

**Inventing the Good Life. How Italy Shaped Early Modern Moral Culture. An Exploration of the
Ethica Section in Wolfenbüttel**

International Conference

Wolfenbüttel, 18-20 October 2018

Italy had an immense influence on the social and cultural life of early modern Europe. There is little acknowledgement, however, of the strong moral imprint of this influence. Quips on superficiality, frivolity and moral corruption of the 'South', common both to the early modern period and to contemporary discourse, have overshadowed the impact the evolving "forms of life" (Quondam) on the Italian peninsula had on early modernity. From the thirteenth century onward, new social classes in the burgeoning cities and towns in Italy developed new social and cultural values. A new "urban life-style" (Ruggiero) redefined the notions of what it means to live a good life, with an emphasis on the right use of wealth, refined manners and grace, and on the importance of learning. Based on ancient ethical models, the concept of virtue became a mainstay of early modern culture and the most important ingredient for the good life, both in terms of rational self-control and creative power. Not confined to the urban centres of Northern and Central Italy, the new ideas on the good life had a huge impact on the aristocratic and courtly societies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and spread throughout Europe.

The conference will look at the influence of Italian models on early modern moral culture through a special lens: the *Ethica* section in Wolfenbüttel.

Part of the book collection of Duke August the Younger (1579-1666), preserved at today's Herzog August Bibliothek, the *Ethica* section offers us a 'window' onto the varied landscape of early modern ethics and the wealth of literature on ethics. Not only does it contain philosophical treatises and disputations, but also novels, novellas, theatrical texts, collections of proverbs, emblem books, and conduct books. The section allows us to chart the trajectories of European literature towards the middle of the seventeenth century and to measure the influence Italian literature had on it. In fact, many of the works in the section are written in or translated from the Italian language, stem from Italian authors, or were printed in Italy, bearing witness to the significance of Italy as a force of cultural and moral innovation.

The conference would like to discuss the section's wealth of literature on ethics and its Italian influence along three lines of argument.

First, the rich variety of ethical literature in the *Ethica* section suggests that the history of ethics cannot be confined to the study of 'formal' philosophical teaching, but needs to consider different early modern genres in the light of an '**informal ethics**', imparting moral lessons in a non-systematic way (Mack). Clearly many of these genres had their origin in an Italian context, and Italian authors were at the forefront of the new literary culture of the Renaissance. To understand the ways in which this literary culture shaped, or intended to shape, moral life, the following questions might be posed:

- Which subjects were discussed within informal ethical teaching? When describing the influence of Italian culture, is it possible to discern the tendency towards specific topics,

or agendas? How did certain themes contribute to the formation of the social and moral imaginary?

- How did the choice of genre influence the moral impact of literary works? Which role did Italian authors play in redefining this impact when they remodelled and reintroduced older genres such as the novella and the comedy, or invented new genres, such as the pastoral poem? Were some genres especially effective, or problematic?
- How was the dividing line between 'formal' and 'informal', 'explicit' and 'implicit' moral teaching negotiated? Which techniques were developed to impart moral lessons? To which extent did the 'informal' treatment of ethical topics lead to moral ambiguities, and how could such ambiguities be contained or controlled?
- Which role did different groups of readers and the question of literacy play? How far did attempts go to include new groups of audiences, such as the 'unlearned', women, or children? How did the emphasis on vernacular literature tie into the picture?

Second, the *Ethica* section reveals that early modern moral culture is much richer and more multidirectional than standard narratives of early modern ethics such as the „invention of autonomy“ (Schneewind), the „making of modern identity“ (Taylor), or the „loss of virtue“ (MacIntyre) imply. These narratives build on the idea that 'modern' forms of morality detached themselves from 'premodern' forms of ethics, especially from its 'eudaimonism', or centeredness on human flourishing. Against this view, we set the narrative of the '**invention of the good life**', that is a renewed emphasis on the cultivation of virtues and a radical reformulation of ancient ethics. Italian Renaissance culture is at the heart of this renewal, and it places us in the privileged position to investigate the moral dynamics of early modern culture.

- What does Italian literature tell us about the social place of ethics? Does it refer mainly to the refined taste and hedonistic tendencies in the upper echelons of society? Or does it have an impact on a wider part of society? How can literature influence whether ethics is divisive, or inclusive, elitist, or appealing to a wider spectrum of society?
- How do literary texts shape perceptions of the good life? Do they have the power to shape moral experience? Which strategies do they follow to 'interact' with their reader's life: radically reconfiguring it, holding up a mirror, reconfirming one's moral ideas, subtly influencing one's perceptions? Which roles do pleasure and entertainment play?
- What do literary discussions or representations of virtue and virtuous conduct contribute to one's moral formation? How does it nourish moral thought and feeling?
- How does a work's being 'fiction' contribute to its moral importance? What role does narrative play? How are characters and their lives employed?

Third, the *Ethica* section helps to re-examine the diffusion of Italian culture on a European scale. Therefore, our focus on Italy does not so much promote a narrow and arbitrary 'nationalist focus', singling out one country to the detriment of others, but aims at an exploration of the role played by ethics and morality in the **transmission and translation processes** involved in the proliferation of cultural models first developed in the Italian city-states and at Italian courts.

- How did new conceptual spaces and social practices that reconfigured the complex relationship between ethics, literature, and material culture spread throughout Europe, and how did they react in different social and political circumstances?

- What role did translation play? How does it change the original social and moral coordinates of Italian literature? How is it employed on an ideological level, and what made the translations necessary?

Literature

- Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (London 1981).
- Peter Mack, "Informal Ethics in the Renaissance," in *Rethinking Virtue, Reforming Society. New Directions in Renaissance Ethics, c.1350 - c.1650*, edited by David E. Lines and Sabrina Ebbersmeyer (Turnhout 2013), pp. 189-213.
- Amedeo Quondam, *Forma del vivere. L'etica del gentiluomo e i moralisti italiani* (Bologna 2010).
- Guido Ruggiero, *The Renaissance in Italy. A social and cultural history of the Rinascimento* (New York 2015)
- Jerome B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy. A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge 1998).
- Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge 1989).

Paper Proposals

For the conference, we are experimenting with a new format, combining the general topic, the moral culture of early modern Europe and its Italian influence, with a specific selection of source materials - the books in the *Ethica* section. Therefore, **your paper should combine three aspects, ideally:**

- It should, first, concern a volume in the *Ethica* section. For an alphabetical list, see <https://ethica.digital/section/list>, or search Wolfenbüttel's OPAC, <http://opac.lbs-braunschweig.gbv.de/DB=2/>) The idea is that of a bottom-up approach. You might want to choose one specific volume/work in the section as your point of departure and elaborate on it for more general observations. As the volumes in the section often contain two or more works, you might also be interested in studying the volume as "Sammelband" in its combination of heterogeneous works.
- Secondly, your paper should have a clear link to Italy, in the broad sense of the Italian peninsula as one important centre of early modern European culture. The author of your work can be Italian, for example, or its language Italian; it may be printed in Italy, or based on the work of an Italian author.
- Third, your paper should reflect on the role played by ethics/morality in the volume you are presenting. Obviously, you do not need to reduce the work in question to its "moral message". More to the point, we are interested in the complex and often ambiguous interplay between entertainment and moral instruction, as well as the place of this moral instruction in early modern society.

It is also possible to select works not present in the section if they shed special light on specific aspects of the Italian influence on European moral culture. The purpose of the discussion will be to foster a new kind of attention to the cultural history of ethics, not in the sense of another type of sub-specialization, but as a trans-disciplinary way of thinking. **Presented papers will be collected for publication in a collected volume.**

The languages of the conference are English, Italian, French and German. Please send title, short abstract (max. 250 words), keywords, and contact information (including institutional affiliation) to Matthias Roick ([matthias.roick\[at\]theologie.uni-goettingen.de](mailto:matthias.roick@theologie.uni-goettingen.de)) by 15 June 2018.

Acceptance decisions will be sent via email on 30 June 2018.

Organization

The conference is organized by Matthias Roick (Göttingen/Wolfenbüttel), together with Franziska Meier (Göttingen), Enrica Zanin (Strasbourg), and Claudia Rossignoli (St. Andrews) and takes place in the framework of the Freigeist project “The Ways of Virtue. The *Ethica* section in Wolfenbüttel and the History of Ethics in Early Modern Europe”. It will be held at the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel.

The invitation to the conference includes accommodation (four nights). As for your travel arrangements, there will be an allowance of up to 250 € to cover travel expenses for those coming from within Europe, and 600 € for those coming from overseas.