

THEORETICAL SEMINAR OF THE IPHRAS DEPARTMENT OF ETHICS

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**The Ways of Virtue. The Ethica Section at Wolfenbittel and the
History of Ethics in Early Modern Europe**

Abstract

My project concerns broadly the history of ethics in early modern Europe, with a focus on the seventeenth century and the Holy Roman Empire. This subject raises methodological issues – how to write a history of ethics? – as well as questions concerning the moral and intellectual make-up of the period – what was the meaning of ethics in early modern culture, what was its place in society? Methodologically, I suggest to shift from an exclusively philosophical approach, still – dominant in the history of ethics, to an approach of historical contextualization. Regarding the role in early modern culture, I propose to see the ethical as an interplay between different processes of education, regulation, and cultivation, best captured in the notion of virtue. As a source, I intend to study the Ethica section in the book collection of duke August of Brunswick-Lüneburg (1579–1666), preserved in today's Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbittel. The section provides us with ample materials to examine the ways in which the concept of virtue marked early modern arguments, attitudes, and mentalities, and how it was challenged by the changes in the political and intellectual climate of the seventeenth century. Along those lines, the study of the ways of

virtue should not only affect our interpretation of early modern ethics and culture but also prompt us to assess our own ideas on ethics and morality. Moreover, it will help us to re-evaluate the term 'ethics' in a transdisciplinary perspective, involving fields such as social psychology, evolutionary biology, and moral anthropology.