MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND MORAL THEOLOGY IN VERMIGLI

Sebastian Rehnman

INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to explicate the relation between moral philosophy and moral theology in Reformed orthodoxy by analysis of the early and influential Protestant reformer Pietro Martire Vermigli (1499–1562). It attempts to make a contribution to the more basic issue of the relation between faith and reason in Reformed orthodoxy and to solve contradictory interpretations. For claims of ethical knowledge on the basis of human reason on the one hand and claims of ethical knowledge on the basis of divine revelation on the other, raise the issue of the relation between reason and faith. For the claim that there are two kinds of moral truths assumes that some truths are discoverable by human understanding and some are not. Granted that there are two kinds of moral truths, the question arises as to how (if at all) moral truths that are above and beyond the comprehension of reason are related to moral truths that are within the comprehension of reason. In short, how, if at all, are moral philosophy and moral theology related?

CONTRADICTORY INTERPRETATIONS

In the secondary literature there are contradictory interpretations of the early Reformed orthodox view of the relation between moral philosophy and moral theology. This entails that at least one of these interpretations cannot be true.

On the one hand, Servais Pinckaers claims that “Protestant thought always maintained a basic opposition between the Gospel and philosophy.” This opposition between moral philosophy and moral theology is

---

1 This essay is primarily based on Vermigli’s *In primum, secundum et initium tertii libri Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum commentarius*, ed. Giulio Santerenziano, et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011 [1563]). All page references are to the 1563 Froschauer edition although the critical edition has been used, since the 1563 edition is readily available on the Internet and the critical edition has its pagination in the margin. Hereafter *Ethicorum*.

found, according to Jill Kraye, in Vermigli. However, Vermigli maintains that the relation between theology and philosophy is a congruent one. For throughout his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* there is an emphasis on the compatibility and complementarity of reason and faith, moral philosophy and moral theology. In the few places where he expresses disagreement, he also explains that this is due to the inaccessibility of revelation to Aristotle. Vermigli moreover explicitly denies incompatibility:

Let us return to that from which we digressed, namely whether this discipline [*facultas*] is incompatible with religion [*pietas*]. I maintain that it is no more against it than the study of the heavenly bodies, the art of navigation, war, fishing, hunting and indeed the prudence of human law (which everyone understands is necessary for public administration).... What can be nobler than to know oneself and this we know chiefly from this source [of moral philosophy]?... There is not little delight in knowing this demonstrative discourse [*scientia*], within whose confines the light of nature should sustain itself and to which it may itself be able to proceed in its own right.

---


5. Sometimes Vermigli expresses a difference between himself and Aristotle in terms of ambiguity and emphasis (*Ethicorum*, 236–237). Although Vermigli argues that Aristotle should have borrowed first principles from metaphysics concerning God, he could not know from philosophy that there is a divinely given happiness since it is only revealed by God (224; similarly on this naturally unknowable happiness 201, 224, 239, 257, 261–262, 294 and 308). This happiness of justification by Christ through faith Aristotle did not know (200, 309). This is softened though with the remark that Aristotle may have had "an awareness of ignorance" about what remains after death (263). Vermigli also distances himself from Aristotle on the mortality of the soul (238–239), but argues elsewhere that the nature of the human mind cannot be known in this life (82, 83). Vermigli argues similarly concerning Aristotle's ignorance of the doctrine of sin. "For he did not see the corruption of the mind; hence he speaks in this way" (294; similarly 227, 258, 294). "However, Aristotle could not see this corruption of our nature, since he was destitute of faith and the light of the divine scriptures" (309; Cf. 294, 422, 425). Yet, "we see that philosophers acknowledged the disease and vice of nature" (389). Likewise, according to Vermigli, Scripture agrees in the main with Aristotle over virtue towards friends and relatives, but he could not know that there is the divinely infused virtue of charity that extends even to enemies (264). Cf. "In this work the Philosopher speaks of happiness as it can be held in this life. For the happiness of the other life exceeds every investigation of reason." Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, I l.9n.11 (par. 113) (*Opera*, 47.1).