Agricola's Place in the Development of Doctrine:
The Function of *Loci Communes* in Sixteenth-Century Exegesis and Disputation
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In *The Unaccommodated Calvin*, Richard Muller argues that Calvin adopted the

plan for the *Institutes* from the topical model of Philipp Melanchthon and Rudolph

Agricola. Agricola defined the grounds for argument by identifying the *loci*, or "the

'places' or *topoi* in which they might be found" (109). And Calvin adopted this topical

approach for the purpose of exegesis and disputation (102-11). Since *loci communes*

"most frequently took the form of a gathering of theological topics drawn out of the work

of exegesis and disputation" (5), the question is how do *loci communes* function in both

exegesis and disputation?

Because *locus communis* is a rhetorical concept, this question directs us to the

rhetorical treatises of the time. Understanding what *locus communis* meant in the

rhetorical treatises of the early sixteenth century, however, is not as straightforward as it

at first may appear. Erasmus, for example, in his ecclesiastical rhetoric, *Ecclesiastes*,

explains four uses of the *locus communis* (400-2). To complicate matters, later in the

century Lodovico Carbone in his treatise on rhetorical and dialectical commonplaces lists

some twenty uses of the term *locus communis* (86-88).

For our purposes, however, we turn to Melanchthon because he devotes a section

to the *loci communes* in his rhetoric and because he authored the most famous theological

commonplace book of sixteenth-century. In his *Elementa rhetorices*, Melanchthon notes

a new use of the *locus communis*. In the section *De locis communibus*, Melanchthon

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explains that students need training in topics not to invent arguments, but to find them in good authors.

> For once the way is known, afterwards these matters don't have to be sought out in the rhetorical handbooks, but they must be taken from both common wisdom and from other arts. In fact these teachings are not so much fitting for invention as for choosing appropriately when the things are offered from other arts.[i] (451)

For Melanchthon *loci communes* guide the reading of authors in order to extract commonplaces and digest them into discipline-specific commonplace books such as his own *Loci Communes* (1521).

The advantage of extracting *loci communes* from reading is their usefulness when transferred from a specific question at issue to a general question (451). For example, Melanchthon gives as the specific question "Should war be marshaled against the Turks?" This question depends on the general question "Should Christians wage war or not?" If the reader transfers the question at issue from the specific question to the general question, contextual factors in the specific question, but irrelevant to the general question, fall out, and only the material consonant with the general question remains (451). Reframing the question at issue thus helps determine what is relevant.

As an example of how this works in exegesis, Melanchthon cites II Samuel 12 where the prophet Nathan chastises David for adultery. Interpreting the passage depends on understanding the general commonplace not only of chastisement but also of forgiveness. This procedure renders the proper doctrinal interpretation, a procedure that Jesus exemplifies when he excuses his disciples from harvesting grain on the Sabbath by invoking the more general locus of mistaken traditions of the Pharisees (452). Such a

transfer, Melanchthon notes, is especially useful when *loci communes* are used to prove arguments and not just to amplify passages. Often the transfer yields the major premise in a syllogism (452).

This new use of the commonplace in exegesis serves two functions. First, it allows the exegete to discern what is relevant in a passage and avoid elements unrelated to the exegetical purpose. Second, with the question made general, the *loci communes* provide proof for arguments so the interpreters may apply the commonplaces to make new arguments, and, what is more difficult, understand new arguments in terms of the *loci communes* (452). Melanchthon criticizes the practice of indiscriminately collecting authors' sayings because this practice persuades only fools (452). For the best method of extracting and organizing *loci communes*, Melanchthon recommends Rudolph Agricola's *De formando studio*, in which Agricola explains the two-step process of reading classical authors and excerpting passages for commonplace books. Agricola urges the same method for sacred literature and recommends the full explanation of this process found in his work *De inventione dialectica*, to which we now turn.

In book two, chapter twenty-six, Agricola raises two questions: how to recognize arguments in authors and how to determine from which commonplace arguments are drawn. He raises these questions because authors don't argue openly as dialecticians would. Rather, skillful authors hide arguments in a style so natural that it makes the arguments difficult to detect. Moreover, authors obscure arguments with figures of speech. Finally, authors often disguise the premise and the conclusion in a single proposition (354). The result is that the unwary reader is easy to ambush (355).

Agricola offers simple cases to explain first how to recognize arguments and

second how to identify the relevant *locus communis*. The first task requires finding the middle term of the implied syllogism. The middle term is the term in a premise not used in the conclusion. In the following example, "A *philosopher* will not rightly put away his wife; therefore, Cato will not rightly put away his wife," the middle term is "philosopher." The second step in finding the argument is to compare the middle term to the term in the conclusion that does not occur in the premise. In this case it is "Cato." The reader examines the commonplaces to determine by elimination and comparison the semantic relationship that best describes the two terms "philosopher" and "Cato." (See chart.)

Partim in ſubſtātia rei, è quibus res idipſum qđ ſunt, accipiunt, ut
- Definitio 1
- Genus 2
- Species 3
- Propriū & diſcrētia 4
- Totum 5
- Partes 6
- Coniugata 7

Partim circa ſubſtantiā, qui cum rei inſint, mo-dum quendā ipſi affectio nemᵹ afferunt, ut
- Adiacentia 8
- Actus horum 9
- Subiectum horum 10

Alij interni ſunt, & hi rurſum

Locorū

Aut neceſſitā te quapiā rei cohærent, ut

Cognata, quæ ſunt alteris altera naſcē di ac pueniendi ori gine coniuncta, ut
- Cauſſæ per quas res fit
  - Efficiens 11
  - Finis 12
- Euenta quæ fiunt p cauſas
  - Effecta 13
  - Deſtinata 14

Applicita, quæ addita rei extrinſecus, habitudi nem quandam ac deno-minationē ei præbent, ut
- Locus 15
- Tempus 16
- Connexa 17

Alij ex terni at que hi

Aut nulla ne ceſſitate ſunt rei cōiuncti, ut

Accidentia, quæ eius ſunt generis, ut & ipſa, et res, cū altero alterū et ſine altero eſſe poſſit, ut
- Contingentia 18
- Nomen rei 19
- Pronunciata 20
- Comparata 21
- Similia & diſſimilia 22

Repugnantia, quorū al-terum dici id eſſe quod alterum non poteſt, ut
- Oppoſita 23
- Diſtātia ſeu diuerſa 24

D Defini-

The first determination is whether the middle term "philosopher" compares with the final term "Cato" intrinsically or extrinsically. In this case, the relationship between "Cato" and "philosopher" is intrinsic. This determination eliminates all extrinsic commonplaces. The second determination is whether "philosopher" is part of Cato's

substance. It is not since being a philosopher is not essential to being human. This determination eliminates the commonplaces that belong to substance and leaves only those that are both internal and non-substantial: adjacents, acts, and subjects.

The next determination is to compare the three remaining commonplaces to see which best describes the semantic relationship of the terms "philosopher" and "Cato." Agricola eliminates the two least related commonplaces: subject and act. "Philosopher" is not the subject of "Cato" because being a philosopher is not the basis of or the source of Cato's being. Nor is "philosopher" an act of Cato because being a philosopher is a state, not a change wrought by nature or will. Because "philosopher" is Cato's manner but not his substance, the *locus communis* best describing the semantic relation between "philosopher" and " Cato" is adjacent (355, 62-76).

But here, Agricola cautions that the middle term, which was compared to the final term in the conclusion, not only implicates one commonplace, but also, if compared to the remaining term, implicates yet another commonplace. Hence, the remaining term, "wife," must also be compared to "Cato." To demonstrate the second task, Agricola offers a new premise for the old conclusion: "Cato must not put away a *good servant*; therefore, how much less ought Cato to put away a good wife." The middle term of this new argument is "good servant." When "good servant" is compared to "Cato," it relates through the commonplace of connected things such as master and servant. Now the reader can consider the semantic relations of "servant" and "wife" with respect to "Cato." "Wife" relates to "Cato" through the commonplace of compared things, while "servant" relates to "Cato" through the commonplace of connected things. Since the relationship between husband and wife is more evident than the relationship between master and

servant, the argument from compared things is stronger than the argument from connected things, and is best inferred from the locus of comparison (355-6).

This process allows the reader both to evaluate the argument against its other semantic possibilities and to identify the argument for a commonplace book. For example, the reader could list the commonplaces as headings. Under the heading "Arguments from compared things," he would list the statement "Cato must not rightly put away a good servant; therefore, Cato will not put away his wife." This same technique of reducing a literary passage to its propositional content based on commonplaces applies equally to scripture.

The popularity of *Loci Communes* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is puzzling without investigating how the concept of *locus communis* changed in the rhetorical handbooks of the sixteenth century, particularly among Melanchthon and his Lutheran followers, who used Agricola's understanding of the *loci communes* for exegesis of scripture and for doctrinal disputation. As Owen Chadwick notes in his landmark study, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development*, the Spanish Jesuits adopted propositional disputation in theological discussions, thus ushering in a phase in doctrinal development known as the propositional phase (21-48). This propositional phase, however, was preceded by the use of propositions in *loci communes*, most notably by Melanchthon. Melanchthon, as noted by Dickinson (54), first employed *loci communes* for scriptural exegesis and theological disputation, but he derived the procedure of reducing statements to their propositional content and collecting the propositions into commonplace books from Rudolph Agricola.

Notes

[i] My translation. *Nam via quadam cognita, postea res non in libellis rhetoricis quaerendae sunt, sed tum a communi prudentia, tum ex aliis artibus sumendae. Etenim haec precepta non tam ad inveniendum conducunt, quam ad eligendum idonea, cum res ex aliis artibus offerentur.*

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