
Aristotle's Ethics: The Real Reason for Luther's Reformation?

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What was it that stirred Martin Luther to take up a reformer's mantle? Was it John Tetzel's fund-raising through the sale of indulgences? The posting of Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* against *the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences* in October, 1517, did, indeed, stir the public at large. But Luther's main complaint was located elsewhere. He offered his real concern in a response to the *Diatribes ... Concerning Free Will* by Desiderius Erasmus:

I give you [Erasmus] hearty praise and commendation on this further account—that you alone, in contrast with all others, have attacked the real thing, that is, the essential issue. You have not wearied me with those extraneous [*alienis*] issues about the Papacy, purgatory, indulgences and such like—trifles rather than issues—in respect of which almost all to date have sought my blood (though without success); you and you alone, have seen the hinge on which all turns, and aimed for the vital spot.

The concern of this article, then, is to go behind the popular perceptions—the “trifles”—of Luther's early activism in order to identify and examine this “hinge on which all turns.”

What was this vital spot? Luther was reacting to the assimilation of Aristotle's ethics within the various permutations of scholastic theology that prevailed in his day. Indeed, Luther's arguments against Aristotle's presence in Christian theology are to be found in most of his early works, a matter that calls for careful attention in light of recent scholarship that either overlooks or dismisses Luther's most explicit concerns.

In particular, historical theologian Richard A. Muller has been the most vigorous proponent in a movement among some Reformation-era scholars that affirms the works of seventeenth-century Protestant scholasticism—or Protestant Orthodoxy—as the first satisfactory culmination, if not the epitome, of the Reformation

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TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 224

as a whole. Muller assumes that the best modern Protestant theology has been shaped by Aristotelian methods and rigor that supported the emerging structure and coherence of Protestant systematic theology. He argues, for instance, that any proper understanding of the Reformation must be made within the framework of a synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotle's methods:

It is not only an error to attempt to characterize Protestant orthodoxy by means of a comparison with one or another of the Reformers... It is also an error to discuss [it] without being continually aware of the broad movement of ideas from the late Middle Ages... the Reformation ... is the briefer phenomenon, enclosed as it were by the five-hundred-year history of scholasticism and Christian Aristotelianism.

The implications of Muller's affirmations may be easily missed. In order to alert readers to the intended significance of the present article at least two points should be made. First, Muller seems

Trinity Journal 18 (1997).

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to shift the touchstone status for measuring orthodox theology from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas. That is, he makes the Thomistic assimilation of Aristotle—which set up the theological environment of the late middle ages—the staging point for all that follows in orthodox doctrine. It thus promotes a continuity between Aquinas and Reformed theology within certain critical limits —and this despite the fact that virtually all of the major figures of the early Reformation, and Luther most of all, looked back to Augustine as the most trustworthy interpreter of biblical theology after the apostolic era. Thus citations of Augustine were a constant refrain by Luther and John Calvin, among many others, as evidence of a purer theology than that which emerged from Aquinas and other medieval figures. Second, once a commitment to “Christian Aristotelianism” is

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 225

affirmed, the use of “one or another of the Reformers” as resources “to characterize Protestant orthodoxy” sets up a paradigm by which key figures, such as Luther, can be marginalized because of their resistance to doctrinal themes that emerge only through the influence of Aristotle in Christian thought.

An alternative paradigm, advocated here, is that Luther’s greatest concern in his early reforming work was to rid the church of central Aristotelian assumptions that were transmitted through Thomistic theology. To the degree that Luther failed—measured by the modern appreciation for these Thomistic solutions in some Protestant circles—a primary thrust of the Reformation was stillborn. The continued use of Aristotle’s works by Protestant universities during and after the Reformation promoted such a miscarriage. Despite claims to the contrary by modern proponents of an Aristotelian Christianity, Aristotle’s works offered much more than a benign academic methodology; instead, as we will see below, his crucial definitions in ethics and anthropology shaped the thinking of young theological students in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who read the Bible and theology through the optic of his definitions. Luther recognized that Aristotle’s influence entered Christian thought through the philosopher’s pervasive presence in the curricula of all European universities. In his scathing treatise of 1520, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Luther—who for his first year at Wittenberg (1508–9) lectured on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* four times a week—chided educators for creating an environment “where little is taught of the Holy Scriptures and Christian faith, and where only the blind, heathen teacher Aristotle rules far more than Christ.” His solution was straightforward:

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.

This study will note, especially, three of Luther’s works, along with Philip Melanchthon’s *Loci Communes Theologici*. The first is Luther’s *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, presented in the Fall of 1517, at least a month *before* he wrote his more famous *Ninety-Five Theses*. Second is his *Heidelberg Disputation*, which took place April 26, 1518. The third is his *Bondage of the Will*—which we cited above—written in 1525 as a response to Erasmus. Melanchthon’s *Loci* was published in 1521 as Luther was facing the Diet of Worms. A comparative review of Augustine’s responses to Pelagianism will also be offered.

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 226

Medieval scholasticism, as noted already, was characterized by the blending of Aristotelianism and Christian theology. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* was adapted by Thomas Aquinas to biblical content in a synthesis that shaped the medieval moral tradition. Aquinas, with his view that Adam’s

fall had not undermined human reason, welcomed the insights of Aristotle as a complementary source in buttressing revelation wherever the Bible is relatively silent. This allowed for increasing speculation in subsequent generations as the church doctors produced their various systematic theologies. By Luther's day, however, the nap of this arrangement was wearing thin. As Heiko Oberman points out, there existed in the fourteenth century a "suspicion of speculation" and a "programmatic call for an affective theology in its place." Luther, reflecting this disposition, was confident that the time for change had come when, in 1517, he spoke of the ascendancy of Augustine's theology and the decline of Aristotelianism.

Luther's challenge was more profound than many of his peers realized at first. The two systems were at complete odds with each other. In Augustine's model of the human will, the affective component is primary, so that the love of God is the motivating feature of salvation—God draws the elect to himself apart from any initiative on their part towards God. This was a thoroughly unilateral model of salvation. In the Aristotle/Aquinas model, by contrast, the will is self-moved. That is, the will works most effectively apart from any influence of the affections. In adopting this model, Aquinas assumed that the self-moved will is a necessary feature of salvation which, in turn, led him to adopt a cooperative doctrine of salvation—a doctrine that Luther rejected. This was the "hinge" of Luther's reformation activism.

In this study we will begin by establishing some of the distinctions between Aristotle's ethical assumptions and those offered by Augustine in his controversy with the Pelagians. The Pelagian debate is the context for all that Luther wrote about God's grace in salvation. A second section examines Luther's belief that Augustine's theology was subverted by the later assimilation of Aristotle's views within medieval theologies. This is shown to be the context for Luther's claim that the will is in bondage because of its faulty affections, as Augustine held, rather than "free" in the manner that Aristotle's ethics assumed.

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 227

I. God's Grace and Human Will

A. Aristotle, Aquinas, and Cooperative Theology

An underlying assumption of the cooperative model was set out in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: morality is defined by a freedom either to choose or to refuse the good apart from any external constraint or compulsion. In his definition Aristotle specifically rejected any reference to the passions ("By passions I mean appetite, anger, fear, confidence, envy, joy, friendly feeling, hatred, longings," etc.) because they are "neither praised nor blamed"—that is, they fall outside the categories of merit. Aquinas adopted this and other of Aristotle's moral assumptions but struggled to formulate them in terms suited to the Augustinianism which he also sought to honor. Aquinas and most medieval theologians assumed that a gap exists between the *iustitia Christi* (a provision of grace or love) and the *iustitia Dei* (an absolute righteousness, examined at judgment day) to which Christians move in their lifetime through the endeavors of "faith formed by love." Love, in this arrangement, is an *obligation* which the seeker continually fulfills by his or her choices. Love is thus a work of the will. This effort, by Aristotelian values, is meritorious. As reconfigured by Aquinas, it results from God's grace, which God, in turn, crowns with merit. Luther, however, insisted that at conversion the believer, by faith, has *both iustitia Christi and Dei* as his or her possession.

The Thomistic model thus made love a function of the will, a human effort, by which man is to achieve greater spiritual benefits. In the *Summa Theologi**, addressing the new law (*lex nova*), Aquinas portrayed faith working through love (*fide per dilectionem operante*), as a property of grace. The grace is delivered through the efficacy of the sacraments and by an instinct of inward grace

Trinity Journal 18 (1997).

(*interiorem gratiam*). The benefit of the new law, as against the old, is its relative freedom (*lex libertatis*) from specific directives. This is viewed within the Aristotelian framework: freedom provides opportunity for meritorious choice, either to do well or badly. Aquinas anchored his point by citing Aristotle directly: “The free man is one who is his own cause.” Thus Aquinas’s system looked for room—a region of limited autonomy within God’s larger will—in which free choices, enabled by grace, display a person’s ability to “act rightly.” The necessary grace is infused by the Spirit: “Since therefore the grace of the Holy Spirit is a kind of interior disposition infused into us which

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 228

inclines us to act rightly, it makes us do freely whatever is in accordance with grace, and avoid whatever is contrary to it.”

The notion of *habitus*, as drawn from Aristotle’s anthropology, was crucial to Aquinas and, though widely noticed in scholarly literature, should be reviewed in passing. *Habitus* is the principal nexus of nature and grace in Aquinas’s spirituality, the gift of grace which supernaturally enhances nature to be able to bear the responsibilities of faith (*aliquid inditum homini quasi natur* superadditum per grati* donum*). Thus Aquinas’s view of grace combined human responsibility with divine enablement—the cooperative model of faith. Love, in this arrangement, is seen to be part of the will in order to be crowned with merit, rather than an affection which, as a response, is non-meritorious. It is this conception of love as part of the enabled will, that supported Aquinas’s crucial paradigm, of faith formed by love (*fides caritate formata*) in progressive justification.

Aquinas’s cooperative model was semi-Pelagian. He believed, with Pelagius, that human culpability requires that moral decisions be made freely. But, like Augustine, and against Pelagius, he held that original sin destroys any human ability to choose well. Restoration comes only by God’s grace. This led to the conundrum that morality requires free will, but original sin precludes it. In Aquinas’s solution God provides an assisting grace that enables, but does not compel, the will to choose the good. Culpability is then based on the failure to apply God’s gracious enablement. How, then, did this model compare to the Augustinian model?

B. Augustine on the Will

Augustine’s doctrine of grace presumed the Spirit’s work of illumination that elicits an obedient love for God. Thus, like Pelagius, he affirmed a link between grace and obedience. In the *Treatise on Grace and Free Will*, an anti-Pelagian work, he affirmed “the free choice of the human will” and the merits of obedience: “Indeed, a work is then to be pronounced a good one when a person does it willingly; then too, may the reward of a good work be hoped for from [God].” What, then, were the specific elements of Augustine’s view of the will in his conflict with Pelagius? Three issues invite special attention.

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 229

1. The Heart is the Core of the Soul

Augustine developed his argument in stages, all of which assumed a “heart” conversion. Thus, while Augustine accepted the reality of a free will, he portrayed it as useless, “perverse and opposed to faith,” until the heart, which includes the will, is replaced. In the language of Ezekiel, the stone-like heart that “has no feeling,” must be replaced with another heart that “possesses feeling.” God himself is the only proper object of these feelings. Thus, Augustine warned that free will with a hard heart only leads to accountability; but God transforms some hearts: “For what does it profit us if we

will what we are unable to do, or else do not will what we are able to do?” The heart for Augustine, sometimes called love or will, is the inclusive faculty of the soul in relationship to God.

2. Every Choice is Motivated by an Affection

A question must be raised about the relationship of the will and love in light of Augustine’s interchangeable use of the words. Is love a work of the autonomous—self-moved—will? Or does the will gain its priorities through the affections? Augustine held the latter position, a crucial point that Aquinas either missed or ignored. In fact, Augustine seems to support the Thomistic model if he is read carelessly. The bishop spoke freely of God enabling the will in his *Treatise*, as if accepting the key contention of Aristotle that was also central to the view of his Pelagian opponents, that “God would not command what he knew could not be done by man.” This captures Augustine’s strategy of confrontation. He first made a case for the apparent ability of the will to be self-moved in choosing “the good” before turning to attack what he perceived as the system’s flawed logic. Thus, he noted [Phil 2:13](#) (“It is God who works in you, even to will!”): “It is certain that it is we that act when we act; but it is He who makes us act, by applying efficacious powers to our will,” and, “Make or enable me, O Lord [to obey].” Furthermore, God is “He who prepares the will, and perfects by His cooperation what He initiates by his operation.”

Having set up the key premise of the Pelagian position, Augustine then offered what he believed to be the solution to the entire matter, namely, the primacy of the affections as they guide the act of choosing: “When the martyrs did the great commandments which they obeyed, they acted by a great will,—that is, with great

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 230

love.” He supported the crucial role of love with a litany of verses on its power, including the call to follow Christ’s example: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Similarly, it was a “small and imperfect love” which God’s cooperation promised to assist in supporting “what He initiates by His operation.” Augustine’s point, unless he had been suddenly converted to the Pelagian position, is that love—seen as will and affections—is the motive center of the soul. Thus, it is through the illumination of the soul by God’s love that the soul moves, by response, out of its imprisonment of self-love. It is this absolute linkage of affections to choices that characterized the will for Augustine, as summarized in his paraphrase of [1 John 4:19](#): “... we should not love God unless He first loved us.”

In *The Spirit and the Letter*, also written against the Pelagians, Augustine presented the Spirit as the source of the love that shapes the believer’s response:

For it would not be within us, to whatever extent soever it is in us, if it were not diffused in our hearts by the Holy Ghost who is given to us. Now “the love of God” is said to be shed abroad in our hearts, not because He loves us, but because He makes us lovers of Himself.

Thus, the presence of the Spirit in believers represents the sanctifying force in faith.

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 231

3. Love and Obedience Operate Unidirectionally

In Augustine’s acceptance of a linkage between the will and obedience, he denied the correlative assumption that a decision to love God can be achieved by the self-moved will. The assumption that the will is able to move itself when aided by infused will-power, is, in fact, the very foundation on which the cooperative model was based. Augustine denied its key premise and, in doing so, exposed the single direction of travel in the love-obedience nexus in three steps: 1) love generates

obedience; 2) but certain types of obedience may be achieved without love; 3) therefore obedience does not assure the presence of love. He thus challenged the critical Pelagian assumption, that “Love comes to us of our own selves.” Augustine used a literal Bible reading to make his case against the Pelagians. Since the Spirit offers “the things that are freely given to us of God” ([1 Cor 2:12](#)), and “God is love” ([1 John 4:16](#)), then the knowledge of God as love comes only by the Spirit. Augustine challenged the Pelagians for their credulity in identifying grace with law and not with God’s love given by the Spirit:

And thus the Pelagians affirm that they actually have God Himself, not from God, but from their own selves! and although they allow that we have knowledge of the law from God, they will yet have it that love is from our very selves. Nor do they listen to the apostle when he says, “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.” Now what can be more absurd, nay, what more insane?

Augustine’s response to the question of how God enables the will, then, is focused on the motive power of love, a love which God gives believers by his indwelling Spirit.

II. The Affective Theology of Luther and the Early Melancthon

Luther recognized the key issues in Augustine’s critique of the Pelagians, including an awareness that their dispute centered on definitions of sin, will, and grace. To this end, his targets in the *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* are revealing. Luther charged that Aristotle’s categories and definitions were a primary source of heterodoxy. In sending the *Disputation* to Jodokus Trutfetter, Luther commented:

Should Aristotle not have been a man of flesh and blood, I would not hesitate to assert that he was the Devil himself. My wish would be for Usingen [Bartholomaeus Arnoldi] and Trutfetter to give up their teaching, indeed stop publishing altogether. I have a full

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 232

arsenal of arguments against their writings, which I now recognize as a waste of time.

A. Luther’s Early Disputations

What, then, were these arguments? In both the *Disputation* and the *Heidelberg Disputation*, Luther relied on Augustine’s fundamental argument against Pelagius: the will is enslaved by self-love that defies God. The enslavement is only overcome in the elect by the regenerating disclosure of God’s love and goodness. Aristotle, in Luther’s debates, was transposed into the role of heresiarch in place of Augustine’s Pelagius. Luther believed he could demonstrate an identity in definitions of the will between Pelagius, a confirmed heretic, and Aristotle. By this means any part of the scholastic tradition that assimilated that definition was subject to challenge. Three assumptions may be identified in Luther’s approach.

1. Sin as Enslavement through Concupiscence

The *Disputation* began with Luther’s emphasis on the polarity between Pelagius and Augustine. He denied that Augustine’s opposition to the “Pelagians and all heretics” is “exaggerated.” The fourth and fifth theses expressed the heart of Luther’s case:

4. It is therefore true that man, being a bad tree, can only will and do evil. 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.

The reason for this captivity is a paradoxical conflict taken from Augustine: “nothing is so much in the power of the will as the will itself.” This implied that the more intense purposes of the will always dominate lesser purposes. What, then, guides the will? Luther argued that sin is misapplied devotion: “Man is by nature unable to want God to be God. Indeed he himself wants to be God,

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 233

and does not want God to be God.” The idea that nature, of its own accord, will love God above all else is a fantasy. Thus, Luther used Augustine’s definition of sin: “No act is done according to nature that is not an act of concupiscence against God,” and, “Every act of concupiscence against God is evil and a fornication of the spirit.” This view of self-deceiving sin—pride—was further developed in the *Heidelberg Disputation*. Luther argued that self-love is ultimately expressed by anthropocentric, rather than Christocentric, theology.

2. The Inside-Out Movement of the Heart-Behavior Continuum

By adopting an intentional and relational definition of sin, rather than the more extrinsic definition of law-breaking, Luther, like Augustine, radicalized sin. Even the best behavior as measured by extrinsic values was thus rejected: “Every deed of the law without the grace of God appears good outwardly, but inwardly it is sin.” This set up Luther’s complete rejection of the law, “even the Decalogue itself.” Why does he press the point to this extent? Because, although the fallen will hates the imposition of the law, it may still find the law of use, so that if “the will desires the imposition of the law it does so out of love of self.” In any case, the will is hostile to the law’s goodness because “everyone’s natural will is iniquitous and bad.”

These assumptions set up Luther’s most important opposition between Aristotelian-scholasticism and his own beliefs. The deceptiveness of sin means that all behavior, no matter how attractive outwardly, only witnesses to sin’s pollution *unless* the will is led to that behavior by the Spirit’s grace. With that grace of received love, the soul is able to love: “The grace of God is given for the purpose of directing the will, lest it err even in loving God,” and “without it no act of love is performed.”

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, in contrast to this arrangement, held that goodness is *both* intrinsic and extrinsic; rooted in *habitus* and displayed in *actus*. Merit, however, is found in *actus*, the outward activity of the will. While this intrinsic-extrinsic arrangement suggested a wholism in which the dual aspects of volition are fully meshed, the *actus*, in fact, has a primacy based on its function in forming the *habitus*. That is, virtue is formed by doing virtuous actions, an ethical transformation generated from the outside-in:

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 234

Again, of all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity [as in physical functions] ... but the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.

Luther expressed his opposition by an explicit juxtaposition: “We do not become righteous by doing righteous deeds but, having been made righteous, we do righteous deeds,” and “Virtually the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace.”

Thus the radical polarization expressed in Luther's inaugural disputations—his pitting Augustine's affectionate theology against Aristotle's intellectual-volitional model—was critical to the emergence of the Protestant Reformation.

B. Melancthon's *Loci Communes Theologici* (1521)

Melancthon's earliest theological commentary expanded many of the issues in Luther's theses. Melancthon, it should be noted, later shifted his views. It is assumed here that his early views were, in fact, a reflection of Luther's position that the younger man accepted in full and then began to leave behind in his irenic pursuit of an accommodation with Rome. Nevertheless, leaving that matter

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 235

aside, the underlying assumption of the 1521 *Loci* is that God's attractiveness is disclosed by the Spirit to the elect. As Luther had before him, Melancthon attacked Aristotle's influence on scholastic theology. In particular, he insisted that the affections have primacy over the will in describing faith; and he defined grace as God's immediate favor, as opposed to those who held it to be an intermediary and created quality.

1. The Primacy of the Affections

Melancthon rejected the assumption that morality is defined by the human exercise of freely choosing either good or evil: "The term 'free will' [*arbitrium*] was used, a term most incongruous with Scripture and the sense and judgment of the Spirit, and a term that often offended holy men." The scholastic elevation of the will, in Melancthon's view, meant that the church had "embraced Aristotle instead of Christ." Instead, Melancthon held, the soul consists of cognition and inclination. The former operates through reason and the latter through "appetition" or will. Here, however, Melancthon redefined Aristotle's "appetitive" faculty.

We divide man into only two parts. For there is in him a cognitive faculty, and there is also a faculty by which he either follows or flees the things he has come to know. The cognitive faculty is that by which we discern through the senses, understand, think, compare, and deduce. The faculty from which affections (*affectus*) arise is that by which we either turn away from or pursue the things known, and this faculty is sometimes called "will" (*voluntas*), sometimes "affection," and sometimes "appetite." ... in which are love, hate, hope, fear, sorrow, anger, and the feeling which arise from these.

Experience shows, Melancthon argued, that the will can be informed by the intellect but can be easily overcome by the affections, just as a despot (using the analogy of ancient Roman politics) overrules the reasoned deliberations of the senate. This displays the greater power of the affections, not as a property external to the will, but as the defining quality of the will: "the will

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 236

[as in the political analogy] casts knowledge out and is borne along by its own affection." Thus, in a critical distinction, he revised the nomenclature of the twin faculties to be "the 'cognitive faculty' and the 'faculty subject to the affections.'"

Given this redefinition, Melancthon was prepared to address the main concern of the scholastics, "whether the will (*voluntas*) is free and to what extent it is free." He concluded from biblical evidence: "Since all things that happen, happen necessarily according to divine predestination, our will has no liberty." The determinism of predestination is the point where, Melancthon insisted, reason in the hands of Aristotelian theologians always violates Scripture because of their belief that good conduct arising from a self-moved will is the basis of morality

(Aristotle's *eupraxia*). Melanchthon addressed this tension by pointing to the power of the affections as God's instrument for change. This allows a "certain freedom in outward works" but only as they operate within the limited range of the controlling affections of the heart. The question of morality, then, is centered in the affections and not the behaviors. The "outward works" merely disclose the nature of the affections.

The would-be philosophers who have attributed freedom to the will (*voluntas*) have fixed their eyes upon this contingency of external works. But Scripture tells nothing of that kind of freedom, since God looks not at external works but at the inner disposition of the heart... By contrast [to external works], internal affections are not in our power, for by experience and habit we find that the will (*voluntas*) cannot in itself control love, hate, or similar affection, but affection is overcome by affection.

This key principle, that "affection is overcome by affection," captured Augustine's solution to the conundrum of God's initiative and human free will. Augustine had argued: "[Let the soul seek God's mercy] that [God] may give it what he commands, and may, by inspiring into it the sweetness of his grace through his Holy Spirit, cause the soul to delight more in what he teaches it, than it delights in what opposes his instruction." Thus, for Melanchthon, if sin is "a depraved affection," so that "the dominant affection of man's nature is love of self," then the solution to sin must come through an even greater affection that can eclipse the affections of sin. God alone elicits such an affection once he is revealed to the heart by the Spirit: "For unless the Spirit teaches you, you cannot

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 237

know what it is to love God, that is, unless you actually experience it inflamed by the Spirit himself."

2. Grace as Real Union Rather than a Quality

Melanchthon also challenged the medieval belief that grace can be construed as a quality. This was critical to rejecting the cooperative model of salvation. Melanchthon offered a dichotomy of views on the way a spiritual gift is related to God as giver: a gift may be seen either as something given as the ongoing benefit of God's continued benevolence by his Spirit, or as a quality imparted by God, but with an independence from God once he imparts it. In the latter option, the gift of a righteous disposition is an effect imparted by God; but is also an independent quality within the subject once it has been given. This option, developed by Aquinas, established a framework for the cooperative model of salvation. A physical analogy for this is the motion imparted to a stone, which, once free of the hand that throws it, is a continuing effect of the thrower; but it is independent in light of its freedom from the hand. Melanchthon rejected this as "Aristotelian figments."

Melanchthon held that the Bible affirms saving grace to be God's love or favor. To designate grace as "a quality in the souls of the saints" is a shameful misuse, Melanchthon charged: "The worst of all offenders are the Thomists who have placed the quality of 'grace' in the nature of the soul, and faith, hope, and love in the powers of the soul." Melanchthon, in rejecting the conceptualities of Aristotelian motion, offered the solution of the affectionate tradition: "But the gift of God is the Holy Spirit himself, whom God has poured out into their hearts. [John 20:22](#): 'He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit"' This assumption, when defining grace as God's benevolence, affirmed a dependency of the recipient of the gift on the presence of the giver rather than on the gift by itself.

C. Luther's Dispute with Erasmus

Erasmus, the great humanist of Luther's era, was attracted to many of Luther's practical reforms, but he generally avoided matters of dogmatic theology and retained his Catholic affiliations.

Trinity Journal 18 (1997).

Page . Exported from [Logos Bible Software](#), 12:18 PM May 31, 2021.

Nevertheless, after remaining silent about his own views for most of a decade, Erasmus finally reacted to an aspect of Luther's message in his *Diatribes ... Concerning Free Will* in 1524. It was Luther's "riddles" and "paradoxes" that troubled Erasmus, as he reported in a letter to Ulrich Zwingli in 1523. Among these riddles he included Luther's view that free will is an "empty word" [*nomen inane*].

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 238

The denial of a free will was, of course, a riddle that Melancthon, following Luther, sought to unravel in his *Loci*. In his introduction to the *Bondage of the Will* Luther explained that he was slow in responding to Erasmus's work because it had added nothing to the debate, so that "it seemed a complete waste of time to reply to your arguments." Luther went on:

I have already myself refuted them over and over again, and Philip Melancthon, in his unsurpassed volume on the doctrines of theology [*Loci Communes*] has trampled them in the dust. That book of his, to my mind, deserves not merely to live as long as books are read, but to take its place in the Church's canon; whereas your book, by comparison, struck me as so worthless and poor that my heart went out to you for having defiled your lovely, brilliant flow of language with such vile stuff.

While Luther left readers with little doubt about his feelings, he certainly recognized that a work by so prominent a figure as Erasmus required a careful response. In the *Bondage of the Will* Luther addressed the *Diatribes* by citing and evaluating key assertions and arguments. Two major features emerge among the many points in debate, both of which were rejections of Erasmian arguments, namely, Luther's certainty of God's uncontingent predestination and his belief in the spontaneity of necessary actions for all humans.

1. Foreknowledge and Contingency

Luther attacked the Erasmian position for its lack of precision on the key definition: "In this book of mine," he wrote, "I shall harry you and all the Sophists [i.e. scholastic theologians] till you tell me exactly what 'free will' can and does do." Any definition, Luther insisted, needed to affirm the absence of any contingency in God's works.

It is, then, fundamentally necessary and wholesome for Christians to know that God foreknows nothing contingently, but that He foresees, purposes, and does all things according to His own immutable, eternal and infallible will. This bombshell knocks "free-will" flat, and utterly shatters it.

Having made that point, however, Luther also acknowledged that the standard theological word for God's uncontingent purposes—"necessity"—is inadequate, being "harsh" and "foreign" because "it suggests some sort of compulsion, and something that is against

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 239

one's will." The Erasmian definition of free will was, indeed, based on an Aristotelian notion of moral freedom. Free will is, Erasmus insisted, "a power of the human will by which a man may apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from the same." Such a view, Luther responded, "is plainly to ascribe divinity to the 'free will'!" That is, the will is able to move itself "by its own power," a position affirmed only by pure Pelagians. Even the scholastic theologians, Luther reminded Erasmus, required an assisting work of the Spirit in their model of free will.

2. The Spontaneity of Human Choices

What, then, did Luther offer in countering the Erasmian view? The key premise in Luther's thought is that the affections move the heart in a response to God's initiative of loving self-disclosure: "The will, whether it be God's or man's, does what it does, good or bad, under no compulsion, but just as it wants or pleases, as if totally free." Erasmus fails to recognize this and other matters, Luther argued, because "Your thoughts of God are too human." The solution is to be found, he believed, in the spontaneity of necessary acts, a spontaneity produced by God's attractiveness as he reveals himself to the soul by the work of the Spirit. Thus, whether in good or evil, there is a fundamental immutability at work in human souls apart from any compulsion. "That is to say," Luther explained, "a man without the Spirit of God does not do evil against his will, under pressure, as though he were taken by the scruff of the neck and dragged into it." And,

On the other hand: when God works in us, the will is changed under the sweet influence of the Spirit of God. Once more it desires and acts, not of compulsion, but of its own desire and spontaneous inclination. Its bent still cannot be altered by any opposition; it cannot be mastered or prevailed upon even by the gates of hell; but it goes on willing, desiring and loving good, just as once it willed, desired and loved evil.

The work of conversion, then, is a work of Christ who "overcomes Satan," thus generating a new freedom:

So man's will is like a beast standing between two riders. If God rides, it wills and goes where God will... If Satan rides, it wills and goes where Satan will. Nor may it choose to which rider it will

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 240

run, or which it will seek; but the riders themselves fight to decide who shall have and hold it.

III. Conclusion

The collision of two competing views of the human will generated Luther's earliest protests in what became the Protestant Reformation. His opposition to the widespread Aristotelian-scholastic theology of his era was not simply a secondary matter, but a frontal assault on prevailing medieval assumptions about the nature of human volition and the ground of morality—matters that define salvation. He rejected Aristotle's definitions as assimilated by Aquinas and affirmed, instead, the affective tradition of Augustine. Thus Muller and others who would promote a Christian Aristotelianism must speak more effectively to Luther's concerns—Luther's discussion of the nature of the human will shows just how heavily-loaded the question of Aristotle's presence in Christian theology can be.

The following points may be offered in summary.

A. Luther Affirmed the Augustinian Reading of the Bible on the Nature of the Human Will

We have seen that Luther's earliest reforming efforts were triggered by his opposition to the flawed anthropology and morality of his day; compared to such matters the issue of indulgences was just a "trifle." The Pelagian view of grace and salvation, which Augustine and the late-patriarchal church rejected were, nevertheless, revived in the Aristotelian-scholastic synthesis of Aquinas and those who followed after him. Luther, in labeling Aristotle's *Ethics* as the "worst enemy of grace" put his finger on the fundamental polarity of any theology of grace: does a "righteous man" become righteous by doing righteous deeds? Or do righteous deeds emerge because he has been made

righteous by the Spirit's work in transforming him? The nature of sin, using Augustine's definition of concupiscence as self-love, precluded any anthropocentric model of salvation, including the cooperative approach offered in the Thomistic synthesis.

B. The Augustinian/Lutheran Model Assumed an Affective Dimension in the Will

The role of the affections as a necessary feature of the will—serving as the capacity which prioritizes choices—was rejected by Aristotle as applied to ethics because it meant that the ground of morality may be a *response* and not a self-initiated action. Aquinas

TrinJ 18:2 (Fall 1997) p. 241

accepted this premise; it became a foundation for most of late-medieval theology. Luther and the early Melancthon, instead, adopted Augustine's assumption that the will is shaped by its highest desires and that salvation of those who are "dead in their trespasses and sin" depends on God's initiative. With faith viewed as a response, the human desires are generated and sustained by the immediate grace of the Spirit who discloses the love of God to the elect.

C. The Augustinian/Lutheran Model Affirmed a Distinctively Unilateral Work of Salvation

Luther certainly understood the profound nature of his decision to affirm the Augustinian affective tradition. It meant the notion of a cooperative (albeit assisted or enabled) doctrine of grace misconstrued the real issues of sin and salvation. Only God's overt initiative can accomplish the work of salvation. The human heart is not disabled and in need of assistance; it is dead in its absolute hostility to God. We conclude, then, by citing the point made by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston in their introduction to the *Bondage of the Will*:

Historically, it is a simple matter of fact that Martin Luther and John Calvin, and, for that matter, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and all the leading Protestant theologians of the first epoch of the Reformation, stood on precisely the same ground here. On other points they had their differences; but in asserting the helplessness of man in sin, and the sovereignty of God in grace, they were entirely at one.

“Scholasticism, Reformation, Orthodoxy, and the Persistence of Christian Aristotelianism”: A Brief Rejoinder

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I welcome Richard A. Muller’s robust response to my “Aristotle’s *Ethics*: The *Real* Reason for Luther’s Reformation?” in that it highlights some of the issues which first led me to write the essay. Before responding to his discussion, though, I wish to express real appreciation for Muller’s meticulous and insightful analyses of post-Reformation Protestant Orthodoxy as offered in his many publications. All students of this period are obliged to draw on his work. That expertise is very obvious in the present essay. Given that, I am surprised and disappointed to find that he misses my central argument. My work had everything to do with the function of affectionate theology in Luther’s reforming activism and very little to do with most of the issues he raises. Indeed, I am confident that if readers were to begin with Muller’s essay before reading my piece, they would be startled to discover my actual concerns.

Lest the misunderstanding remain I will restate and sharpen the principal issue I addressed, namely Luther’s rejection of crucial assumptions about anthropology and ethics in the theology of his day. He adopted, instead, the affective theology that Augustine affirmed in the midst of his debate with Pelagius.

I. The Self-Moved Will Versus The Affections

Luther rejected a theology based on an assumption that the human will is the faculty of the soul that chooses either good or evil, thus making the will the moral center of the soul. In this theology grace, construed as both created (a quality or *habitus* sent forth by God) and uncreated (a capacity of God’s character), is the means by which God works his salvation. Those who are saved are enabled by God’s infusion of *habitus* to choose rightly. Luther viewed these assumptions as unbiblical distortions, attributable to Aristotle’s illicit influence in scholastic theology — with Thomas Aquinas seen as a

TrinJ 19:1 (Spring 1998) 98

chief purveyor of the error. Luther looked to Augustine to adjudicate his own reading of the Bible on the question. In the essay I explained that it is important to understand “Luther’s claim that the will is in bondage because of its faulty affections, as Augustine held, rather than ‘free’ in the manner that Aristotle’s ethics assumed.” Aristotle held that the will is “self-moved,” while “in Augustine’s model of the human will the affective component is primary, so that the love of God is the motivating feature of salvation.” The polarity I posed, then, was of Luther’s *model of the will* set against Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s. Aquinas clearly adopted Aristotle’s assumption about the free will, a point illustrated by his approving citation of Aristotle: “The free man is one who is his own cause.” His task, then, was to find a way to mesh such a view with Augustine’s theology, a matter which I introduce in my essay. Luther rejected any such synthesis.

Trinity Journal 18 (1997).

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A. Muller's Complaint

A fair reading of the essay will show that its scope was limited to the rather narrow but crucial concern just outlined. The article did *not* attempt to pit "all things Aristotelian and Thomistic" against "all things Augustinian and Lutheran" in the reductionistic fashion that Muller attributes to me. Furthermore, his pedantic argument against any historical study done in defense of various "isms" of major historical figures is misplaced here. In a related issue, Muller's argument that Luther approved of Aristotle's *Logic*, *Rhetoric*, and *Poetics* despite condemning the *Ethics* - or that on occasion Luther could speak of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in neutral terms - is not "new news" nor significant since in such cases the question of human choice, morality, and salvation were not addressed or threatened.

Muller's revisionism has, indeed, exposed, clarified, and promoted key aspects of the neo-scholastic synthesis of Protestant Orthodoxy, but in that effort Muller seems not to have noticed or grasped Luther's complaints. This may be because Muller's gaze is so captured by identifying and differentiating the wide (and indisputable) variety of views within the Christian Aristotelian camp that he fails to come to grips with a fundamentally different paradigm. This oversight effectively dissolves a crucial concern about the nature of the will that was shared by Luther and other early reformers. To the degree that such a concern is neglected, Luther and other proponents of that position slip toward the margins of studies that focus primarily on the primacy of Christian Aristotelianism in Protestant theology. In such a discussion the

TrinJ 19:1 (Spring 1998) 99

question is not so much a matter of "who held what position," but one of fair and full representation of the issues involved among the various parties - i.e., a broadened context.

B. A Question of Frames

An analogy might be useful in assessing my critique of Muller's works, and his counter critique of my essay. As a photographer or painter seeks to capture a certain object, a major task is to "frame" it with a suitable boundary. A large frame creates one impression, a smaller frame creates another. In my essay I insisted that any discussion of the development of soteriology be framed broadly enough to feature Augustine's role, especially after he clarified his view in his debate with Pelagius. In that debate he insisted that every human choice is motivated by an affection, and that the affections are a *response* to God's unilateral initiative of love which "makes us lovers of Himself."

A striking example of the importance of the Augustine-Pelagian debate may be seen in John Calvin's debate with the Roman Catholic Pighius. The latter figure challenged Calvin's soteriology primarily on the basis of Augustine's early views. Calvin, in response, pointed to the affective theology of the later Augustine, now sharpened by the Pelagian debate. It was no accident that in Calvin's debate with Pighius, as was the case in Luther's debate with Erasmus, the "bondage of the will" is explained by a captivity of the affections - i.e., the heart's desires.

Muller points to Calvin's fascinating debate in his essay, but he overlooks the primarily affective argument used by Calvin against Pighius. Instead Muller points to Calvin's brief uses of Aristotle to oppose an Aristotelian opponent, an exercise of fighting fire with fire. But listen to Calvin *contra* Pighius (at length) for the key underlying component of his argument, namely that the affections - identified as "desires" here - ultimately account for human conduct:

But since Pighius is always craftily confusing coercion with necessity, when it is of the greatest importance for the issue under discussion that the distinction between them be maintained and carefully remembered, it is appropriate to note how the following four

[claims] differ from one another: namely that the will is free, bound, self-determined, or coerced. People generally understand a free will to be one which has it in its power to choose good or evil, and Pighius also defined it in this way. There can be no such thing as a coerced will, since the two ideas are contradictory. But our responsibility as teachers requires that we say what it means, so

TrinJ 19:1 (Spring 1998) 100

that it may be understood what coercion is. Therefore we describe [as coerced] the will which does not incline this way or that of its own accord or by an internal movement of decision, but is forcibly driven by an external impulse. We say that it is self-determined when of itself it directs itself in the direction in which it is led, when it is not taken by force or dragged unwillingly. A bound will, finally, is one which because of its corruptness is held *captive under the authority of evil desires*, so that it can choose nothing but evil, even if it does so of its own accord and gladly, without being driven by any external impulse.

Earlier in the work Calvin had affirmed Luther's "trumpet call," which Calvin summarized: "For since the worth of good works depends not on the act itself but on perfect love for God, a work will not be righteous and pure unless it proceeds from a perfect love for God."

It seems, then, that Muller's disinterest or inability to follow my argument may be rooted in a predisposition to ignore the place of the affections in defining human conduct.

II. A Final Question

Having engaged Muller's attention I would like to take this opportunity to pose a question that would help clarify a related controversy among Reformed historians, one which carries with it the "isms" issue: how would he assess the ongoing "Calvin versus Calvinism" debate in light of his categories of continuity and discontinuity?

Some have argued over the implications of the restored devotion to Aristotle represented in the English puritan, William Perkins, among others. Basil Hall, for instance, charged that Calvin would have rejected subsequent "Calvinism." The "successful repristination of Aristotle among Protestants," he argues, "led to the Reformed scholasticism that distorted the Calvinist synthesis." R. T. Kendall argues that Perkins was the crucial figure in transmitting these views in England. Kendall's discussion includes other questions about Calvin's continuity with "Calvinism," especially about the extent of the atonement and assurance of salvation. The latter issues drew critical responses from Paul Helm and Andrew Woolsey, among others. These scholars, however, fail to address the claims made

TrinJ 19:1 (Spring 1998) 101

about renewed Aristotelian thought in Calvinism, the very issue that Hall and Kendall were addressing. Their intention, instead, is to demonstrate an essential continuity between Calvin and English Reformed orthodoxy in covenantal matters. How, then, are the intertwined issues of that enduring debate to be assessed? Is it by diminishing Calvin's importance for his lack of devotion to Aristotelian assumptions?

I conclude this necessarily brief rejoinder with a renewed note of appreciation - despite my stated concern about the promotional quality of his research in Christian Aristotelianism - for Muller's broad and prolific scholarship. I hope this modest exchange may be useful to him in return.