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Giovanni Tortoriello

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Introduction

The German scholar Robert Stupperich (1904-2003) entitled his famous and influential biography on Philipp Melanchthon "The Enigma of the Reformation."¹ Indeed, there is no other figure in the Reformation history, maybe not even Luther himself, who turned out to be so elusive and alien to every form of wide categorization.

"Humanist" and "Reformer", "Lutheran" or "Erasmian", "Aristotelian" but eclectic: for years scholars have been trying to elucidate the exact relationship among these wide categorizations in order to enclose Melanchthon's thought within them. The real secret of this formulas lies in the conjunction: copulative, disjunctive or adversative, the conjunction should reveal the real nature of Melanchthon's relationship with the different movements he was part of.

In the last years Melanchthon has been the topic of an increasing amount of research. Scholars like Heinz Scheible, Irene Dingel, Timothy Wengert, and Günter Franck have helped to clarify different aspects of Melanchthon's thought. Fundamental themes, like the relationship between law and gospel or the role of philosophy in Christian doctrine, have received a much better and more careful examination. However, the path to free our understanding of Melanchthon and his contribution to the history of the Reformation from broad, and somehow unhistorical, categorization is still far away. Not surprisingly, the results of these contemporary studies is, in a certain measure, contradictory: from one hand, Wengert and Scheible have emphasized Melanchthon's independence from Erasmus' theology and its continuity with Luther's,² from the other, Gunter

¹ Stupperich (2006).

² For Melanchthon's antierasmian position, see: Wengert (1998). Scheible understands Melanchthon's thought, albeit minimal differences, in continuity with Luther. See: Scheible (1984); Scheible (1990).

Franck does not perceive Melanchthon's thought in antithesis to Erasmus and highlights a platonic influence on Melanchthon.³

Despite the improvement in our understanding of Melanchthon's thought, many contradictory aspects still need to be clarified. This paper aims to show that, although Melanchthon incorporated platonic concept in his philosophical system, he consciously did it in contraposition with Erasmus. This is well represented by Melanchthon's quotation of Origen of Alexandria, who is often quoted by the *Praeceptor Germaniae* in order to criticize his most famous 16th century reader, namely Erasmus himself. According to Melanchthon, Origen's theology corrupted true Christian doctrine because of the improper mingling by the Alexandrian father of Platonic philosophy and Christian revelation. However, as an eclectic, in his philosophical works Melanchthon made full use of Platonic philosophy. It is necessary to clarify how Melanchthon perceived the relationship between Aristotle and Plato and contextualize it in wider reception of Greek philosophy in the early sixteenth century.

Melanchthon's critique of Erasmus' Origenism.

As is well known, the years 1524-25 marked a crucial point in the history of the Reformation because of the dispute between Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther over the freedom/bondage of the will. The myth of Melanchthon who maintained a middle position between the two contenders has been dismantled by Timothy Wengert, who argued that Melanchthon's 1528 *Scholia* on Colossians must be understood as a continuum and the last propagation of the dispute between Luther and Erasmus with Melanchthon in the side of Luther in defending the theology of the Wittenberg reformers.⁴ Erasmus, replying to Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio* in his two books *Hyperaspistes*, had vehemently criticized both Luther and Melanchthon, accusing the latter of being Luther's ghostwriter. In his *Scholia* on Colossians

³ Frank discussed Melanchthon's "philosophical theology" in Frank (1995). In 1998 he presented a paper on the influence of Neoplatonic tradition in occasion of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. See: Frank (2001). For his reading of Melanchthon's *Liber de Anima*, one of Melanchthon's works in which the platonic influence is stronger, see: (Frank 1996). Regarding the Melanchthon-Erasmus relationship, Frank explicitly describes Melanchthon's philosophy in Erasmian terms: Frank (2012) 2-5.

⁴ Wengert (1998)

Melanchthon took position against Erasmus accusing “Origen and those who follow him” of misunderstanding the relationship between law and gospel. The *Praeceptor germaniae* uses the Alexandrian theologian as an identifier to indirectly criticize Erasmus, according to the 16th century literary standards.⁵

Melanchthon's use of Origen as an identifier in order to attack Erasmus can be traced back at least to 1521, when a 24 year old Melanchthon published the first edition of his *Loci Communes*, the first systematic description of the Protestant theology.⁶ The whole book is marked by Luther's critique of philosophy, the limits of human reason, the intrinsic sinful condition of human nature after original sin. Melanchthon's humanistic background is just a faded memory, still recognizable in methodology and in the elegance of the style,⁷ but no more in the content.

Melanchthon derives from Luther the distinction between Law and Gospel.⁸ The former shows sin and the weakness of human nature, the latter the cure to this disease which is God's promise of salvation through faith alone. This distinction is linked to a negative anthropology, according to which human powers are completely darkened by original sin. The whole human nature is nothing but sin. Following Luther and his interpretation of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Melanchthon labels human nature as Flesh. Only the

⁵ Wengert notes that “not only in his argumentum for Colossians, used as a preface for both Paraphrases and the Annotationes, but also in the paraphrase and annotations of this passage (and other discussed earlier) , Erasmus insisted that Paul excluded ceremonial, not moral, works from salvation. He followed an entire host of medieval and patristic commentators, including Augustine. But Melanchthon argued that the source of this approach, Origen, was misled and that, once followed to its logical conclusion, this approach resulted in a distortion of Paul's point of view (sentential). By making the origin of this defect Origen, he could warn readers away from an entire exegetical tradition and its-present-day defender, the moral philosopher Erasmus.” Wengert (1998) 46.

⁶ CR 21, 83-227. For further discussion of Melanchthon's critique of Origen and Hieronymus as an antierasmian polemic, see: Burger (2006) 13-26. Meijering dates the first Melanchthon's critique of Origen and his followers to 1520 in a letter to Hesus Meijering (1983) 74.

⁷ For the meaning of the terms *Loci* and *Loci Communes*, see Breen (1947) 197-209.

⁸ Kusakawa (1995) 27-74. For a general assessment of Luther's distinction between Law and Gospel, see Kolb (2014) , Barth and Maloney (2012)135-6. For Melanchthon's distinction between law and Gospel and his later dispute with John Agricola, see: Wengert (1997).

intervention of the Holy Spirit freely bestowed by God can regenerate the darkened condition of men and grant eternal salvation.

According to Melanchthon, the philosophical terms “free will” and “reason” have been improperly applied to Scripture, which never mentions them. The Bible disdains human reason which, since is corrupted by sin, cannot grasp the divine message. Moreover, Paul never talks about the freedom of the will; on the contrary, he emphasizes that everything happens for absolute necessity. In Melanchthon’s eyes, pretending that the human will can interfere with the divine judgment is pure blasphemy.⁹

Despite this, the commentators applied impious notions to the Scripture and, little by little, these human categories widened throughout the Church. Gradually, the teaching of the Scripture has been substituted by the teaching of the philosophers. Whereas the modern commentators substituted the Scripture with the teaching of Aristotle, the ancient commentators perverted the true meaning of the Scripture applying the platonic notion of reason.¹⁰

Melanchthon’s affinity with Luther’s critique of philosophy and human reason is quite clear. The Swabian theologian seems to identify the improper application of Plato’s notion of reason with Origen of Alexandria, and thus indirectly with Erasmus of Rotterdam. In this context, Melanchthon departs from Erasmus on two fundamental topics, that is biblical hermeneutics and theological anthropology.

After having pointed out that the intellect is not free from the senses, and that the very distinction between senses and intellect is tricky, Melanchthon adds: “Those passages of Scripture that I cited above sufficiently refute this opinion of the Scholastics. Nor can they run to Origen, pretending that his talk about the soul, the flesh, and the spirit supports them. What do we care what Origen thinks anyway? We are discussing the judgement of Scripture, not of Origen.”¹¹

⁹ CR 21, 86.

¹⁰ Ibid.: *Additum est e Platonis philosophia vocabulum Rationis aequè perniciosum. Nam perinde atque his posterioribus ecclesiae temporibus Aristotelem pro Christo sumus amplexi, ita statim post ecclesiae auspical per Platonicam philosophiam Christiana doctrina labefactata est.*

¹¹ Melanchthon (2014). CR 21,115: *Quam sententiam scholasticorum illi scripturae loci quos supra citavimus satis redarguunt. Neque iuvare possunt Origene, is ut videri volunt, ubi ille de Anima carneet spiritu disseruit. Quanquam quid ad nos quid Origenes sentiat, cum nos de scripturae, non de Origenis sententiadisputemus?*

This passage does not have to be understood as a generic accusation against the Scholastics, but a precise anti-erasmian statement. In 1503 Erasmus published a collection of his early works, among which the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*¹² (“The Handbook of a Christian Knight”), a text in which Erasmus gives the description of human nature here criticized by Melancthon.

In the *Enchiridion* Erasmus claims that Origen, following Paul, wisely divided human nature in three parts: flesh, spirit, and soul. The body is the lowest part, the most corrupt, and tainted by sin. The Spirit, on the contrary, is the proof that we have been created in the image of God: in the Spirit, God impressed in our mind the eternal law of justice and thanks to the Spirit we can unite ourselves with the divine. The soul is in a middle position between these two extremes: it can elevate to the level of the Spirit, or degenerate to the corporal part.¹³

As we can see, in his *Loci* Melancthon uses Origen to criticize the most famous reader of the Alexandrian theologian in the 16th century, Erasmus. The second matter of contention in Melancthon's 1521 *Loci* against Origen/Erasmus concerns the reading of the Scripture: “If you take away all the absurd allegories of Origen, together with the forest of his philosophical opinions, how little will be left?”¹⁴ Melancthon rhetorically asks. A critique against Origen's allegorical reading of the Bible that Melancthon moves also in the last edition of his *Loci*: “Therefore, - he claims- we must set aside the ravings of Origen who says that the letter is the grammatical sense used in the description of ceremonial and historical matters, but the Spirit is the allegorical interpretation of these ceremonies and historical events. Following these hypothesis, he later on took far greater license than the church can allow and dreamed up fictitious interpretations, almost as a painter does when he paints imaginary creatures such as chimaeras, sea monsters, and centaurs.”¹⁵ Finally, commenting Rom. 7 (:14) “The Law is spiritual”, Melancthon explains that the word “spiritual” refers

¹² Erasmus (2016). From here on cited as ASD.

¹³ ASD V-8: 152-158.

¹⁴ Melancthon (2014), Kindle Location 456

¹⁵ Melancthon (2011). CR 21,932: *Explodantur ergo deliramenta Origenis, qui litera ait esse sensum Grammaticum in descriptione ceremoniarum et historiarum, Spiritum vero allegoricam interpretationem ceremoniarum et historiarum. Hanc secutus hypothesin postea nimis magna licentia et profecto non concedenda in Ecclesia, lusit fingendis interpretationibus fore ut pictores ludunt, cum pingunt Chimaeras, Scyllas, Centauros.*

to the spiritual judgment of God and it must not be read allegorically, as Origen, “who failed to interpret correctly the letter and the Spirit,”¹⁶ does.

The link Origen-Erasmus on the allegorical reading of the Bible is clear since some years earlier Erasmus had praised Origen as the best commentator of the Holy Scripture precisely because of Origen’s ability in reading the Holy text behind the literal sense. In the *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* Erasmus invites the reader to prefer the commentators who goes behind the literal sense, naming Origen, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine.¹⁷ Later, he specifies that the apostle Paul opened fountains of allegory and Origen followed Paul obtaining mastery in decoding these allegories.¹⁸

Origen as the first perverter of the doctrine of Justification

In the inflamed theological debate of the early sixteenth century, the reception and interpretation of the Church Fathers had a prominent role. In the previous chapter I showed that Melanchthon repeatedly quotes Origen of Alexandria to criticize Erasmus of Rotterdam. On the contrary, the Wittenberg reformers presented their theology in continuity with Augustine’s teachings, especially in the *Confessio Augustana* (1530). It is well known that, while praising Augustine publicly, Melanchthon criticizes him in a letter to Johannes Brenz (1499-1570). This ambivalence became evident in Melanchthon’s 1532 *Commentary on Romans* in which Melanchthon explicitly contrasts his forensic understanding of the doctrine of justification to

¹⁶ Melanchthon (2011) 347. CR 21, 933: *At lex Dei postulat ardentis motus spirituales, agnitionem, timorem, fiduciam, dilectionem Dei, denique obedientiam perfecta. Et econtra iudicium Dei est et horribilem ministerium irae divinae opprimentis omnes homines non tantum propter externa delicta, sed etiam propter interiores tenebras et immunditiam. De hoc orrendo iudicii loquitur Paulus, non de Origenicis allegoriis aut fabellis. Dolendum est graavissimam doctrinam et Ecclesiae propriam de usu Legis, de ministerio Evangelii, de fide, de donatione Spiritus sancti, de veris fidei exercitiis in invocatione, deque motis a Spiritu sancto accensis obscuratam et obrutam esse illis somniis Origenis non recte interpretantis Literam et Spiritum.*

¹⁷ ASD V-8: 118-20.

¹⁸ ASD V-8: 188. Erasmus further developed these concepts in his *Ratio seu Methodus perveniendi ad veram theologiam*. For Erasmus’ reading of Origen, see Godin (1982).

Augustine's idea of a transformative grace.¹⁹ In general, the appropriation (and misappropriation) of the Church Fathers in the early sixteenth century should be read as a discursive construction aroused in a specific historical context. Thus, in the case of Melanchthon, he quotes Augustine as an authority in order to legitimize his own positions, and, simultaneously, he criticizes Origen in order to delegitimize the positions of his rivals.

Albeit he occasionally quotes Origen positively,²⁰ in the following years Melanchthon further developed his critique of Origen identifying the Alexandrian theologian as the initiator of a Platonic deviation of true Christian teaching. In his 1532 commentary on Romans, Melanchthon emphasizes that the Scholastics "proudly deride what we say about original sin and recall us to philosophy. In sum, they imagine that righteousness in the sight of God or what the law of God demands is nothing else than the discipline with which philosophy is satisfied. Pelagius professed this opinion, but the seeds are scattered in the commentaries of Origen. And since this opinion is in agreement with the judgment of human reason, which has not truly experienced fear and true comfort in repentance, people easily embrace these reasonings."²¹

According to Melanchthon, the confusion between Platonic philosophy and Christian doctrine is the cause of Origen's mistake. Because of his Platonism, Origen opened the doors to the most pernicious heresy in the history of Christianity, Pelagianism. In his 1548 Oration *De Luthero et aetatibus ecclesiae*²² Melanchthon identified in Origen the first theologian who perverted the doctrine of justification. Developing his own understanding of the history of

¹⁹ The meaning of these passages in Melanchthon's thought has been recently investigated by Fink (2017) and Scheck (2016). For Scheck, see especially chapter 6, in which the author deals with the reception of Origen's commentary to the Romans in Luther and Melanchthon.

²⁰ For Melanchthon's praising of Origen, see Meijering (1983) 74-9.

²¹ Melanchthon (2010), Kindle Location 168-171. CR 15, 496: *Superbe derident ea quae de peccato originis dicimus, revocant nos ad philosophiam: Et in summa, non aliud imaginantur esse iusticiam coram Deo, aut quam lex Dei postulat, nisi illam ipsam disciplinam, qua contenta est philosophia. Hanc opinionem Pelagius professus est, sed semina sparsa sunt in commentariis Origenis. E cum sit opinio consentanea iudicio rationis humanae, quae non est experta vero pavores et consolationem veram in paenitentia, facile homines haec πῶν ἀμπλεκτῶν.*

²² CR 11: 783-88.

revelation, Melanchthon explains that Origen's mistake of mixing platonic philosophy and Christian theology, human notions and divine wisdom, led to the heresy par excellence, Pelagianism.

Distancing himself from Erasmus who based his understanding of the history of the Church on the concept of the "magnus consensus,"²³ Melanchthon perceives the history of the Church as a perennial struggle between orthodoxy and heterodoxy.²⁴ Excluding the predication of the apostles, God assigned the propagation of His message to few men, while the majority of people spread a heretical message. When the truth of the Gospel is so much perverted that the true divine message risks to get extinguished, God inspires his prophets to reestablish the true meaning of the Holy Scripture. This is the role that Melanchthon assigns to both Augustine and Luther in the history of the Church.²⁵ According to Melanchthon, Origen's teachings represent the moment of departure from the true predication of Paul and the apostles. The second age of the Church, that Melanchthon labels as *Aetas Origenica*, was dominated by superstition and Platonic philosophy.²⁶

The Praeceptor's pedagogical preference for Aristotle

In the mid-15th century a dispute on the relationship between Platonism and Christian faith arose: in 1458 George of Trebizond wrote his *Comparationes Philsophorum Aristotelis et Platonis* in which he accused the revival of Platonism as a threaten for Christian religion, in 1469 the cardinal Bessarion criticized George defending Plato and Platonism in his *In Calumniatorem Platonis*.²⁷

²³ Green (1975).

²⁴ Fraenkel (1961) 69.

²⁵ Fraenkel (1961) 95-6.

²⁶ CR 11,786: *Sed consideremus tempora post predicationem Apostolorum, quae etiams alius aliter distribuere potest, tamen opinor perspicuor hoc modo discerni, ut prima aetas ac pura, sit ipsa apostolica, et proxima discipulorum, qui doctrinam nondum dilutam Platonicis opinionibus ac superstitionis ritibus tradebant.*

Secunda aetas est Origenica, in qua iam calligo effuse erat doctrinae de fide, et in Ecclesia late dominabantur philosophia Platonica et superstitio. For further discussion, see Fraenkel (1961, 86-90) 86-90.

²⁷ For an overview of the dispute and its influence in the following years, see Monfasani (2008).

Melanchthon remembers this dispute in an Oration on Plato, written in 1538 and held by Conradus Lagus in occasion of the proclamation of master degree in philosophy.²⁸ Melanchthon explicitly sides with Theodore of Gaza (1415-1475), arguing that he was right in claiming that the two most important philosophers of the ancient world must have their own place in the secular learning.²⁹ However, Melanchthon emphasizes that there are pedagogical reasons for which a teacher should prefer Aristotle rather than Plato. In the previous year (1537), as dean of the arts Faculty at the University of Wittenberg, in occasion of the graduation of Masters students, Melanchthon gave an oration on the life of Aristotle.³⁰ The two orations well exemplify Melanchthon's understanding of the relationship between Plato and Aristotle.

On both occasions, the oration begins with an exhortation to follow laws and established authority and to pursue virtue. Aristotle and Plato are pictured as examples of good, wise, and learned behavior. Studying their life and works, young students learn how to behave wisely and how to distinguish true philosophy from sophistry. The latter consists in mixing different topics together for the sake of debate, it derives from ignorance, and it is very dangerous for Church and state.

Then, in both the orations, Melanchthon summarizes the life of the philosopher he is talking about. For Aristotle's life the main sources seem to be Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*,³¹ while for Plato's life he quotes from Diogenes as well, but also from some pseudo platonic epistle, and from Marsilio Ficino's summary of Plato's life in the 1517 edition of his translation of Plato's *Opera*.³² What it is worth noting in Melanchthon's description of Plato and Aristotle's lives is that in both cases Melanchthon expresses the firm conviction that certain events of their life have been guided by divine providence. Indeed, Melanchthon claims that God drove Plato to Egypt in order to retrieve the ancient knowledge of the movements of the heavens. Melanchthon claims that Plato was not satisfied with the discussions on life and moral he heard in Athens from Socrates and was convinced that a

²⁸ CR 11, 413-25. For the English translation I follow the edition of Melanchthon's orations edited by Sachiko Kusukawa and translated by Christine Salazar. See Melanchthon (1999) 191-203.

²⁹ CR 11, 423.

³⁰ CR 11, 342-49; Melanchthon (1999).204-11.

³¹ Melanchthon (1999) 207.

³² Melanchthon (1999) 192, n. 2.

better understanding of the nature of things was necessary in order to understand also morality. For this reason, he went to Egypt with Eudoxus and Euripides. There, they rediscovered the ancient knowledge of the movements of the heavens, a kind of knowledge that Thales had passed on in Greece only in small part but which, at the time of Plato, was already forgotten. Moreover, Eudoxus wrote also a table of the motions and an order of the year. Plato, Eudoxus, and Euripides are those who brought this kind of knowledge to Western philosophy. Their braveness in undertaking a long and dangerous journey for the sake of knowledge and truth is worthy of admiration and is an example to imitate.³³

Divine providence intervened in history in order to avoid that this knowledge which is necessary for theology and true knowledge of God perished. In the same way, God guided history in order that the perfect master, Plato, could have shared his knowledge with the most talented and brilliant man of the following generation, Aristotle. For Melanchthon, the meeting and collaboration between Plato and Aristotle is part of the divine will to defend the arts in order to show men His existence and His love. At the same way, God ensured that Aristotle became the teacher of the man destined to conquer the world, Alexander the Great, in order that Aristotle could teach to the young Alexander the art of good government and to bend Alexander's violent disposition toward gentleness. Aristotle wrote many books in order to explain Alexander how to provide the state with fair laws and discipline. In turn, Alexander generously embellished the state with art and education.³⁴

Melanchthon rejects the idea that Plato and Aristotle did not respect and admire each other. Indeed, he reports all the praises from Plato to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Plato referred by Diogenes Laertes in his *Lives*. The fact that they disagree on certain matters does not imply that they do not respect each other. Just like friends can disagree and still being friends, in the same way learned men have different opinions without harshness of their minds.

Moving beyond their personal relationship to their philosophical works, the emphasis is still posed on an essential continuity between Plato and Aristotle which goes behind disagreements on specific topics. In Melanchthon's eyes, a real philosopher can be considered as

³³ CR 11, 415-6. Melanchthon (1999) 193-4.

³⁴ CR 11, 345-46.

such only if he has two skills: method and style of discourse. The philosopher differentiates himself from the sophist precisely because he applies a method, namely he does not claim something out of proof, but only what he can demonstrate. When, with great knowledge, one has learned to apply this method to philosophy, he can also apply it to religious discussions, clearing up what is complicated and shedding light on what is obscure.³⁵

The perfect example of this kind of philosophy which rejects sophistry and preserves a true method is represented by the teachings of Aristotle. On the contrary, the other philosophical sect must be rejected: Stoic doctrine is full of exaggeration both because it claims that good health, richness and other similar things are not good, and because with the doctrine of *apatheia* it pretends that the reason can completely control the emotions. Epicurus is not a philosopher at all since he is facetious and pretends that everything exists by chance, he takes away the first cause, and in general every aspect of Epicurean philosophy disagrees with the teachings of the physicists. Finally, the Academics do not preserve a proper philosophical method and therefore tend to overturn everything.³⁶

Unlike Aristotle, Plato often mentions this method, but he rarely applies it. In some occasions he freely digresses from the topic he is dealing with, many concepts in his works are hidden under the veil of images and allegory, and he almost never helps the reader explicitly claiming what he has to note in that specific passage. Even more pernicious for the young is the fact that in some of his works Plato clearly jokes and does not express his real thought. This is the case of the *Republic*, a work in which- according to Melancthon- Plato “wanted to censure wittily and figuratively the infinite greed of the mighty.”³⁷ The work in which Plato expresses his real political ideas is *The Laws*, in which “he explained his purpose simply and without riddle.” In this work, Plato correctly explained how to lead the cities, and the Roman lawyers copied many part of the Platonic texts in emanating their law. So, for instance, Plato suggested that it is lawful

³⁵ See Melancthon's 1536 Oration on Philosophy. CR 11, 278-84 and Melancthon (1999) 126-32.

³⁶ CR 11,282.

³⁷ Melancthon (1999) 200. CR 11,422: *Est et πολιτεία, in qua fingit communem rerum usum, prorsus ironica; voluit enim salse et figurate infinitam rapacitatem potentum taxare.*

to kill a rapist not only by the victim, but also by her father, son, or brother.

In virtue of his mastering a proper philosophical method, Aristotle must be a guide in the search for true philosophy. Nonetheless, some ideas can be taken also from other authors. Melanchthon repeatedly asserts that science are connected with one another, and they cannot be understood if they are not studied together. Therefore, a true theologian can be considered as such only if he perfectly masters logic, physics, and ethics. The study of philosophical subjects is propaedeutic for a proper understanding of Christian doctrine. Indeed, those who are skilled in philosophy understand and practice more easily the law of God.³⁸

In general, Melanchthon sees more continuity than discontinuity between Plato and Aristotle. He advises the young to read Aristotle before and then, once having learned a proper method in philosophy, to apply this method in reading and interpreting the Platonic dialogues. Indeed, according to Melanchthon, Aristotle's entire philosophical endeavor consisted in nothing else than to systematize what he learned from Plato, his teacher. In his dialogues Plato sparred and mixed concepts regarding ethics, politics, physics, and anthropology; Aristotle gathered these concepts and express them singularly in their proper contexts, thus passing to following generations what he had learned from Plato.³⁹

Immortality of the Soul and Post-Mortem Existence: Melanchthon's reinterpretation of Plato's *Phaedrus*.

The question of the relationship between Platonism and Aristotelianism in the 16th century is a thorny matter. As Heinrich Kuhn has pointed out, in the 150 years between 1500 and 1650 more commentaries on the Aristotelian corpus have been published than in every other period in the history of philosophy. Thus, applying the label of "Aristotelian" to all the philosophers who commented on Aristotle's corpus would entail to cover most of the philosophers of the 16th and early 17th century. This choice would be too broad and generic. Indeed, most of the 16th and 17th century commentators on Aristotle vindicated their independence from the Stagirite authority

³⁸ CR 11, 280-1.

³⁹ CR 11, 423; Melanchthon (1999) 201.

and, thus, their freedom to draw from other sources and traditions. This is the case of authors like Jacopo Zabarella, Augustinus Niphus, and, as mentioned above, Philipp Melanchthon.⁴⁰

When he arrived in Wittenberg in 1518, Melanchthon planned to publish a critical edition of Aristotle's works.⁴¹ However, he changed his mind after his encounter with Martin Luther: embracing the basic concepts of Luther's theology, just like his older colleague, he rejected Aristotle's philosophy as well. The arrival of the Zwickau prophet in Wittenberg, the extreme positions assumed by Andreas von Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer, and the Peasant war are among the factors which induced both Luther and Melanchthon to distinguish more carefully between the two kind of righteousness: the righteousness before God which derives from faith alone, and a civil righteousness, that is the respect and obedience of civil authority and established order which equates both believers and unbelievers. Whereas Luther focused his efforts on preaching the gospel, the only true therapy for every disease, Melanchthon emphasized the necessity to give a much more prominent role to philosophy in liberal education as well as in theology. Throughout all his career, he commented on some of the most famous Aristotle's works becoming one of the prominent Aristotle's commentators in the 16th century.

As mentioned above, Melanchthon explains his preference for Aristotle with pedagogical, not philosophical or theological, reasons. Moreover, in his commentaries he never follows the structure of Aristotle's work he is commenting on, but freely divides his argumentation according to his philosophical and theological necessities. This attitude emerges clearly in Melanchthon's commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics*: whereas in the previous edition he follows the structure of the original work, from the 1550 edition on,⁴² Melanchthon freely structures his argumentation without taking into consideration Aristotle's text. In the same way, after having been criticized for not following the traditional structure of a commentary on Aristotle, he decided to change the title of his commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul* from *Commentarius de Anima* (1540) to *Liber de Anima* (1553).

⁴⁰ See the entrance *Aristotelianism in the Renaissance* in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Kuhn (Spring 2018)

⁴¹ Kusukawa (1995) 38.

⁴² The text has been recently translated and commented by Franck. See: Melanchthon (2008)

Having postulated a continuity between Plato and Aristotle as well as his independence from Aristotle's teaching, the question of what Melanchthon actually draws from Aristotle and what from Plato naturally arouse. Günter Franck is the scholar who has mostly strongly emphasized Melanchthon's indebtedness to the Platonic tradition.⁴³ The work in which this influence of Plato and Neoplatonist would emerge more clearly is Melanchthon's *Liber de Anima*. Indeed, at the end of this textbook Melanchthon dedicates an entire chapter to the image of God in men. The notion of the *imago dei* as well as the innatism of ideas would prove Melanchthon's Platonism. Franck, however, rejects a possible influence by the Florentine Platonist Marsilio Ficino, claiming that Melanchthon was influenced by Simon Grynaeus (1493-1541), who published Plato's *Opera Omnia* in Basle in 1532.⁴⁴

However, this understanding of Melanchthon as a "Platonist" seems inadequate to grasp the complexity of Melanchthon's thought just like the definition of "Aristotelian." Without doubt, Melanchthon heavily drew directly on Plato, but his reading of Plato is mediated and influenced by other sources.

In the context of his understanding of philosophy as natural science, Melanchthon heavily drew from the most advanced scientific theories of his age. The pioneering works of the Flemish anatomist Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) and the Prussian astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) were immediately studied in the philosophical faculty in Wittenberg and Melanchthon used them in his philosophical works.⁴⁵ Moreover, Grantley McDonald has proved that Melanchthon drew his notion of human spirits from Marsilio Ficino's *Three Books on Life (De Vita Libri Tres)*. Ficino defined the spirit as a vapor which, born in the heart, passes through the body and reaches the brain. In the same way, Melanchthon, transliterating almost literally Ficino, argued that the medical spirits should be considered as vapor squeezed out of the blood. Through these spirits, knowledge was transmitted in the ventricles of the brain and heat was conveyed throughout the body.⁴⁶ Just like Ficino, Melanchthon believed that

⁴³ Frank (2001)

⁴⁴ Frank (2010) 156-7.

⁴⁵ For the influence of Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem* (1543) see (Koch 1998) and Kusukawa (1995) 114-23. For the reception of Copernicus in Wittenberg see Westman (1975) 165-93.

⁴⁶ McDonald (2002) and McDonald (2015) 111-28. For further discussion on Melanchthon's notion of 'spirit', see: Helm (1998).

human beings live in a world dominated by spirits, ghosts, and demons. Through the spirits, the Holy Spirit can enter in to the body and illuminate human reason. At the same time, however, also demons can mix themselves to the spirits and, through them, reach the brain and induce people to commit the most horrendous crimes.⁴⁷

Thus, it is not surprising that Melanchthon, dedicating the last part of his *Liber de Anima* to the most important concept that philosophy has the duty to teach, namely the immortality of the soul, combines the discussion on this topic with the question of the condition of the soul in the period in between death and resurrection. Drawing from Plato's *Phaedrus*, Melanchthon proves that not only souls are immortal, but that they continue to live while their body is buried waiting for the resurrection. This is a clear departure from Luther's teaching on this topic.⁴⁸

As we have seen, Melanchthon believed that the mysteries of Christian faith, namely the remission of sins through Jesus Christ, are unattainable by human reason, however true philosophy teaches that there is one God, that He is eternal, good, and wise, and that the human soul is immortal. Quoting the third book of Aristotle's *On the Soul* (*De Anima*, 3 413 B, 25-27), Melanchthon asserts that Aristotle seems to believe that the soul survives the body because Aristotle claims that rational soul is another class than vegetative and sentient soul. However, the concept of the immortality of the soul is more fully explained by Plato.

In *Liber De Anima* Melanchthon gives three explanations for the immortality of the soul. Two of them are derived from Cicero and Xenophon. Both these explanations focus on the necessity of the existence of a heavenly world in which God will punish the injustices committed in the earthly world. Melanchthon quotes Cicero who claimed that since providence exists, another life in which injustice is punished must follow. Then, he refers Xenophon's argument: after having committed a sin, the sinner is punished by the pain he suffers in his conscience because of the sin committed. This does not happen by chance and is a prelude of the punishment sinners will suffer in afterlife.⁴⁹

The third argument is derived from Plato. Melanchthon interprets *Phaedrus* 87 A as a proof that the perception of good and evil, the

⁴⁷ Helm (1998) 220. Stuart Clark has argued that Melanchthon's demonology is linked to his eschatological expectations. See Clark (1997) 412.

⁴⁸ For Luther's position, see: Juhász (2014) 164-79.

⁴⁹ CR 13,176-77.

notion of numbers, and all other incorporeal entities derive from an eternal source. Thus, he syllogistically argues that a nature that does not spring from the elements is not corrupted, the soul does not spring from the elements, as Plato proves, thus, it must follow that the human soul is eternal.⁵⁰

Moreover, Plato also gives philosophical proofs for the separability of soul and body after death. Several scriptural passages, for instance Jesus who says to the thief on the cross "Today you will be with me in heaven" or Jesus who speaks with Moses entail that human soul continue to live in the period in between the death and resurrection. Both in the case of the thief and of Moses, while their carnal bodies were buried, their souls continued to live. Plato correctly explained this in Phaedrus when he claimed that heroic souls, if not too polluted by physical contagion, would fly about purer regions, whereas the rest, being idle and contaminated by physical pleasure, would wander about their graves on the ground; according to Melanchthon, these second kind of souls are the ghosts that a lot of people claim often having seen.⁵¹

Juhász noted that in his 1523 *Commentary on Matthews* Melanchthon does not deal with the question of the post mortem condition of the soul. He interprets Melanchthon's reluctance to take an explicit position on this topic as a way to avoid an open conflict with Luther.⁵² In his later *Liber de Anima* Melanchthon assumes a position which is clearly antithetical to Luther's notion of the sleep of the soul in the period in between the death and the resurrection.

⁵⁰CR 13, 175-6: *Natura non orta ab elementis non corrumpitur.*

Anima non est orta ab elementis.

Non igitur extinguitur propter corporis interitum.

Minorem sic confirmat. Impossibile est in natura elementari oriri noticias et quidem universales, et de rebus non corporeis, de Deo, de numeris, de ordine, de discrimine honestorum et turpium. Has autem noticias tenent animae hominum etiam non accepta doctrina. Ergo necesse est eas, non ab elementari, sed ab alia praestantiore et perpetua natura oriri.

⁵¹ CR 13, 175: *Et Plato, excellentes et heroicas animas non nimium pollutas contagio corporum, arbitratur tanquam puriores sursum evolare, caeteras ignavas, et voluptatibus corporum contaminatas humi vagari circa sepulcra, et has iudicat esse spectra, quae saepe cernuntur*

⁵² Juhász argues: "It is not entirely clear why he avoided the topic, but it is not at all implausible that he wanted to prevent an open conflict with Luther, who at that time was developing his idea about soul sleep." Juhász (2014) 191.

To conclude, Melanchthon draws directly from Plato to prove that true philosophy teaches that the human soul is immortal. However, his understanding of Plato's dialogues is of a 16th century philosopher who, like most of his contemporaries, was strongly influenced by Neoplatonic and Hermetic traditions.⁵³ Melanchthon reads Plato as a man of his age, but he does it in a unique way. His eclecticism and his extensive knowledge of all branches of philosophy let him to draw freely from the most advanced learning of his age. Whether this means to quote the pioneer of modern science or the Neoplatonic / Hermetic tradition is a problem only in the eyes of the modern reader, since Melanchthon could perceive no difference among these sources

In Melanchthon's eyes, the problem lies in discerning correctly different branches of learning. In his early critique of Origen, and indirectly of Erasmus, Melanchthon emphasized that the improper mingling of Platonism and Christian theology led the Alexandrian father to misunderstand the relationship between law and gospel. Later in his career, Melanchthon went so far to claim that, because of this, Origen must be considered the first perverter of the doctrine of justification. Not surprisingly, Melanchthon emphasizes the risks of Origen's Platonism also in his 1538 oration in praise of Plato:

Therefore sagacity has to be applied in distinguishing between types of teaching, and those impudent people are to be rejected, who pour darkness on the Gospel; indeed they consign to oblivion and destroy the Gospel, when they transform it into Platonic philosophy. Even more to be reproached are those who do not even understand Plato and generate monstrous beliefs by distorting his forms, and spread them in the Church, such as Origen and many others after him did. For the Christian doctrine was shamefully defiled in these old times by the impudent mingling with Platonic philosophy. (tr. Salazar, 203)⁵⁴

⁵³ Wilhelm Maurer in his influential book widely discussed the Neoplatonic, Pythagorean, and Hermetic influences in Melanchthon: Maurer (1967). For the reception of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, see Kemper (2016).

⁵⁴ CR 11, 425: *Quare prudentia adhibenda est in discernendis doctrinarum generibus, et explodendi sunt inepti illi, qui offundunt caliginem Evangelio, imo obruunt ac delent Evangelium, cum transformant in Platonicam Philosophiam. Magis etiam taxandi sunt, qui ne Platonem quidem intelligentes, eius figuris depravatis, monstrosas opiniones genuerunt, easque in Ecclesiam sparserunt, ut Origenes et post eum alii multi fecerunt; flagitiose enim contaminata est doctrina Christiana veteribus illis temporibus, inepte admixta Platonica Philosophia.*

Just like in his 1521 *Loci Communes*, in his 1528 *Scholia on Colossians*, and in his *Oratio de Luthero et aetatibus Ecclesiae*, in this passage Melanchthon exhorts the reader not to confuse Platonic philosophy and Christian doctrine. The heavy influence that Plato's reception exercised on Melanchthon's *Liber de Anima* has to be understood as Melanchthon's attempt to correctly apply this principle that, in his eyes, most theologians fail to discern.

Conclusions

Melanchthon gives a prominent role to Plato in the history of philosophy and, in an eclectic way, often draws from the Platonic dialogues to legitimate specific concepts, like the immortality of the soul. Precisely because of this proximity between Platonism and Christian theology, there is the concrete risk to mix up philosophy and theology, distorting in this way the essence of the evangelical message. This is the accusation Melanchthon addresses to Erasmus of Rotterdam and the ancient theologian who mostly influenced Erasmus, namely Origen of Alexandria. Reinterpreting the history of Christianity, Melanchthon sees in Origen the first philosophical theologian, the one who pushing human reason behind his limits for the first time equated Platonism and Christian faith.

For too long Melanchthon's emphasis on the importance of philosophy for theological studies which characterizes his mature years has been misunderstood as Melanchthon getting closer to Erasmus. Contemporary scholars have put into question this perspective and, indeed, Melanchthon's identification of Origen as the first perverter of the doctrine of justification seems to confirm this idea.

On the other hand, I have emphasized that Melanchthon made full use of Plato's philosophy. He reinterprets Plato combining different sources, like Galen's and Vesalius' medical treatises and Ficino's controversial *De Vita Libri Tres*. This aspect of Melanchthon's thought puts the *Praeceptor germaniae* in discontinuity with both Luther and Erasmus. New researches on Melanchthon's Platonism and its esoteric baggage are needed in order to properly decipher "the enigma of the Reformation."

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