The Young and Clueless?
Wheare, Vossius, and Keckermann on the Study of History

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Abstract: In their debate on whether or not the young should be allowed to study history, Degory Wheare and Gerhardus Vossius quote Bartholomäus Keckermann and state that he wants to exclude the young from studying history. Wheare arguing for Keckermann's purported position, Vossius opposing it. Their disagreement is part of a larger controversy on the relevance of history for moral instruction in general, contemplating the question whether or not history is best understood as ‘philosophy teaching by example.’ But the interpretation of Keckermann's position presupposed by both Wheare and Vossius is wrong. Keckermann's Ramist predecessors argued against a central presupposition of Wheare's views, i.e., the exclusion of the young from studying moral philosophy. Keckermann's own position in this regard is not fully clear. But a closer analysis of his distinction between methods for writing and for reading history shows that Keckermann did want the young to study history. If Keckermann had believed that such exclusion were necessary, it could only have been related to reading historical texts, not to writing them: writing texts about historical figures or events does not require moral precepts, but only the application of certain logical tools. But a view that implies that writing a historical text should be possible for students, whereas reading such a text would go beyond their capabilities, is absurd. Hence, we can assume that Keckermann expected the young to study both history and moral philosophy.1

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses the dispute between Degory Wheare and Gerhardus Vossius on the question whether or not young students should be allowed to read historical texts. Their disagreement is part of a larger debate on the relevance of history for moral instruction. We can trace its roots back to the teaching of rhetoric in the late Roman republic and early empire: Cicero believed history to be a “teacher of life” (De Oratore 2.9.36), Pseudo-Dionysius of Halicarnassus went so far as to claim that “history is philosophy teaching by examples” (De arte rhetorica 11.2.19). Seen through the lens of a contemporary understanding of the tasks of the historian, such ideals seem to be of questionable value: “It seldom occurred to these classical authors that accurate representation of past reality was difficult to attain if the main purpose of the historian was to teach moral lessons.” A history written for purely edificatory purposes may be forced to omit those aspects of the historical record that do not fit with its overarching narrative.

The question whether or not history should serve as a store of examples for moral instruction is not purely theoretical. It also influenced early modern reading practices, particularly the production of excerpts for private consumption in commonplace books and public access in compilations and florilegia. If the reader was expected to make use of the instruction to be gleaned from historical works, these ‘fruits of history’ had to be collected in a methodical and structured manner. This raises questions for both the scope and the structure of such compilations. If the function of history is primarily moral instruction, this suggests that the gory details of history better be omitted from such collections, since the confrontation with the vices of humanity may pose a moral risk to the untutored reader. And the subject headings of such

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5 Ann Blair, “Historia in Zwinger’s Theatrum humanae vitae,” in Gianna Pomata, Nancy Siraisi (eds.), Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, pp. 269–296, at p. 278, discusses the problem with regard to one of the most extensive florilegia of the early modern period: Zwinger believed such moral selectivity to be misguided.
collections might best be taken from the disciplines of practical philosophy, so that the connection between example and precept is immediately obvious. But there exists an alternative to a moral sanitisation of history, namely to allow only mature students to apprehend the historical record in its totality. The dispute between Wheare and Vossius on the question whether or not the young should study history should be seen in this wider context. This paper focuses only on one aspect of this complex debate, namely the reception of the writings of the Gdansk philosopher Bartholomaeus Keckermann by both Wheare and Vossius. Both did not really do justice to Keckermann’s stance, because they based their reading only on the historical methodology developed in *De natura et proprietatibus historiae commentarius* (1610), ignoring the theory of philosophical education to be found in his logical and ethical works. From these additional sources a somewhat paradoxical picture will emerge:

On the one hand, Keckermann defends a quite traditional understanding of the role of history in the education of the young, namely as furthering their moral development through the study of the past. On the other hand, he achieves this goal through an innovative and prima facie highly counterintuitive redefinition of the roles of writing on the one hand and reading or excerpting history on the other hand. The author of a historical text does not use moral categories, but only logical ones. Only the reader of a historical text subsumes its *exempla* under subject headings taken from the disciplines of practical philosophy. This has interesting implications: the author of a historical text uses only logical categories and disregards the moral dimension of events. It is the reader who is obliged to take a ‘moral stance’ towards events of the past and to incorporate them as examples into his moral worldview.

The overall argument of this paper can be summarised as follows: Both Wheare and Vossius quote Bartholomäus Keckermann’s writings. Both authors believe that Keckermann wants to exclude the young from studying history. Wheare agrees with what he takes to be Keckermann’s view. Vossius opposes this thesis. But Wheare and Vossius misunderstand Keckermann’s position, because they do not take his broader views on the methodology of history into account, as they are articulated in his *Systema Ethicae* (1607) and as part of the applied

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6 See Merio Scattola, “‘Historia literaria’ als ‘historia pragmatica’: Die pragmatische Bedeutung der Geschichtsschreibung im intellektuellen Unternehmen der Gelehrtengeschichte,” in Frank Grunert, Friedrich Vollhardt (eds.), *Historia literaria: Neuordnungen des Wissens im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2007, pp. 37–63, at pp. 53–57, on the problem of topics for history in Bodin and Keckermann. See also below, footnote 41.

logic in *Gymnasium Logicum* (1608) and *Systematis Logici Plenioris Pars Altera* (1609). Keckermann’s Ramist predecessors (Talon, Goclenius, Scribonius) argued against a central presupposition of Wheare’s views, the exclusion of the young from studying moral philosophy. Keckermann’s own position in this regard is not fully clear. Still, an indirect argument that relies on his distinction between methods for writing and for reading history can show that he did not agree with Wheare. Keckermann wanted the young to study history. If Keckermann had wanted to exclude them from this subject, this exclusion could only have referred to reading historical texts, not to writing them: writing texts about historical figures or events does not presuppose the precepts of moral philosophy, but only the application of certain logical tools. However, a view that implies that writing a historical text should be possible for students, whereas reading such a text would go beyond their capabilities is not very convincing. Hence, we can safely assume that Keckermann expected young students to apply themselves to both history and moral philosophy. Keckermann thus allows for a didactic role of history, but preserves at the same time the notion that the historical record should not be subjected to moral censure.

Bartholomäus Keckermann was born in Gdansk between 1571 and 1573 and died in his hometown in 1609. Joseph S. Freedman concludes that “the value of studying Keckermann’s career and writings lies not so much in the fact that he was original in some scientific or intellectual sense of the word.” Such damning praise notwithstanding, interest in Keckermann’s work has increased steadily, but mostly in scholarship that focuses on his contributions to rhetoric and the methodology of history. Howard Hotson included his oeuvre in his investigation of German Ramism. But within the history of philosophy, only his contributions to logic, metaphysics, and, to a lesser extent, natural philosophy and ethics have attracted some attention. The seventeenth century had

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8 Freedman, “Career and Writings,” p. 325. On Keckermann’s biography, see ibid, pp. 306–308 and 326–328.


11 See Wilhelm Risse, *Die Logik der Neuzeit* (vol. 1: 1500–1640), Stuttgart–Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1964, pp. 443–450; Ulrich Leinse, *Das Ding und die Methode: Methodische Konstitution und Gegenstand der frühen protestantischen Metaphysik* (vol. 1: Darstellung), Augsburg: Maro Verlag, 1985, pp. 271–287; Cees Leijenhorst, “Place, Space and Matter in Calvinist Physics”, *The Monist* 84 (2001), pp. 520–541, at pp. 528–530; David A. Lines, “Il metodo dell’etica nella Scuola Padovana e la sua ricezione nei Paesi d’Oltremare : M. Piccart e B. Keckermann”, in Gregorio Piaia (ed.), *La presenza dell’Aristotelismo padovano nella filosofia della prima modernità*, Roma-Padova: Antenore, 2002, pp. 311–338.
apparently a higher opinion of Keckermann than later periods.\textsuperscript{12} But to be widely read does not mean that texts are read with due care as well. Keckermann’s contemporaries, the first Camden professor of history Degory Wheare and his opponent, the Flemish polymath Gerardus Vossius, misunderstood his views on the question whether or not young students should be confronted with historical texts. They concentrated only on Keckermann’s monographic contribution to the debate on the proper method of history, his \textit{De natura et proprietatibus historiae commentarius} (published posthumously 1610).\textsuperscript{13} But they did not note that essential aspects of his views on history and its role in philosophy are to be found in other texts. This suggests that a reevaluation of Keckermann’s role in seventeenth-century German philosophy would have to pay more attention to the profoundly systematic character of his thinking.

The following attempt to reconstruct Keckermann’s position in this debate more precisely requires first a clarification of Wheare’s ideas, since Mordechai Feingold believes that Wheare did not in fact intend to exclude the young from studying history.\textsuperscript{14} This assertion is dubious, since Wheare does not merely express a contingent opinion, but presents an explicit argument for why the exclusion of the young from the study of history is necessary: for him, history is nothing but ‘philosophy by example.’\textsuperscript{15} Since on Aristotle’s authority the young are too immature to study moral philosophy, this leads inevitably to their exclusion from the study of history as well. Wheare also engages with the arguments for the opposite view brought forward by Gerardus Vossius in his \textit{Ars historica} (1623).\textsuperscript{16} Vossius criticises Keckermann at length, while Whe are adopts a more positive stance towards Keckermann’s views. Vossius is convinced that Keckermann wants to defend the exclusion of the young as well. His main argument against this purported view of Keckermann is that it is at best applicable to those who write historical texts, but that the reading of historical texts is an innocent pleasure that should not be denied to students.\textsuperscript{17} In his defense of Keckermann against this objection, Whe are contends that the distinction itself is vacuous: both author and reader seek moral guidance.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[12] Freedman points to his reception in the New World in Freedman, “Career and Writings,” p. 306.
\item[15] See above, footnote 2.
\item[16] Gerardus Vossius, \textit{Ars historica sive de historiae et historices natura historiaeque scribendae praecipitis commentatio}, Lugduni Batav.: Mair, 1623.
\item[17] As will be shown below, Keckermann reverts this order: it is not the writer, but the reader of historical texts who must be knowledgeable about the domain of practical philosophy.
\end{footnotes}
from history, hence both must have the appropriate degree of emotional and cognitive maturity.

But apparently neither Wheare nor Vossius took Keckermann’s *Systema Ethicae* (1607) into account. Here, Keckermann defends a much weaker reading of Aristotle than Wheare’s, holding that the young according to Aristotle are excluded from the study of moral philosophy only *per accidens*, i.e., if they really display the kind of immaturity generically ascribed to them by Wheare. Moreover, Keckermann’s Ramist predecessors were highly critical of the exclusion proposed by Aristotle as well. If Keckermann had in fact defended the exclusion of the young from studying moral philosophy, writing historical texts would still count as a perfectly adequate task for students, but they would have to be barred from reading historical texts, because fruitful reading of history is possible only for those who have mastered the corresponding fundamental concepts of the disciplines of practical philosophy (ethics, economics, and politics).

2. Degory Wheare on Studying History

In 1623, Degory Wheare published the first edition of his influential treatise on studying history, *De ratione et methodo legendi historias dissertatio*. Wheare’s argument against the young studying history proceeds in three steps: he first reminds his audience of Aristotle’s refusal to teach moral philosophy to the young. He then appeals to the ancient topos of history as the study of philosophy by examples. Hence, the same immaturity that makes the young unfit students of moral philosophy also justifies their exclusion from the study of history.

In the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle investigates—among other things—the question of who may count as the ideal student of moral philosophy (οἰκεῖος ἀκροατής, *idoneus auditor*). An adolescent (ὁ νέος, *Junior*) does not qualify. This observation triggered an extensive debate in the

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19 See below, footnotes 46–53.


medieval and early modern commentary on Aristotle on the question whether it made sense to confront young students with its subject matter, if the philosopher himself had warned against this.

Wheare briefly reminds the reader of Aristotle’s warnings. He then suggests that Aristotle may have been justified in this skepticism about the value of moral education for the young. And, what is more important in this context, he extends this skepticism to readers of history. He argues that history is nothing else but itself a kind of philosophy that uses examples. Wheare thus identifies the overarching goals of moral philosophy and history: in both cases, we do not aim just for knowledge, but for right action and an honorable life.

But from this follows that, as in moral philosophy proper, the student of history needs certain cognitive capabilities and an adequate affective constitution. History requires the ability to comprehend the examples contained in historical texts, and to judge them correctly. And it demands the right emotions that can motivate its student to moral action. Both capabilities cannot be expected from the young. So it seems that we should take Wheare at his word and conclude that, all things considered, the young are no adequate students of history as far as he is concerned.

3. The Debate between Wheare and Vossius

Wheare tries to further strengthen his position by trying to refute the views articulated in Gerardus Vossius’s *Ars historica*. Vossius first refers to what he knows to be Keckermann’s position from *De natura et proprietatibus*:

22 Wheare, *De ratione*, p. 171. Wheare, *The Method*, p. 298.

23 Wheare, *De ratione*, p. 171: “[…] quid prohibet, quo minus nos etiam, de habili et idoneo Historiarum Lectore idem sciscamus scitum? quandoquidem, Historiam nihil aliud esse quam Philosophiam exemplis utentem, sapientes statuerunt.” Wheare, *The Method*, p. 298: “[…] what reason can be given why we may not pass the same sentence in our disquisition, concerning a fit and competent Reader of Histories; Seeing Wise Men have observed, that History is nothing but Moral Philosophy, cloathed in Examples?”

24 Wheare, *De ratione*, p. 171: “Atque ideo discendum, non ut sciamus tantum, sed bene etiam agamus, et honeste Vivamus.” Wheare, *The Method*, p. 299: “And therefore we must learn, not onely that we may know, but that we may doe well and live honestly.”

25 Wheare, *De ratione*, p. 171: “[…] Historiarum Lectori facultas adsit, discernendi exempla, quaeacunque legetur, et de ipsis recte judicandi: tum adsit lubido, et animi propensio, ea quae proba fuerint, imitandi; quae secus autem, fugiendi: omnia denique in usum suum convertendi.” Wheare, *The Method*, pp. 298f: “And in the self-same manner it is necessary for the Reader of Histories to have the faculty of Apprehending whatever Examples he Reads, and judging well of them: And then, that he should have an inclination and propensity of Mind to follow what is Good, and to shun and avoid what is Evil: and of turning all he meets with to his use and advantage.”

26 Gerardus Vossius, *Ars historica sive de historiae et historiæ natura historiæque scribendae præceptis commentatio*, Lugduni Batav.: Maire, 1623.
This is the judgment of some people, among them that of a learned man, Barth.[olomaeus] Keckermann, that, because history illustrates political philosophy through examples, historians must not be read before we have been instructed in political philosophy.\textsuperscript{27}

He has two main arguments against what he takes to be Keckermann’s views. First of all, it is possible for human beings to learn a language purely by example, without first internalising all rules of its grammar.\textsuperscript{28} But this is not the most relevant point. Vossius’s most salient objection concerns a distinction that, as he believes, is not taken into account in Keckermann:

I will be glad to have said that those commit a not unimportant error when they do not distinguish sufficiently between reading someone’s history and the gift of writing history to which nobody should apply his mind who is ignorant of political philosophy.\textsuperscript{29}

So the passive reception of historical texts must be distinguished from their production. Vossius acknowledges that writing history may have higher requirements than its mere consumption. Writing history can again happen on various levels of complexity: we should distinguish between a mere narration of historical events and a full-blown inquiry into “circumstances and causes of events” (\textit{ἰστορικῆ πραγματεία, quae curate in circumstantias et eventuum causas inquirit}, or, as Wheare renders it, “Historical perfection, which inquireth curiously into the circumstances and causes of events”).\textsuperscript{30}

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\textsuperscript{27} Vossius, \textit{Ars historica}, p. 31: “Nam hoc quorundam, et eos inter docti viri, Barth. Keckermann, judicium est, quia historia philosophiam civilem illustret exemplis, eo historicos non antea legi debere, quam philosophia civili fuerimus instructi.” Translations of all texts with the exception of Wheare are by the author.
\textsuperscript{28} Vossius puts this claim forward with a degree of caution that I take to be purely rhetorical. Cf. Vossius, \textit{Ars historica}, p. 31: “Meo autem judicio admodum est inifirmum. Non jam illud dicam, nihil absurdi esse, si exempla ante praecepta addiscamus: imo posse linguas optime absque praeceptis ullis addisci.” (“According to my judgement [sc. the matter] is still undecided. I would therefore not say that there is nothing absurd in learning examples before precepts. I should rather say that languages can be studied in a very good manner without any precepts.”) So there may be cases in which it is in fact absurd to claim that we can understand examples without knowing what they are examples for. But the study of languages is no such case—and this is what Vossius relies on in his argument against Keckermann.
\textsuperscript{29} Vossius, \textit{Ars historica}, p. 31: “Illud dixisse contentus ero, non parvum eos errorem committere, cum non satis distinguuent inter lectionem historiae alicuius, ac historiam scribendi munus, ad quod nemo philosophiae civilis ignarus applicare animum debet.”
\textsuperscript{30} Wheare, \textit{The Method}, p. 302. The Latin original in Vossius, \textit{Ars historica}, p. 31: “[…] item confundere eos nudam ac simplicem rerum omnium historiam cum \textit{ἰστορικῆ πραγματεία, quae curate in circumstantias, et eventuum causas inquirit}.” On the context of this distinction, see Salmon, “Precept,” p. 30.
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While Vossius is content to paraphrase Keckermann, Wheare feels obliged to actually quote him:

Seeing (saith Keckermann) Histories contain nothing but Examples of Precepts; and Precepts are generally delivered in a Method, but examples without any Method. Except that which is methodically taught precede, it is a common and a very mischievous errour and mistake for youth, which is led onely by the pleasure and delight of History, to begin professedly to read Histories, before it is acquainted with those Sciences and Precepts which are delivered in Order and Method, and with the common places to which all Histories ought to be reduced: Now that this is very preposterous, may be easily understood by thus comparing it with other Sciences; as for example, with Grammar, Logick, &c. For as it were absurd for a Man to desire to know and observe the examples of Grammar, Logick, or Rhetorick, before he hath learned the Rules of those Sciences: so it must needs be more absurd for one to desire to read seriously and professedly, and to observe Histories which are nothing but examples of Morality and Politicks, before he has Learned the Rules and Method of Morality and Policy, etc.31

Superficially, this quote seems to provide support for Wheare’s assumption that Keckermann agrees with him: the young lack the kind of maturity that is required for the study of history. They read it, as Keckermann claims here, for the wrong reasons, namely because they believe that the main function of history is entertainment. This means that their emotions are wrong: history must be read “seriously and professedly” in order to serve its function of conveying not only knowledge, but moral orientation. But moral orientation is impossible without knowledge about the precepts of practical philosophy. This is why we first must learn the rules of right action, before we can study history in order to apply these rules to concrete examples.

Wheare then goes on to defend Keckermann’s views, as they are articulated in the quote above, against Vossius: perfect knowledge of a language

31 Wheare, *The Method*, pp. 299–300. Wheare, *De ratione*, p. 172, quoting Keckermann, *De natura et proprietatibus*, p. 10: “Cum nihil aliud contineant (inquit Keckermannus) Historiae, quam exempla praecceptorum; habent autem praecepta methodum, exempla vero non habent methodum, nisi eam quae est in praeceptis: error est vulgatus, et valde dannosus juvenotit, qua voluptate et jucunditate studii Historici ducta, Historias ex professo incipit legere, plerumque antequam disciplinas, et praecepta ea cognoverit, quibus methodus inest, et loci communes illi, ad quos Historiae reduci debent: quod quidem valde est praeposterum; et facile intelligi potest ex comparatione aliarum disciplinarum: exempli gratia, Grammaticae, Logicae etc. Sicut enim absurdus fuerit, qui exempla Grammat. Logic. Rhetoricae, velit cognoscere, et notare, antequam dedicert praecepta: ita absurdissimus haberi debet, qui Historias, id est, Exempla Ethica, Oeconomica, Politica, serio et ex professo velit legere et notare, antequam habeat perspectam Methodum praeceptorum Ethicorum Oeconomicorum, Politicorum, etc.”
does depend on knowing its grammar.\textsuperscript{32} The distinction between writing and reading history is empty, because both activities are related: the writer wants to convey the right way of life (\textit{vivendi ratio}) through examples and the reader wants to learn. The writer wants to convey prudence, as far as it is accessible to mortals, through certain events (\textit{casus}), the reader wants to use these very events to acquire this very prudence. And these goals of history, both in writing and reading it, are asserted by Vossius himself, when he points out that whoever wants to be prudent, must be eager to observe (\textit{debet observandi esse studiosus}). Wheare states that this is impossible for the young: “Which because Children and Ignorant Men can never doe, they must of necessity want the principal fruit of Reading Histories [...]”\textsuperscript{33}

Finally, Vossius’s distinction between a mere narration and a full-blown explication of events is void as well. Such a narrative is nothing but a story (\textit{fabula}) that we hear only for pleasure (\textit{voluptas}). History has nobler aims: “But the Reader we are now forming, ought to look beyond these things: for our end is not Pleasure, but improvement, and that which is the ultimate end of all Histories, that he may be taught to live well, and happily.”\textsuperscript{34}

So Wheare reads Keckermann as stating that the young are too immature, because their motivation for reading histories does not allow them to realise their value as moral guidelines reinforcing the precepts of moral philosophy. Vossius’s distinction between reading and writing history is spurious, because both reading and writing must aim at the good life. And history that only reports events without deeper insight into their relevance for our conduct is an empty exercise without any deeper value.

This is not Keckermann’s view, if we go beyond the quote Wheare adduces to support his interpretation.\textsuperscript{35} My reconstruction of his own position proceeds in two steps: first, we will see that Keckermann interprets Aristotle as stating that it is not the young as such that should be excluded from studying moral philosophy, but only the young \textit{per accidens}, i.e., insofar as they may in fact be too immature for learning the truths contained in the discipline. The question is whether this is his own considered position, too. First, it is worth noting that Keckermann’s Ramist predecessors argued against Aristotle as stating that the young as such that should be excluded from studying moral philosophy, but only the young \textit{per accidens}, i.e., insofar as they may in fact be too immature for learning the truths contained in the discipline. Moreover, if Keckermann had agreed with Aristotle’s authority, the young would still be allowed to write historical texts, but it would not be possible for them to read historical texts. Keckermann thus disagrees with a key tenet of Vossius’s stance, namely that the young should read historical

\textsuperscript{32} For the following, see Wheare, \textit{De ratione}, pp. 173–176, Wheare, \textit{The Method}, pp. 302–309.

\textsuperscript{33} Wheare, \textit{The Method}, p. 306. Wheare, \textit{De ratione}, p. 176: “Quod, cum pueri et artium ignari, assequi nequeant.”

\textsuperscript{34} Wheare, \textit{The Method}, p. 308. Wheare, \textit{De ratione}, p. 177: “Verum Lector ille, quem nos formare cupimus, ulterius spectare debet: non ad delectationem, sed ad utilitatem, ad finem ultimum Historiae, ut probis, ad bene beateque vivendum, exemplis instruatur.”

\textsuperscript{35} See above, footnote 30.
texts, but should not aspire to writing them. For Keckermann, the situation is reversed: those who have no knowledge of moral philosophy are in a position to *write* historical texts, because these texts only depend on logic. But students are in no position to *read* historical texts profitably, because in reading histories the student is expected to subsume their content under the *loci communes* of practical philosophy.

3.1. Ramists and Keckermann on Teaching Ethics

The request to exclude the young from studying moral philosophy did not meet with unanimous approval in the early modern period. In Ramist circles, it was uniformly rejected. We find objections to Aristotle’s denial of moral education to the young already in Omer Talon’s commentary on the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. His main accusation is that Aristotle’s view has sceptical consequences regarding the general efficacy of philosophical teaching. Those who maintain, like Wheare, the exclusion of the young imply that moral education of them in general is a hopeless project. This does not only go against scripture, but it also misinterprets the character of moral insufficiency. If we compare moral failings as diseases of the mind to those of the body, Aristotle’s position amounts to the fairly counterintuitive view that those who need treatment most, should be excluded from it—in medicine this would mean that it is precisely sick people that should not be treated by a physician. In his *Problemata Ethica*, Goclenius explicitly agrees with this second point: ethics is a “cultivation of the mind” (*cultura animi*) and as such it was invented for those who fail morally (*pravi*) in the same way as medicine was invented for the benefit of the sick. And Wilhelm Adolf Scribonius also

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36 The majority of commentators in Renaissance Italy clarified in their texts that they do not wish to see the young excluded. See David Lines, *Aristotle’s Ethics in the Italian Renaissance (ca. 1300-1650)*, Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 2002 (Education and Society in the Middle Ages and Renaissance 13), p. 89.

37 Omer Talon, *In primum Aristotelis Ethicum librum explicatio*, Parisiis: ex typographia Matthaei Davidi, 1550, p. 15: “Et quid Evangelium Christianum, quae est vera philosophia, profiteur aliud aut pollicetur, quam medelam et sanationem animorum? An Christus se ad vocandos iustos, non potius ad consolandos et in viam reducendos inustos ex illa caelesti vita in hanc humanam venisse confirmat?” (“And what else does the Christian gospel, which is the true philosophy, offer or promise than the quintessence and healing of spirit? Did Christ confirm that he came from His life in heaven into this human [sc. life] in order to call up the just or not rather for the consolation of the unjust and to lead them back onto the right path?”)

38 Talon, *Explicatio*, p. 15: “At non potest, inquies, iuuenis de moribus iudicare: nec agrotus de morbo suo potest aestimare: accedet tamen nihilominus ut ille ad medicum, ita hic ad philosophum.” (“But you will say that the adolescent cannot judge about morality and that the patient also cannot diagnose his disease: but nevertheless, as the latter goes to a physician, thus the former [sc. goes] to the philosopher.”)

39 Rudolphus Goclenius, “Problemata Ethica,” in Johannes Hockenhaffen, *Axiomata disciplinae moralis…*, Frankfurt/Main: Zacharias Palthenius; Peter Fischer, 1595, pp. 175–384,
presses the argument that it is precisely the young who should study ethics in order to enhance their moral capabilities and learn to deal with their affects according to the requirements of “right reason.”

So none of these influential German textbooks on ethics in the Ramist tradition was in agreement with Wheare’s reading of Aristotle that the young should be excluded from studying moral philosophy. As for Keckermann, his interpretation of Aristotle tries to differentiate between two types of exclusion of the young:

Aristotle does not want that the young must be excluded unconditionally (per se) from the study of ethics, but only accidentally (per accidens), insofar as many young people do not want to apply [its] teachings to their practice (usus) due to their defective youthful temperament. Aristotle freely admits those young people to hearing ethics who are young only with regard to their age, but not regarding their mind (animus) and affects and who therefore wish to put moral teachings to use in action [...].

Keckermann speaks here explicitly only about what Aristotle appears to have said. Together with the clear stance of his Ramist colleagues, this provides a first pointer to what his own position might have been in this regard. But more conclusive evidence is needed in order to make a really convincing case against Wheare’s and Vossius’s misreading of his position.

3.2. Writing and Reading History

As we have seen above, Vossius had contended that Keckermann neglects the distinction between reading and writing historical texts: only an author of historical tracts must have knowledge of political philosophy, particularly if the result should be more than a mere enumeration of facts. Wheare had countered at p. 186: “Est enim Ethica cultura animi, quae vitia radicitus etrahit, et preeparat animos ad recipiendos satus. [...] et, [...] inserit, quae adulta fructus uberrimos ferant. At ut medicina aegrorum, sic Ethica pravorum causa inventa est.” (“Ethics is the cultivation of the mind that roots out vices and prepares minds in order to receive seeds and inserts what in its mature form should bear copious fruit. But as medicine was invented because of the sick, thus ethics was [sc. invented] for the depraved.”)

40 Wilhelm Adolf Scribonius, Philosophia Ethica ex Aristotele et aliis methodice repetita ..., Basle: Konrad von Waldkirch, 1586, p. 3: “Idcirco enim majori diligentia Ethicen illi [sc. iuvenes] audire debent, ut mores suos regere, et affectus rectae rationis dictaminì subjicere discant.” (“Therefore those [sc. young persons] must hear ethics with more diligence, so that they may learn to guide their moral attitudes and to subject their affects to the dictate of right reason.”)

41 Keckermann, Systema Ethicae, 78: “Non vult Arist. a studio ethico per se excludendam esse aetatem iuvenilem, sed tantum per accidens, quatenus plerique iuvenes vitio iuvenilis temperamenti Ethica praecepta nolunt ad usum transferre. Qui ergo iuvenes non sunt iuvenes animo et affectibus, sed aetate tantum, atque adeo qui cupiunt praecepta moralia applicare ad usum et actionem, illos Aristoteles ultro ad audiendam doctrinam Ethicam admittit [...].”
this with the observation that both reading and writing history have the same ultimate goal, namely orientation towards the good life, so that philosophical knowledge is indispensible for both the reader and the writer of history.

Before turning to Keckermann’s views on the distinction between reading and writing history, it might be helpful to summarise the central aspects of his overall understanding of the discipline. History conveys awareness of individual events, i.e., of particulars. This awareness is a precondition for understanding general concepts (universals) through the process of induction. We thereby acquire and strengthen philosophical habits, namely knowledge (scientia) and prudence (prudentia). This means that history consists in the awareness of the relation between such particulars and their individual “explanation” (explicatio). History serves to justify our existing knowledge about general norms of a discipline and it can help to ground such knowledge (praeccepta, theoremata et canones constituantur, demonstrentur et illustrentur). History is thus not a sub-discipline of grammar, as Keckermann’s friend Clemens Timpler had held, because it is concerned with reality, the way things are or have been, and not just with language. But history itself cannot count as a

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42 Keckermann, De natura et proprietatibus, pp. 13–14: “Principalis finis [sc. historiae] est, ut universalia ex singularibus observentur inductione exemplorum, et deinde ut universalia iam observata per singularia confirmetur, et singularia, sive exempla ad universalia, sive regulas reducentur. Qui quidem est finis principalis primus; Finis autem principalis ortus a primo, est, ut experientia singularium confirmetur in nobis scientia et prudentia […] atque adeo ut discimus bonum imitari et amplecti, bonorumque præmia consequi mala autem fugere, et poenas declinare.” (“The main end [sc. of history] is to observe universal concepts from singular instances through induction of examples and that then the universal concepts that have been observed are confirmed through singular instances and that singular instances or examples are reduced to universal concepts or norms. This is indeed the first main end; the main end derived from the first [sc. end] is that experience of singular instances may strengthen in us science and prudence […] to such a degree that we learn to imitate and cherish the good and to strive for the reward coming from good things, but to flee from evil and to avoid punishment.”)

43 Keckermann, De natura et proprietatibus, p. 8. Grafton, History, pp. 217–218, shows how the mutual dependency of universals and particulars in Keckermann is based on his critique of Bodin.

44 Keckermann, De natura et proprietatibus, p. 49: “Alter effectus generalis principalis est, quod ex singularibus historiae exemplis universalia disciplinarum praeccepta, theoremata et Canones constituantur, eaque præcepta iterum exemplis ex historia petitis, demonstrentur et illustrentur.” (“Another general effect is that universal precepts, theorems, and canons of the disciplines are constituted through particular examples of history and that these precepts are then demonstrated and illustrated through examples taken from history.”)

45 Clemens Timpler, Metaphysicae Systema Methodicum: Libri quinque, Hanoviae: Antonius, 1612, p. 26: “Per Philologiam enim intelligent studium humanioris literaturae, qua homo praeparatur ad Philosophiam et Theologiam melius discendam. Et sub hac comprehenduntur, Grammaticam, Rhetoricam, Poeticam, Musicam, Logicam, Historiam.” (“They understand philology as the study of letters, by which man is prepared to better learn philosophy and theology. And they subsume under it grammar, rhetoric, poetics, music, logic, history.”) See also Keckermann, De natura et proprietatibus, p. 10.
discipline, because it is concerned with individuals rather than universals: history itself does not contain knowledge of general concepts. This knowledge can only be obtained within the disciplines of practical philosophy.  

Keckermann does acknowledge the distinction made by Vossius between requirements for writing history and for reading it, but gives it a completely different interpretation. For him, historical writing depends only on the correct use of certain tools of logic: “It is certain that no one can write history correctly who is not a good logician.” Only in reading history do we depend on insights from practical philosophy:

Apparently in ethics, but particularly in economics and politics, history is so powerful that anyone wanting to separate it from economics and politics or believing that he could acquire these forms of prudence without an accurate reading of histories commits a grave error. And he does not seem to know what economics and politics is or that there is a distinction between general and special [sc. economics and politics]; special economics and politics depend on histories in their totality.

Theories of reading and writing formed, under the heading of analysis and genesis, an important part of Ramist methodological discourses. “Analysis, for Ramus, is [...] at root a way of operating didactically upon a text. It belongs not to an art, but to usus or exercise, and is complemented by genesis or composition, for, once the schoolboy has broken down a sample of discourse—written discourse, for analysis is here growing out of the humanist approach to language through the written word—he can reassemble the parts in configurations of his own, which, according to Ramus, is what one does in composing.” Keckermann uses various terms for referring to this dichotomy, e.g., tractatio for the composition of a text and recognitio for the analysis of a given text. But tractatio is not just the composition of an explicit text, it can also consist in the “meditation on a theme or subject matter using instruments of an art to be developed for this purpose.”

46 See Freedman, “Career and Writings,” p. 312.

47 Keckermann, De natura et proprietatibus, p. 15: “Certa res est, neminem posse historian recte scribere, qui non sit bonus Logicus [...].”

48 Keckermann, De natura et proprietatibus, p. 68: “In specie vero ad Ethicam, inprimis vero ad Oeonom. et Polit. tantae est efficacio Historia, ut qui eam velit ab Oeonomicis et Politicis separare, aut putet se posse has prudentias sine accurata historiarum lectione acquirere, is vehementer erro, neque sciat, quid sit prudentia Oeconomica et Politica, vel quod distinguatur in generalem et specialum, quae specialis Oecon. et Polit. in universum ab historiis pendet.”


So Keckermann breaks with the Ramist tradition insofar as, for him, the production of something must be ranked higher than the comprehension of the products of others. Therefore, *tractatio* must precede *resolutio*. In other words, the use of logic does not primarily consist in the reconstruction of what others have thought, but in the independent reflection on a given problem in agreement with the rules of the proper use of logic.\(^{51}\)

In the last edition of what we could call Keckermann’s ‘applied logic,’ we find various short texts written by his students that exemplify this approach: biographies of Władysław II. Jagiełło,\(^{52}\)Aristotle,\(^{53}\)Julius Caesar,\(^{54}\) or Themistocles.\(^{55}\) Looking at Władysław II. Jagiełło as an example, we find first a discussion of his name, then causes relevant for his life, e.g., the family of Lithuanian princes he belonged to; circumstances of place and time, e.g., the capital of Lithuania, Vilnius; accidents, effects, and related things (*cognata*).\(^{56}\) This structure matches the general prescriptions Keckermann provides in the same volume for the description of persons.\(^{57}\) And his own example is also dedicated to a historical figure, again Julius Caesar.\(^{58}\) It is important to note that none of these ‘topics’ (Keckermann calls them *themata*) have as such a moral connotation. This does not preclude the introduction of moral concepts: the character of a person is one cause of her actions. But in a biography,

\(^{51}\) Bartholomäus Keckermann, *Systematis Logici Plenioris Pars Altera: Quae est Specialis; continens usum et Exercitationem artis Logicae antehac Gymnasia Logicum appellata; nunc recognita et varie aucta*, Hanoviae: Antonius, 1609, p. 8: “Opus aliquid conficere dignius quid et praestanter est, quam factum ab alio retextere et recognoscere ac resolvere. Ita principalis operatio, sive cogitatio mentis humanae est, quando ipsi aliquid pro nobis meditamur et excogitamus, atque intelligimus. Secundaria autem operatio mentis, et quae a priori oritur ac pendet, est, quando aliena aut nostra ante cogitata et scripta resolvimus.” (“To produce some work is somewhat more valuable and excellent than to unravel, recognise and analyse something done by someone else. Thus the main operation or cognitive act of the human mind takes place, when we think through something for ourselves and understand it. The secondary operation of the mind that also comes out of and depends on the first takes place when we analyse thoughts or writings by others or our former selves.”) Lutz Danneberg, “Logik und Hermeneutik im 17. Jahrhundert,” in Jan Schröder (ed.), *Theorie der Interpretation vom Humanismus bis zur Romantik - Rechtswissenschaft, Philosophie, Theologie: Beiträge zu einem interdisziplinären Symposion in Tübingen, 29. September bis 1. Oktober 1999* (Contubernium, 58), Stuttgart: Steiner, 2001, p. 75–131, at p. 97, takes note of this reversal of the traditional Ramist ordering of *analysis* and *genesis* without exploring its implications. Grafton, *History*, pp. 220–221, discusses Keckermann’s theory of commonplaces, but does not pay attention to Keckermann’s vies on writing history.

\(^{52}\) Keckermann, *Systematis Pars Altera*, p. 461
\(^{53}\) Keckermann, *Systematis Pars Altera*, p. 689.
\(^{54}\) Keckermann, *Systematis Pars Altera*, p. 689
\(^{55}\) Keckermann, *Systematis Pars Altera*, p. 769.
as envisioned by Keckermann, its causal role in the explication of events in a person’s life is more relevant than its moral dimension as such.\textsuperscript{59}

The \textit{Apparatus Practicus} (1609) provides guidelines that concern the process of using texts in the study of practical philosophy, including the proper use of historical texts. It is thus a contribution to what we could call Keckermann’s ‘logic of reading.’ It is divided according to the sub-disciplines of practical philosophy, and these sub-disciplines are again divided into \textit{loci communes} that aim to give an overview of these disciplines as a whole, so that these \textit{loci} can serve as ‘titles’ under which to subsume the material studied by the student.\textsuperscript{60} Keckermann also adds a short list of sources to which this ‘apparatus’ can be applied that also contains historical texts serving as examples and illustrating the teachings of practical philosophy.\textsuperscript{61} It is obvious that these concepts themselves must have been understood by the student, before it is possible to apply them to the study of texts written by others.\textsuperscript{62}

3. Conclusion

Even if it was possible that, in his interpretation of Aristotle’s exclusion of the young from studying moral philosophy, Keckermann was not speaking in his own voice, his views on the role of reading and writing, \textit{resolutio} and \textit{tractatio}, in studying history and applying it to philosophical problems provide clear indications of his own thinking on the matter. Since writing history requires competencies only in logic and does not force us to apply categories from moral philosophy to the task at hand, there is no reason to exclude the young from this practice: it makes no requirement regarding their maturity, since it is a purely cognitive technique that can also be mastered by younger authors, as documented by the student essays Keckermann included in his book. Reading historical texts profitably does depend on knowledge of the fundamental categories of moral philosophy. If Keckermann had believed that this kind of knowledge depended on the kind of maturity that is inaccessible to the young, he would have been committed to the notion that the study of historical texts written by others has requirements more far-reaching than those required for learning to write historical texts.


\textsuperscript{60} See, e.g., the list of loci for the study of politics in Bartholomäus Keckermann, \textit{Apparatus Practicus, sive Idea methodica et plena totius philosophiae practicae}, Hanoviae: Antonius, 1609, pp. 68–112.

\textsuperscript{61} Keckermann, \textit{Apparatus Practicus}, pp. 112-116.

\textsuperscript{62} For Freedman, “Career and Writings,” p. 320, the \textit{Apparatus} is a work of “applied practical philosophy,” maybe alluding thereby to its use in academic exercises (p. 317).
So Keckermann does not really want to exclude the young from studying history: he just wants to provide a methodological foundation for this activity that helps them to profit from it. In fact, the study of history is for Keckermann a fundamental necessity for making any progress in studying practical philosophy proper. Keckermann believes that history should form an integral part of the curriculum, but only if it is studied philosophically. In other words, the ‘consumption’ of historical texts must be guided by the conceptual framework of practical philosophy, whereas the authors of historical texts must avoid any direct reference to this framework and rely exclusively on the topics for historical texts, as they are developed within ‘applied logic’.

Both Wheare and Vossius focused only on Keckermann’s contributions to the methodology of historiography to be found in De natura et proprietatibus. The weight given to Keckermann’s argumentation in their debate shows his relevance for the European discourse on the methodology of historiography in the first half of the seventeenth century. But neither of them was able to grasp his position completely, because neither of them really took into account the philosophical background of his methodological views.

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Feingold, “Humanities,” p. 339, holds that Keckermann “emphasized […] the need to inculcate precepts before exposing the student to examples, which, he believed constituted the essence of history.” While it is true that history is concerned with particulars and equally true that examples are a species of particulars, the thesis that students should not be confronted with examples as such is false. In fact, students were obliged to produce texts about particulars without any knowledge of the precepts of practical philosophy before approaching texts written by others. Hence the notion that only Vossius discussed history writing (Feingold, “Humanities,” p. 339) is false as well.

See above, footnote 47.


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