and then what can be construed out of them. A student first learns the definitions of subject and predicate. Similarly in logic he first learns the elements and their properties, and then constructs syllogisms, etc. Molinaeus observes that one does not know beforehand what it is to speak congruously and to reason correctly. This is the reason many youngsters dislike the study of logic and grammar. In logic and grammar, learning is by construction, a view later advocated by Thomas Hobbes. Franco Petri Burgersdijk rejected this idea of a difference in method between logic and grammar and the other arts.

In his De cognitione Dei, Molinaeus advocates a version of natural theology. True knowledge of God is the absolute perfection of the mind. Here Molinaeus seems to follow not Aristotle, but John Calvin. Man has an inherent notion of God, as is clear from the testimony of countless people over many centuries. Molinaeus qualifies man's natural knowledge by saying that the infinite cannot be grasped by the finite. Moreover, man cannot will the good on his own account. Even an atheist can learn how to honour God and to study God's wisdom in the phenomena of nature and find the way to live his life according to God's direction. This natural knowledge of God is necessary to restrain sin, but it will always be imperfect and restricted. Man must find a way between the two extremes of neglect and harmful curiosity.

The Eléments de la philosophie morale is of Aristotelian character as well. The structure of man follows the Nicomachean Ethics, and the distinction between the two kinds of virtues of the mind, viz. those of the intellect and those of the will, is conceded. Moral virtue is a disposition of right willing, and is perfected by the study of morals. The will is free and not compelled by fate — interestingly, Molinaeus refers to Vergil. The ultimate goal of morality, however, is the vision of God. Molinaeus shows no sign of Stoicism. His Leiden predecessor Lipius, for instance, concentrated on steadfastness (constantia), which he defined as the virtue of a soldier, i.e. as an immovable strength. According to him, everything outside the soul was irrelevant.

Fortunately, he saw the danger. In his De monarchia, Molinaeus repeatedly says that one must realize that his opponent, Bellarmine, uses the principle that the higher order should command the lower, just as the spiritual should be in command over the corporeal order. Molinaeus replies that this is true not universally, but only within its own sphere. The Pope advises the king as pastor, so within his own sphere, but is subservient to the king as civil subject. State and Church should be separated. Molinaeus advanced three arguments for this thesis. (1) If the Pope were able to liberate the subjects from a king, he would also be able to liberate children from obedience to their parents, or make an order to end a marriage, etc. (2) Nobody may be punished for the guilt of another, e.g. a son for the transgression of his father. (3) Experience teaches us that transfer of power leads to trouble. It is clear that Molinaeus denies any secular power to the Church of Rome.

In his Anatomie Arminianismi, Molinaeus attacks the thesis of the Arminians, who advocate the doctrine of free will with respect to salvation. He says that a man has a truly free will only if he is born again. Molinaeus takes an orthodox stance. His arguments are based on evidence from the Bible, evidence of the senses, and experience. Whatever is without faith, is sin, he says. The gentiles are capable only of external works; they do not have an inner correspondence in their heart with God's law. They cannot fulfill it. If someone cries from his pitiful position, he starts his renewal, Molinaeus says, adhering to a solid Reformation tenet. Molinaeus claims that one should first of all believe in God and know Him, before one receives faith. He criticizes the Arminians for attaching importance to merits.

This position is derived, Molinaeus says, from Pelagius and the Roman Catholic Church. ARMINIUS argues that if one accepts a state of necessity, as the Calvinists do, there can be no blame. Molinaeus answers that whoever is drunk and thereby becomes blind, is also guilty, namely of being drunk. One should use judgement and knowledge in a certain sense as God does, who is good by necessity and is still free. The Anatomie provoked a fierce reaction on the part of the Remonstrants, for instance Johannes Arnoldi Corvinus (1595–1650, a pupil of Arminius), who criticized the traditional Calvinist interpretation that sees natural revelation as evidence that nobody can be excused from worshipping God.

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Further Reading


MORTERA, Saul Levi (c. 1596-1660)

Born in Venice to a family of Jews of German origin, Saul Levi Mortera (Mortre) studied Talmud and rabbinical literature with Leon Modena, one of the most important rabbis of Italy at that time. In his youth, he made the acquaintance of the physician Elihu Montalto, a New Christian from Portugal who became a Jew. When the latter was invited to Paris in 1612 by Maria de Medicis, to serve as a physician in her court, he took Mortera with him as his personal secretary and teacher of Hebrew and Judaism. They received permission to live openly in France as Jews, although Jews were then forbidden to live in that country.

After Montalto’s death in 1616, Mortera accompanied the late physician’s family, who had him buried in the cemetery of the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam in Ouderkerk. Although Mortera was an Ashkenazi Jew, he integrated into the Portuguese community of Amsterdam. He married a young woman from that community named Esther Sores and remained in Amsterdam until the end of his life. He joined the Beth Jacob (House of Jacob) congregation, which was the older of the two Portuguese Jewish congregations in the city. In 1618, when that congregation split, following a controversy between the rabbis, Joseph Pardo, and some of the syndics, led by Dr David Farar, Mortera supported the latter faction. When Pardo joined the splinter group that established a third congregation known as Beth Israel (House of Israel), Mortera was appointed the rabbi (Hakham) of the veteran congregation. Mortera shared his teacher’s reservations about the Kabbalah, thus finding a common language with Farar, who adopted a rationalistic approach to the Talmudic tradition.

Around 1624, Mortera wrote a treatise on the immortality of the soul in Hebrew. This has not been preserved, but passages from it are mentioned in his extant sermons. Although this treatise is not meant to be a polemical response to the views of Uriel da Costa, but rather a systematic presentation of orthodox Jewish views on the nature and destiny of the soul, it included indirect refutations of the Kabbalist Isaac Aboab da Fonseca. In a controversy with his colleague, the rabbi and Kabbalist Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, in a