastics', i.e., Aristotle, in common theological understanding of his time. Luther's student, Franz Gunther, was to read and publicly defend the theses at the University of Wittenberg on September 4, 1517, while Luther presided over the debate as dean of the Faculty. As the author of the theses, Luther revealed himself a good Augustinian: having a high view of God and a somber (or even derogatory) view of human nature in its sinful state. (Schwarz 1962; Oberman 1963; 1966) Following from his Augustinian presuppositions are

⁵ Also known as the 'Turmerlebniss' or 'Tower experience,' as it allegedly occurred while Luther was in a tower (location is unclear) reading the Bible and praying.

⁶ Luther refers here to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Book III). The Latin text says: "Et dicitur ad differentiam Iustitie hominum, que ex operibus fit. Sicut Aristoteles 3. Ethicorum manifeste determinat, secundum quem Iustitia sequitur et fit ex actibus. Sed secundum Deum precedit opera et opera fiunt ex ipsa. Sicut in simili opera Episcopi Vel sacerdotis nullus potest facere, nisi sit prius consecratus et ad hoc sanctificatus [...]" (WA 56: 172, 8-12).

statements that speak pessimistically about the human capacities to choose the good freely and do good without outside (i.e., divine) help:

“Thesis 4. It is therefore true that man, being a bad tree, can only will and do evil [Cf. Matt. 7:17–18]. 5. It is false to state that man’s inclination is free to choose between either of two opposites. Indeed, the inclination is not free, but captive. This is said in opposition to common opinion. 6. It is false to state that the will can by nature conform to correct precept. This is said in opposition to Scotus and Gabriel. 7. As a matter of fact, without the grace of God the will produces an act that is perverse and evil.” (LW 31: 9)

In theses 40-44, Luther mounts his direct attack on the ‘improper’ use of Aristotle’s philosophy in important theological matters:

“40. We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds. This in opposition to the philosophers. 41. Virtually the entire Ethics of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace. This in opposition to the scholastics. 42. It is an error to maintain that Aristotle’s statement concerning happiness does not contradict Catholic doctrine. This in opposition to the doctrine on morals. 43. It is an error to say that no man can become a theologian without Aristotle. This in opposition to common opinion. 44. Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle.” (Luther 1999, 12; LW 31: 12)

Aristotle is mentioned here explicitly as “the worst enemy” (thesis 41) of the Church’s teaching on grace and the idea is proposed that one can become a theologian only if one gives up his/her dependence on Aristotle (thesis 44). Furthermore, Luther is convinced that “the false metaphysics of Aristotle and the traditional human philosophy have deceived our theologians,” and this “foolish opinion has led to the most injurious deceptions” (Luther 1999b, 338). The examples of original sin and righteousness, and their treatment by the scholastics, belong among the most revealing ones for Luther. “First, according to the subtle distinctions of the scholastic theologians,⁷ original sin is the privation or lack of original righteousness. And righteousness, according to these men, is only something subjective in the will, and therefore also the lack of it, its opposite. This comes under the category of a quality, according to the Logic and Metaphysics of Aristotle.”⁸ (Luther 1999b, 299) We notice Luther’s frustration with the scholastic tendency to obscurity and subtle distinctions that overburden the human mind and confuse the believers, instead of helping them. What is more, Luther notices a proud, arrogant attitude interwoven into the rhetoric of these scholars who believe that their rational, ‘reasonable’ reflections are able to translate divine speech in humanly understandable language.

“The scholastics, despite their presumption to speak of these matters in a more careful and clear manner, have spoken more intricately and obscurely in their effort to translate divine speech into human form. For this reason their notions are vain and harmful, when on the basis of Aristotle in dark words and metaphors they have taught that virtues and vices stick to the soul like whitewash on a wall, like writing on a beam, and form to its subject. For in so doing a person ceases to understand the difference between flesh and spirit.” (Luther 1999b, 343)

⁷ The reference here is mainly to Peter Lombard’s Second book of *Sentences*.

⁸ Luther refers here to Aristotle’s *Categories*, chapter 8.

It is this proud and blind trust in human reason and philosophy, i.e., the methods and, to a large degree, also content of Aristotle's thinking (as it was presented by the scholastic teachers), that bothered Luther. Even before he would get into specific disagreements on the diverse nuances in conceptual definitions and semantics, the German reformer criticized the very approach of the scholastic teachers to the question of the relationship of general and special revelation, of philosophy (employing reason and human tradition) and theology (building on revelation as understood by reason that is enlightened and inspired by the divine Spirit).

Of course, the issues of a proper approach to divine revelation and a proper understanding of the roles and relationship between philosophy and theology, became the underlying foundation for concrete disagreements on important topics of theology and ethics. Thus, Luther showcases the alleged errors in Aristotle's thinking about righteousness and the ensuing ethical conclusions in his Lectures on the Book of Romans, saying: "But those men speak in the manner of Aristotle in his Ethics, when he bases sin and righteousness on works, both their performance or omission. But blessed Augustine says very clearly that 'sin, or concupiscence, is forgiven in Baptism, not in the sense that it no longer exists, but in the sense that it is not imputed.'" (Luther 1999b, 261) Moreover, "virtue does not come from acts and works, as Aristotle teaches, but acts come from virtues, as Christ teaches." (Luther 1999b, 354) To sum up, "the definition of virtue in Aristotle is wrong,⁹ for this makes us perfect, and its exercise renders us praiseworthy, unless it understands that it makes us perfect and commends our works only before men and in our own eyes. But before God this is an abomination, and the contrary is more pleasing to Him." (Luther 1999b, 385)

In his *Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520), the German reformer laments over the religious situation in Germany where "little is taught of the Holy Scriptures and Christian faith," and that instead "only the blind, heathen teacher Aristotle rules far more than Christ." Luther's advice reveals his clear opposition to using philosophy in theological matters, showing that he considered Aristotle as the most dangerous enemy of true theologians. "In this regard my advice would be that Aristotle's Physics, Metaphysics, Concerning the Soul, and Ethics, which hitherto have been thought to be his best books, should be completely discarded along with all the rest of his books that boast about nature, although nothing can be learned from them either about nature or the Spirit." (Luther 1999d, 200) We can reasonably argue here that Luther, as a typical medieval religious thinker, has gone a bit too far. Not only is he discarding Aristotle's metaphysical speculations and his controversial, albeit modern-sounding notions of the human soul and morals, but also his ideas on the nature and classifications of things (Physics). In fact, Luther claims that "any potter has more knowledge of nature than is written in these books." (Luther 1999d, 200) He further complains that "nobody has yet understood him, and many souls have been burdened with fruitless labor and study, at the cost of much precious time" and closes his excessively critical remarks by saying: "It grieves me to the quick that this damned, conceited, rascally heathen has deluded and made fools of so many of the best Christians with his misleading writings. God has sent him as a plague upon us on account of our sins." (Luther 1999d, 201) Luther hates the idea that the soul should die along with the biological body of the human, which, according to Luther, is blatantly anti-biblical (Soragji 1974, 66). On such matters, Luther is convinced, "Aristotle has not the faintest clue," which leads Luther to believe that "the devil has introduced this study." (Luther 1999d, 201)

Among Aristotle's writings, according to Luther, "his book on ethics is the worst of all books. It flatly opposes divine grace and all Christian virtues, and yet it is considered one of his best works. Away with such books!" (Luther 1999d, 201)¹⁰ Any theological school that replaces the

⁹ As we find defined in the *Nicomachean Ethics* I, 12.

¹⁰ Other important instances where Luther discusses the issue of the perceived threat of Aristotle's ethics

biblical doctrine on grace with Aristotle's ethics is an "impure and foul whore which has declared that Aristotle's teachings on morals are not in conflict with the teachings of Christ." (Luther 1999d, 300)

On a more positive note, Luther conceded, even in this very Letter where he had been so critical of Aristotle, that some of his books can be useful for the instruction of students and clergy. "I would gladly agree to keeping Aristotle's books, Logic, Rhetoric, and Poetics, or at least keeping and using them in an abridged form, as useful in training young people to speak and to preach properly. But the commentaries and notes must be abolished, and as Cicero's Rhetoric is read without commentaries and notes, so Aristotle's Logic should be read as it is without all these commentaries." (Luther 1999d, 201)

The problem with relying on Aristotle too much, according to Luther, was the underlying presupposition that humans need to attain a rational explanation of all major articles of faith. Such presupposition elevates the faculty of reason and natural revelation, while suppressing the distinctive character of special revelation and the epistemology of faith, i.e., the epistemic 'knowing' that is induced by faith. Thus, Luther asks, "What shall we say when Aristotle and the doctrines of men are made to be the arbiters of such lofty and divine matters? Why do we not put aside such curiosity and cling simply to the words of Christ, willing to remain in ignorance of what takes place here and content that the real body of Christ is present by virtue of the words? Or is it necessary to comprehend the manner of the divine working in every detail?" (Luther 1999e, 33) The intellectual and existential aspiration of believer, according to Luther, should be aimed elsewhere. Instead of reason, believers ought to build on the premise that "the Holy Spirit is greater than Aristotle." (Luther 1999e, 34) It is in this context that we should understand Luther's famous, though often misunderstood expression in which he labeled the 'natural reason' by the term "clever harlot." (Luther 1999g, 39; LW 45: 39)

Luther's masterpiece on the nature of divine action and potency of human (unregenerate) will, *De servo arbitrio [Concerning the Enslaved Will]* (1525),¹¹ reveals the author's dissatisfaction with Erasmus' of Rotterdam anthropology as well as theology (i.e., the understanding of God and his actions in the created realm). Luther accuses Erasmus of reverting to philosophy, namely Aristotle, when he should have stayed on the foundations of the biblical revelation. Luther defends God's omnipotence at the expense of human free will and, some would say (e.g. Erasmus), also his dignity. He says: "if God is robbed of the power and wisdom to elect, what will he be but the false idol, chance, at whose nod everything happens at random?" Luther ironically points out that if such God "has left it to them to decide whether they want to be saved or damned," then, perhaps, "in the meantime he has himself gone off to the banquet of the Ethiopians, as Homer says." (Luther 1999f, 171; LW 33: 171) Such view of God and human will, according to Luther, poses two unsurmountable problems: (1) the human being is overburdened with responsibility for

for a proper theological understanding is in his Disputation Against Scholastic Theology (1517) (LW 31: 9-16), in his Letter and Against Latomus (1521) (LW 32: 137-260), and finally in his Opinion of the Parisian Theologians on Doctor Luther's Doctrine. Doctor Luther's Dissenting Opinion. [Eyn Urteyl der Theologen tzu Paris uber die lere Doctor Luthers. Eyn gegen Urteyl Doctor Luthers) (WA 8, 289-312) and his Lectures on Galatians (1519) (LW 27: 224-225).

¹¹ Luther wrote this piece in response to Erasmus' *De libero arbitrio [On the Freedom of the Will]* (1524). He accused Erasmus of deviating from the biblical witness and adopting instead rational, philosophical ideas that elevated the capabilities of human thinking agents even in their relationship towards God (*coram Deo*). In a clear reference to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (I.VI. 1096a 16) where the Greek philosopher says: "Let Plato be a friend and Socrates a friend, but truth must be honored above all," (Luther 1999f, 29; LW 33: 29) Luther challenges Melancthon to weigh the arguments and let them lead him wherever they may.

his salvation and, because of his frailty, can never be sure to have 'chosen' God in the proper way to be saved for eternity; (2) God is depicted as a benevolent but passive deity who is either unable or unwilling to engage directly in human affairs (that can arguably be messy). In Luther's words:

“It is just such a God that Aristotle, too, depicts for us, that is to say, one who drowns and lets all and sundry use and abuse his kindness and severity. Nor can Reason judge otherwise of God than Diatribe does here. For just as she herself snores away and despises divine realities, so she judges also about God, as if he snored away and exercised no wisdom, will, or present power in electing, discerning, and inspiring, but had handed over to men the busy and burdensome task of accepting or rejecting his forbearance and wrath.” (Luther 1999f, 171-172; LW 33: 171-172)

When confronted with the accusation that his theological reasoning depicts a humanly incomprehensible conception of God's action, namely His righteousness and wisdom, Luther answers that the one true God is “wholly incomprehensible and inaccessible to human reason, it is proper and indeed necessary that his righteousness also should be incomprehensible.” (Luther 1999f, 290) Referring directly to Aristotle, Luther further defends the biblical God's direct engagement with this broken world in what Christian theologians came to call 'history of salvation.' “Aristotle, in order to preserve that Supreme Being of his from unhappiness, never lets him look at anything but himself, because he thinks it would be most unpleasant for him to see so much suffering and so many injustices.” (Luther 1999f, 291; LW 33: 291) We see here the opposing views of God between two sides – biblical theologians who refer to concrete divine acts in the history of salvation, and philosophers, namely Aristotle (whose influence in scholastic theology overshadowed all other philosophers). While in Aristotle's view, so Luther points out, it would be utterly unfit for God in his completeness, glory and ontological *asseitas* (i.e. “otherness”) to come into contact with this malleable, degrading reality, full of ambiguities and suffering, Luther promotes a vision of God whose glory is precisely in His merciful dealing with the world. This divine engagement leads to a natural curtailment of the free exercise of the human will, according to Luther, as the Creator finally exercises his rightful dominion over his creation. This view, obviously, does not sit well with the humanist Erasmus, nor with the modern, philosophically inclined scholars.

Conclusion

During the course of his studies and, later, his academic career and pastoral ministry, Luther grew more dissatisfied with Aristotle. On the one hand, it would be an exaggeration to claim that Luther rejected Aristotle as a philosopher. His usage of Aristotle's concepts and ways of reasoning (logic) was obvious, as was his appreciation of some aspects of his philosophical ideas. I propose that it is methodologically relevant that Luther does not reject rational thinking as a relatively autonomous exercise in the context of philosophy and metaphysics. Important is the context in which one evaluates Aristotelian ideas. Luther was ready to commend the usage of selected Aristotelian concepts and themes when dealing with nature and human interaction (*coram hominibus*), that is, with the temporal sphere. However, when it came to matters of salvation and, more specifically, the nature of divine grace and the role of human reason/will in attaining a good standing before God, Luther saw Aristotle as a clear threat to traditional, biblical theology. The issue here was twofold: (1) Not only was Luther unhappy about what Aristotle said or failed to say; (2) but he was also rejecting the idea of accepting Aristotle as a frame of reference of equal or almost equal

status (within the so-called *revelatio generalis*) the divine revelation in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Thus, what we observe here, is a clear preference for a mystical, religious epistemology, as opposed to one based more on experience, empirical evidence, and reason.

It is also interesting to point out that although Luther thought highly of his nominalist teachers Ockham and Biel, who both had a high regard for Aristotle, he could not accept some of their teachings. Three topics became especially sensitive for Luther, as he continued to regard his teachers: (1) justification, (2) the potency (freedom/unfreedom) of the human will, and (3) the nature of good works. Luther could not agree with Ockham and Biel that a human being, unaided by the divine grace, was by nature able to will to love God unconditionally, that is, above all things and without any ulterior motives. Humans, according to Luther, were rather helpless *coram Deo*, unable to prepare themselves or make themselves worthy of receiving God's saving grace. If Christ's work of atonement became operative only after the human individual had proven himself worthy of it, how could one be ever certain of his salvation? This troubled Luther not only intellectually but also existentially. One could argue, perhaps, that Luther's mind was 'clouded' (or biased) by his existential fear, by this ultimate uncertainty of his own eternal destiny. His emphasis on justification by faith alone should be seen in the light of his personal struggle for attaining the certainty of grace and salvation. It can equally be argued, therefore, that Luther's rejection of much of the scholastic theology can be traced to this same question and struggle. For Luther, if one bases his eternal destiny on the power of reason (rationalism), or human will (voluntarism), one can never be certain that he has done enough to 'deserve' God's redeeming and/or accompanying grace to help and sustain him in the process (Luther 1999c, 6).

On the other hand, despite his clear opposition and acute criticism of some of the core Aristotelian ideas, Luther continued to use the fundamental semantic and logical apparatus of medieval scholasticism, being unable to cross the threshold of his own upbringing and education into the paradigm of a new era that was intellectually dawning in the European milieu of the 16th century. He conceded (though sometimes more implicitly than explicitly) that Aristotle's rhetoric, logic, poetics, and semantics are useful and can be beneficial to students of theology, as well as to ordinary educated men. When disputing the use of Aristotle's thought legacy in the theological discourse of his time, however, Luther is quick to point out discrepancies between the way his scholastic opponents present their 'Aristotelian' ideas and between the teaching of Aristotle, as evidenced by his works, which Luther studied intently early in his career.

When it comes to assessing the value of Luther's approach to the modern ethical and social discourses, the German reformer becomes an ambiguous figure. While his approach to philosophy and ethics may have been groundbreaking at the time of late scholastics, his excessively mystical approach and unilateral leaning on divine revelation are not easily understood, let alone readily acceptable to modern thinkers. His theological anthropology seems to be too pessimistic regarding human capacities to do good and take full responsibility (including social responsibility) for one's actions. Furthermore, his disregard for using reason and philosophy to solve some fundamental issues in anthropology and theology will naturally be objected by philosophers, scientists, as well as adherents of other religions. Also, from the viewpoint of a political scientist, it is Aristotle's approach, distilled and remolded by the numerous authors of the 'Neo-Aristotelian' movement,¹² rather than Luther's, that carries more weight for dealing with issues of human behavior and socio-political responsibility (Nash 1897; Zucca 2020).

¹² This movement in philosophy and ethics started in the 20th century by the American rhetorician, Herbert Wichelns (1894 – 1973). Philosophers, such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, John Henry McDowell, or Alasdair MacIntyre have developed various strands of Aristotle's ideas in the recent decades, while rejecting his metaphysical, speculative concepts.

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