

Birgit Biehler. *Der Eigennutz — Feind oder “wahrer Begründer” des Gemeinwohls?*

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This thorough study offers a discerning analysis and careful contextualization of complex, diverse, and contending interpretations of self-interest (*Eigennutz*) in mid-sixteenth-century Germany (mainly the 1520s and '30s). Looking at a cross-section of theological, political, and literary writers and genres, Biehler demonstrates the variability of contemporaneous interpretations of a term central to early modern political, economic, moral, and spiritual life and debate. Notably, self-interest could be interpreted not only as opposed to the common good (*Gemeinnutz*), but also as integral to its pursuit.

Biehler identifies two “symbolic fields” — shared assumptions that direct distinct domains of knowledge and shape more-specific theories or paradigms of interpretation — as underlying the divergent perceptions of self-interest discussed in her volume. The first is constituted by the pessimistic anthropology and interpretation of self-interest in Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon (part 1). For Luther, self-interest is synonymous with self-love (*amor sui*) and thus with hatred of God. It exemplifies the intrinsic inability of corrupted humanity to love and return to God. *Eigennutz*, in other words, is the most patent manifestation of original sin. Authors like the radical theologian and revolutionary Thomas Müntzer, the polemicists of the Peasants’ War, and the Nuremberg poet Hans Sachs (part 2) follow the Lutheran paradigm and identify corrupted humanity’s propensity to think and act in terms of *Eigennutz* as the root cause of social, spiritual, political, and economic evil. They also demonstrate the multiple ways in which negative understanding fed into contemporary debate. For instance, rebels as well as defenders of political and ecclesiastical authority during the Peasants’ War leveled accusations of self-interest against their opponents.

Yet, as Biehler demonstrates, Philip Melanchthon already dilutes Luther’s position, and softens the opposition between *Eigennutz* and *Gemeinnutz*, at least in the political and economic arena. Melanchthon acknowledges that trade and wealth generation can benefit social and political stability, and proposes to regulate and balance selfishness by means of natural law and reason rather than shun and condemn it outright. At the same time, humanist members of the secular urban elite like Sebastian Franck, Leonhard Fronsperger, and Oswald Gut (also part 2), and Konrad Peutinger (part 3) embark on a reevaluation of self-interest in the context of Lutheran theology, law, and the politics and economic interests of the imperial free cities and Southern German merchant houses. Their approach represents Biehler’s second symbolic field: an optimistic anthropology that emerges from and still reflects Lutheran anthropological pessimism. Here, the reader might wonder whether Catholic Augustinian theology was not also part of the interpretative frame. Though diverse in genre, context and content, these authors assess and develop the understanding of *Eigennutz* on the basis of the principle *Ex malo bonum*, the notion that human selfishness is part of rational divine order and thus can benefit the common good. The best part of Biehler’s study deals with Konrad Peutinger’s innovative interpretation of *Eigennutz* as a positive force. A jurist, imperial counsellor, humanist, brother-in-law to Bartholomäus Welser, and senior official of the wealthy city of Augsburg, Peutinger engages with the concept in order to defend Augsburg’s merchants and their allegedly monopolistic aspirations and practices. Arguing in terms of law as well as theological anthropology, Peutinger posits that self-interest promotes, rather than harms, the common good. His theoretical stance is inspired by his experience of capitalist enterprise and the emperor’s dependency on merchant capital. According to Biehler, Peutinger’s defence of selfishness — modern in appearance, though deeply rooted in late medieval economy, politics, and theology — represents a “historical shift from preoccupation with the common good to recognition of the operation of self-interest” (364).

Biehler's intent and the strength of her study is the lucid reconstruction of the multiple intellectual, political, and social contexts within which her authors articulated diverse interpretations of the meaning and role of self-interest in human life. She critically and constructively responds to a number of strands in current scholarly debate, for instance the work of Peter Blickle and Peter Burke, or the relationship between conceptual history and cultural history. Her book offers comparatively few cross-references to relevant contemporary discourse elsewhere in Europe or to later developments. Yet she makes evident nonetheless that conceptual development and practical application of notions of self-interest are as vital to our understanding of sixteenth-century history as they are to the history of the (Scottish) Enlightenment. The volume is sparsely indexed, but well organized and presented, and includes a useful summary in English. Biehler's study will certainly appeal and be very useful to scholars and advanced graduate students in early modern intellectual history, the history of (especially Lutheran) theology and moral philosophy, political and economic thought, humanism, and early modern German urban history.

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