THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY
TEACHING ETHICS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA: THE MAKING OF A COMMENTARY AT THE FACULTY OF ARTS (A CASE STUDY)

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“Die einzigen Gipfelgespräche, die wirklich einen Sinn haben, sind die der Alpinisten”

(Luis Trenker)

1. Introduction

Ethics at the University of Vienna, as in other European universities of the fifteenth century, belonged to the compulsory subjects for a master’s degree in the Faculty of Arts. Teaching ethics meant holding lectures and disputing questions on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. As a result of efforts by bachelors who took notes in class and “reported”, as they called it, the oral teaching, a great many manuscripts with Viennese commentaries on the *Ethics* survive. At present we can point to 21 manuscripts with commentaries on the *Nicomachean Ethics* that definitely originated at the University of Vienna; 5 more manuscripts contain commentaries that were probably written there, too.¹ This number of manuscripts dating from the same century, originating from the same university, and pertaining to the same textbook is unmatched, as far as I know, in the abundant tradition of medieval commentaries on Aristotle’s works.

In a recent article on the teaching of ethics at the University of Vienna, I studied the surviving Viennese commentaries on Aristotle’s *Ethics* in comparison with the legal framework set out in the Statutes

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¹ For a list of these manuscripts see Christoph Flüeler, “Ethica in Wien anno 1438: Die Kommentare der aristotelischen ‘Ethik’ an der Wiener Artistenfakultät”, in *Schriften*