

## PHILIP MELANCHTHON'S THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY: A CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract.** The paper is devoted to the theological and philosophical activity of Philip Melanchthon, the closest associate of Martin Luther. The article gives a brief biography of Melanchthon. It shows his significant contribution to the creation of key doctrinal texts of the Reformation era, namely the Augsburg Confession, the Apologia Augsburgische Confession, the Schmalkalden Articulae, the Catechisms, and the so-called Formula of Concord. Further, in the modern Western history of philosophy it is believed that all philosophy of the New Age up to the Enlightenment was prepared to a large extent by Melanchthon's writings. "Dilthey's thesis" that Melanchthon's "*theologia naturalis*" prepared and laid the foundations of "all the human sciences of the seventeenth century" is well known. The paper shows that Melanchthon is not only the founder of the modern Geisteswissenschaften – "sciences of spirit", but can also be considered as one of the founders of the modern natural science philosophy. In his book "*Initia doctrinae physicae*" he came very close to formulating the principle of inertia, and also insisted on the possibility of a mathematical description of the Universe. It is no accident that in Germany Melanchthon is called "Praeceptor Germaniae" - the Teacher or Mentor of Germany.

**Keywords:** Melanchthon, evangelical theology, Geisteswissenschaften, anthropology, natural philosophy.

### *Introduction*

There are not many personalities in the world history, whose activity could influence the whole epoch and determine the main vectors of the world's development for centuries to come. Even fewer of them are those who, playing on the world stage, could leave their contribution in many areas of human culture and being not only the leading actor, but also the main director of the world drama being played out. One such bright personality was Philip Melanchthon, Martin Luther's closest friend and associate. One cannot but agree with the famous German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey that "if one seeks to trace the gradual formation

of the doctrine of an unchanging natural system of truths in the human spirit, to try to establish in this process the influence of ancient writers, especially Roman philosophy and the tradition conditioned by it, one should turn to Melanchthon" [1, p. 126]. It was Dilthey who made the famous assertion, later called "Dilthey's thesis" in the history of philosophy, that Melanchthon's "theologia naturalis" prepared and developed all the foundations of the sciences of the spirit in the seventeenth century [2, pp. 186-254].

Despite Dilthey's appreciation of Melanchthon's work as the founder of modern Geisteswissenschaften – "sciences of spirit", even in his characterization there is an underestimation of the role and place of Philip Melanchthon's work in the history of culture. Dilthey writes: "Melanchthon belongs to those people, usually underestimated by posterity, who, **not possessing creative abilities** (highlighted by the author), managed to develop a huge activity. He was not a discoverer. And comparing himself with Luther, he felt it more strongly than others" [2, p. 160]. With all due respect to Dilthey, one can safely assert that such a statement is possible only with a cursory and superficial study of both the biography and Melanchthon's work itself. Yes, Melanchthon himself very often puts Luther first in his texts. And this is his conscious position. It has its own reasons, the consideration of which within the framework of this article does not make sense. However, even a cursory glance at the authorship of the main doctrinal texts of the Reformation is enough to understand the true role and place of Philip Melanchthon within the epoch of that time.

### ***Formation of Philip Melanchthon's Ideas***

Melanchthon is usually known as a theologian and one of the reformers of the Church, author of the main doctrinal document of the Protestant Church - the Augsburg Confession "*Confessio Augustiana*" and the famous theological work "Loci communes" - the first theological work of the Evangelical Church. His life, however, was not confined to his reform work alone. The thin and even puny Melanchthon always kept in the shadow of the outwardly bright and heavy figure of Luther, playing a leading role in the schism of the Catholic Church.

Already from childhood, fate had destined him for an outstanding role. Philip Melanchthon (Schwarzerdt) was born on February 16, 1497 in the small German town of Bretten (Lower Palatinate), now part of Baden-Württemberg. The highly gifted young man, son of the princely gunsmith Georg Schwarzerdt from Heidelberg, had already made a brilliant career at an early age. He spent the first eleven years of his life in his hometown. At the age of seven the little boy was unforgettably impressed by the siege of his native Bretten during the internecine war in which his father took part, and was seriously wounded. A few years later, not having recovered from his wounds, his father died (27.10.1521) and eleven-year-old Philip was taken to live with relatives, first in the city of Speyer, and then in Pforzheim to his maternal relative Elisabeth Reichlin, a sister of the famous German humanist Johann Reichlin. Her brother Johann Reichlin (1455-1522) was a prominent repre-

sentative of the German Humanist era. Author and translator of numerous treatises, he is known, above all, as a connoisseur of the Hebrew language. He is famous for such works on the subject of Kabbalah as “*De arte cabalistica*” (On the Art of Kabbalah) and “*De vero mirifico*” (On the Wonderful Word). He was persecuted several times by the Inquisition, but always found high patrons, including Cardinal Aegidius, head of the Augustinian order to which Martin Luther belonged.

On March 15, 1509, Johann Reichlin gave the young Philip Schwarzerdt a new name, Philip Melanchthon. At that time, the adoption of a Latinized or Greekized form of a name was, generally speaking, common for Renaissance representatives.

Thanks to his brilliant home education and his studies at the Latin school in Pforzheim, he entered the University of Heidelberg at the age of twelve (14.10.1509), from which he graduated two years later at the age of fourteen! In the summer of June 10, 1511, he received his bachelor’s degree there.

At Heidelberg he receives a classical education that remained virtually unchanged since the Middle Ages. It was based on an in-depth study of the Latin language, its grammar, scholastic philosophy and logic. At the time it was called the course of the Liberal Arts - the Trivium and Quadrivium. The Trivium included grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, while the Quadrivium included astronomy, arithmetic, geometry, and music theory. Note that the study of astronomy also meant the compulsory study of astrology, the interest and excellent knowledge of which Melanchthon is noted by all historians. Thus, later Luther joked: “While I go to drink beer, Philip goes to study horoscopes”.

After receiving his bachelor’s degree, because of his young age, Melanchthon could not continue his further education in Heidelberg and in 1512 moved to Tübingen, where his famous uncle Johann Reichlin taught. The education here differs sharply from that of Heidelberg. It is based on the so-called *Via moderna*, a course of modern humanistic education. At Reichlin’s school he studied Greek and Hebrew in depth, in other courses he studied the works of ancient philosophers and poets, in parallel he studied mathematics, law, medicine, and continued to deepen his knowledge of astronomy. At the same time he becomes interested in chronology and world history. Two years after he began his studies, he received a master’s degree.

In the spring of 1518, he published a Greek grammar book, which brought him his first public fame. This book subsequently went through more than fourteen editions. At Wittenberg he pursues many theological studies and in September 1519 (19.9.1519) he receives the degree of bachelor of theology - *Baccalaurus biblicus*. In August 1518, at the age of 21 (!) he becomes a professor at the University of Wittenberg. Already on the third day after taking office, he makes a speech to students and professors about a comprehensive reform of education. Pedagogy, educational issues have always been in the center of attention of Philip Melanchthon. He succeeded in laying several scientific schools in theology, philology and pedagogy, and it is not by chance that he is called “*Praeceptor Germaniae*” - the Teacher or Mentor of Germany.

In Wittenberg he met Martin Luther, and his entire subsequent life became inextricably linked with this figure. Luther in the spiritual and political life of his

epoch blew like a real hurricane, the result of which was a painful split in the ecclesiastical unity of the Christian world in the West. The history of the Reformation began on October 31, 1517, the eve of All Saints' Day, when Luther nailed his famous "95 Theses" on indulgences in Wittenberg on the gates of the cathedral. At the time, it was a common practice to express disagreement with the official point of view. Luther was not thinking of any reform at this time, and the Theses were in fact an invitation to a disputation. However, these "Theses" had the effect of a bombshell. The clang of the hammer used to nail down the "95 Theses" was instantly heard throughout Europe. The theses, which were intended for theologians, were already being actively discussed in all universities and religious centers within two weeks.

Events developed rapidly. In 1518 Luther holds a disputation first with his Augustinian order, a little later with representatives of the papal authorities, first in Augsburg, and then in 1519 in Leipzig. Luther is urged to renounce his views, he invariably refuses and in 1520 the Pope excommunicates him from the Church, and in the following year 1521 at the Reichstag in Worms, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V outlaws him. Luther was forced into hiding. Already later in 1529 Charles V, to prevent the split of the Church decided to physically destroy Luther and his supporters. The Reichstag, which he convened at this time in Speyer, voted for an intolerant attitude towards Lutheranism. Germany was not a united state at this time, 6 princes disobeyed this decision and 14 cities "protested". Thus Protestantism was born and there was a church split first in Germany and then throughout Europe.

Melancthon was always close to Luther, deftly maneuvering between the two parties. Luther was always intolerant, known for his harsh and even very rude statements, speeches and writings against the Roman Pope and the Roman Catholic Church in general. Melancthon, firmly taking Luther's position, subtly circumvented his harshness and sought a link to traditional Catholic theology. He became famous as a theologian for his work *Loci communes* (Common Places), a synthetic exposition of the foundations of evangelical theology.

In all the following years he was a constant participant in all political events connected with the emergence of Protestantism. He wrote almost all the major doctrinal texts of the Evangelical Church, namely the Augsburg Confession, the Apologia of the Augsburg Confession, the Schmalkalden Articles, the Catechisms, and the so-called Formula of Concord. We should also note that in the creation of the Lutheran translation of the Bible, which led to the creation of the German literary language, the leading role belongs also to Melancthon, because it was translated mainly not from Greek and not from the Latin Vulgate, but directly from the Masoretic text of the Old Testament in Hebrew, which Melancthon knew perfectly. The 28 volumes (!) of the so-called *Corpus Reformatorum* and 6 volumes of *supplements* to them (*Supplementa*), written again by Melancthon alone, form the basis of Lutheran thought.

During the political struggle Melancthon did not leave his intense teaching and research activities. From under his pen come out numerous works. What is

striking is not only and not so much their number, which is truly inclusive, but only a cursory coverage of the topics and disciplines in which he was professionally engaged. He published numerous textbooks, especially in Latin and Greek, books on rhetoric, dialectic and jurisprudence, numerous theological works and commentaries on the texts of Holy Scripture. He translated Latin authors such as Cicero, Ovid, Quintilian, Tacitus, Terentius and Virgil; Greek authors such as Aeschylus, Hesiod, Lucian, Lycurgus, Pindar, Thucydides and others. He wrote in different years on philosophical ethics and anthropology, three fundamental works on world history, chronology and geography. A good two dozen volumes of polemics are devoted to current political events. And that's just the books... Separate small works you will find Melanchthon and on botany, medicine, natural law and the theory of state structure. He also composed about 500 poems in Latin and about 50 in Ancient Greek. His most extensive epistolary heritage - about 9500 letters - has been preserved! Note that the addressees of letters were even in Moscow Russia ... Melanchthon's work capacity was truly titanic. In his youth, his friends seriously feared for his health, seeing the intensity of his studies ...

### ***Influence of Philip Melanchthon's Concepts on the World Philosophy***

Until the end of the nineteenth century, Melanchthon's works were assiduously studied not only in Protestant universities but also in Catholic universities. And this is not surprising! One of the leading trends in modern Catholic thought is still Neo-Thomism, the modern continuation of scholastic philosophy. Besides Thomas Aquinas himself, the main representative of the so-called second scholasticism was Francisco Suarez (1548-1617). His main work *Metaphysical Disputations* (1597) was a response to one of Melanchthon's philosophical works, namely his *Dialectic*.

Once again, in the Western history of philosophy, the view is firmly established that all subsequent philosophy of the New Age, up to the Enlightenment, was prepared to a large extent by Melanchthon's writings. At the very beginning of this article we referred to Wilhelm Dilthey's statement that Melanchthon's "*theologia naturalis*" prepared and laid the foundations of "all the human sciences of the seventeenth century".

This fact is well known, for the last century it is devoted, especially in Germany, a large amount of literature and in this paper we will not dwell on it in detail. The emphasis will be on a somewhat different aspect of Melanchthon's activity, which for a long time remained in the shadows and only recently has received proper coverage.

In 1997, the 500th anniversary of Philip Melanchthon's birth was widely celebrated in Germany. In connection with the anniversary, a great number of new publications devoted to his activities appeared. And here came publications that reasonably prove that the foundation of our scientist-technocratic civilization is also directly connected with Melanchthon's works. To be more precise, a number of his works as early as the sixteenth century laid the foundations of the modern understanding of the natural sciences. It was he who, a century before Descartes

and Galileo, put forward the ideas that laid the foundations of our scientific civilization. For example, in the book *"Initia doctrinae physicae"* Melanchthon comes very close to formulating the principle of inertia, which only a century later will be completed by Galileo and Descartes, as well as not ambiguously states the possibility of a mathematical description of physical phenomena, which at that time was contrary to the prevailing Aristotelian ideas about the world. Here I can refer to the research of the contemporary German philosopher, director of the Melanchthon House-Museum in Bretten, Günter Frank.

Frank notes that the key concept in Melanchthon's natural philosophy is that of *motion*. For him it is obvious: nature is not cognizable in the negation of motion. Like the entire preceding tradition, he regards motion as the basic phenomenon of nature.

However, the question arises, how exactly is motion to be understood as a primary phenomenon of natural processes? And formally Melanchthon follows the Aristotelian position when discussing this question, which he considers against the background of various commentators: *"motion is the act of an entity that is in potentia, precisely because it (the entity) is in potentia (motus est actus eius quod est in potentia, in quantum huiusmodi)"* [3, p. 45]. By *ens in potentia* he means *an object that can take form and strive for it*. *Actus*, on the other hand, is *action, activity in the object itself, which can become substantial or accidental*. This distinction played a major role in the traditional understanding of motion: motion that does not move itself was regarded as accidental, and, on the contrary, that which moves itself was regarded as substantive. Nature was seen as the subject of motion.

As Günter Frank notes, it was decisive that "Melanchthon is interested only in the accidental side of movement, which he identifies with the Aristotelian concept of 'entelechy' and, like Boethius and Cicero, translates as 'actus', i.e. activity (action). He formulates his understanding of motion in this way: motion is an act, i.e., an action, i.e., the attainment of form or purpose, or the loss of form in an object that is "in potency", i.e., that can assume form or aspire to it. (Movement) is an act as long as the object strives for that form" [4, pp. 22-36].

This definition of motion was unacceptable to the scholastic philosophers. In general, the following conclusion follows from it: motion, having been started for some reason, can exist independently, until it is stopped by other forces, and does not pass to rest, as Aristotle supposed, having reached its "natural place". This means, however, that motion, once begun, may never cease. Such a conclusion is in no way consistent with the Aristotelian understanding of motion. In this understanding of motion, a body can move by virtue of its inherent property. This means the understanding of motion as an accidental action, which essentially destroys the Aristotelian understanding of motion. For Aristotle, the concept of motion is connected with the doctrine of act and potency, with the essence of a thing, and thus has an ontological character. With the understanding of motion as an accidental action there is, we can say, a de-ontologization of this concept. Motion can now be explained by the properties inherent in the object itself and the causes of motion, and does not require clarification of the essence of the thing.

According to Melanchthon, nature can be conceptualized within the framework of the universal connection of phenomena, the connection of everything with everything, the universal causality of being, on the basis of which motion can be understood. Such a position cannot be regarded as materialistic, but is related to the deontologization of Aristotelian-Scholastic naturphilosophy. “The rejection of the doctrine of act and potency in the notion of motion, central to Aristotelian ontology and universal causality in no way means for Melanchthon a break from the divine basis of the world. For him it is the elimination of the old dualism: the forces for the explanation of motion and matter do not appear from outside, do not oppose them in an ontological sense; the whole order comes from nature itself, since God created it in this way” [4, pp. 45 - 46].

Melanchthon’s philosophy shows a clear tendency to understand nature solely on the basis of its immanent principles and laws, a tendency that would later be completed only by René Descartes, in whom all the soul-spiritual became completely separated from matter. This tendency leads ultimately to the understanding of matter as something independent, with its own laws and independent existence. It is significant to note that it was Melanchthon who was one of the first to introduce the concept of “*machina mundi*” and “*universa machina*”, which is characterized by universal causality manifested through mathematical structures.

So, summarizing here, we can state that Melanchthon’s naturphilosophical works were the ideological basis, on which later were built the foundations of a completely new understanding of natural science, characteristic of our era.

### ***Originality of Philip Melanchthon’s thinking***

If we return to Dilthey’s thesis, in this paper I will focus only on the following. After Dilthey’s work, when Melanchthon’s role in the history of culture became clear, the sword of Damocles loomed over the figure of Luther’s associate. It was with him, with his works that the secularization of theology, the rationalization of the truths of Revelation, the dissociation of theology and philosophy, or to put it briefly: the Reformer and Humanist came to be seen as the forerunner of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which paved a direct path to all the troubles of modern civilization.

Such a statement is too straightforward and does not correspond to historical facts. Here I can refer again to Günter Frank’s work on Melanchthon’s philosophy “Die theologische Philosophie Melanchthons (1497-1560)” [4, p. 50]. The work shows that Melanchthon’s entire philosophy is based on fundamentally different foundations than the philosophy of the coming Enlightenment. And there is no paradox here. Yes, Melanchthon’s philosophy prepared and laid the foundations for a new understanding of the world order from social philosophy to natural philosophy, but, if we can put it this way, the prepared vessel was subsequently filled with a fundamentally different content.

Here I shall only dwell on one point in Melanchthon’s philosophy where the difference with New European philosophy is clearly seen. His whole social philos-

ophy is closely connected with his anthropology. Melanchthon in this point follows a traditional metaphysics that goes back to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. More specifically, his anthropology, the doctrine of the soul, is primarily closely related to the metaphysics of Albert the Great, Cicero, and is also based on his own interpretation of the Apostle Paul's Epistles to the Romans. Key for Melanchthon is the notion of "notitiae naturales". According to this concept, the human soul (anima), or rather its highest beginning (mens), is originally connected with God himself. Man, following this position, possesses, from the very moment of his creation, the capacity for direct understanding of the essence of things. His mind possesses transcendent faculties that take him beyond the created world. It is clear that such a position has nothing in common either with nominalism, which has been tried to be associated with the name of Melanchthon, or with the forthcoming philosophical discourse of Descartes or Francis Bacon. Both proceed from a "pessimistic epistemology". As Martin Heidegger quite rightly observes, if one disassembles, the basis of New European philosophy is not the cogito at all, but René Descartes's method of universal doubt. As Heidegger notes, cogitare is Descartes's "essentially doubting representation, double-checking, calculating provision: cogitare is dubitare .... Doubt is here understood as an essential referring to the indubitable, the unambiguous, and its authentication..... That all cogitare is essentially dubitare means nothing else than: representation is a securing establishment" [5, p. 123]. At the heart of New European philosophy, despite its numerous transformations, lies the *method of doubt*. It is this method, which, having emerged at the dawn of the modern era, permeates, binds together, but at the same time undermines the entire edifice of modern culture. It is this principle that dissolves even human *subjectivity*, which, in our opinion, is the basis of the entire postmodern era. If the method of doubt is universal, as Descartes said, then it is bound to challenge the assertion of *az esm, I am*, which is the basis of all subjectivity.

We find a radically different approach and different consequences in Melanchthon. Whereas in Descartes we can speak of "epistemological pessimism", here the position is exactly the opposite. Melanchthon recoils from the "metaphysics of light" characteristic of the entire Neoplatonist tradition. There is a *light* that pervades every human being, and its root lies in the transcendent spheres, which opens up completely different horizons of cognition for man. It is also important that this *light* is one for everyone, which lays down, in principle, completely different paradigmatic settings for society. All of the above requires, generally speaking, a more detailed discussion, which we will try to fulfill in the following works devoted to the work of Philip Melanchthon.

### ***Conclusion***

To summarize, we can state that Melanchthon's socio-philosophical views, based on his theology, have a dual character. On the one hand, he relied on the ancient tradition, but at the same time he laid down new paradigmatic approaches, unfortunately, only partially realized in the future. The same duality accompa-



nied, by the way, his socio-political activity. Melanchthon, despite all the collisions among the circle of Reformers, first of all Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, constantly acted as a reconciler, seeking a compromise between them, but also with the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, as is unanimously noted by all unbiased historians, the Reforms that were carried out led Europe into the future to a series of bloody wars and events that did not clearly end until a century and a half later, only after the devastating Thirty Years War in 1649. Even more disturbing, in our view, was the spiritual climate in Europe, and subsequently in America, a Protestant power in spirit, that arose with the advent of Protestantism. The reform had to be carried out *within* Catholicism, without splitting it, which is what all the activities of the Reformers, among whom Philip Melanchthon was and played not the least role, eventually led to.

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### *Transliteration*

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**Филипп Меланхтонның теологиясы мен философиясы: қазіргі көзқарас**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақала Мартин Лютердің ең жақын серіктесі Филипп Меланхтонның теологиялық және философиялық қызметіне арналған. Мақалада Меланхтонның қысқаша өмірбаяны келтірілген. Оның Реформация дәуіріндегі негізгі дін мәтіндерін құруға қосқан елеулі үлесі, атап айтқанда Аугсбург діні, Шмалькальден артикулдары, Катехизистер және т.б. Келісім формуласы деп аталған еңбектері талданған. Жалпы Батыс философиясы тарихында Жаңа дәуірде, ағарту дәуіріне дейін, барлық философиялық ілімдер негізінен Меланхтонның еңбектерімен байланысты деп саналады. Дильтейдің Меланхтонның «*theologia naturalis*» негізінде «XVII ғасырдың барлық гуманитарлық ғылымдары» қалыптасты деген «тезисі» белгілі. Жұмыста Меланхтон қазіргі заманғы *Geisteswissenschaften* – «рух туралы ғылымдардың» негізін қалаушы ғана емес, сонымен қатар заманауи жаратылыстану философиясының негізін қалаушылардың бірі екендігі көрсетілген. Ол өзінің «*Initia doctrinae physicae*» кітабында инерция принципін тұжырымдауға өте жақын келді, сонымен қатар универсумды математикалық тұрғыдан сипаттау мүмкіндігін талап етті. Германияда Меланхтонды «*Praeceptor Germaniae*» - Ұстаз немесе Германияның тәлімгері деп атайтындығы кездейсоқ емес.

**Түйін сөздер:** Меланхтон, евангелиялық теология, *Geisteswissenschaften*, антропология, жаратылыстану философиясы.

**Севальников А.Ю.**

**Теология и философия Филиппа Меланхтона: современный взгляд**

**Аннотация.** Работа посвящена теологической и философской деятельности Филиппа Меланхтона, ближайшего соратника Мартина Лютера. В статье приведена краткая биография Меланхтона. Показан его существенный вклад в создании ключевых вероучительных текстов эпохи Реформации, а именно Аугсбургское вероисповедание, Апология Аугсбургского вероисповедания, Шмалькальденские артикулы, Катехизисы и т.н. Формула Согласия. Далее, в современной западной истории философии считается, что вся философия эпохи Нового времени, вплоть до эпохи Просвещения была подготовлена в значительной степени трудами Меланхтона. Хорошо известен «тезис Дильтея», что «*theologia naturalis*» Меланхтона подготовила и заложила основы «всех гуманитарных наук XVII столетия». В работе показано, что Меланхтон является не только основоположником современных *Geisteswissenschaften* – «наук о духе», но может считаться и одним из основоположников современных основ философии естествознания. В своей книге «*Initia doctrinae physicae*» он очень близко подошёл к формулировке принципа инерции, а также настаивал на возможности математического описания Универсума. Вовсе не случайно в Германии Меланхтона называют «*Praeceptor Germaniae*» - Учитель, или Наставник Германии.

**Ключевые слова:** Меланхтон, евангелическая теология, *Geisteswissenschaften*, антропология, философия естествознания.