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LODI NAUTA

Lorenzo Valla and the rise of humanist dialectic

Humanism and scholasticism

In the Renaissance there were two main approaches to the study and teaching of language. Though the period is traditionally associated with the development of humanism, scholasticism was far from dead. University arts courses continued to be based on the Aristotelian *Organon* and the specialized textbooks of late medieval logic. In Italy, the cradle of humanism, this logic was imported from the mid-fourteenth century onward where it flourished throughout the fifteenth century, with Paul of Venice's *Logica parva* as one of the most important textbooks. Apart from a host of technical logical issues which were being discussed, broader issues continued to provoke debate, such as whether words signify concepts or things and whether language was naturally or conventionally significant, and there was no lack of subtle answers.¹ However hostile to the "pettifogging schoolmen" they professed to be, early modern philosophers such as Descartes, Hobbes, and Locke were obviously indebted to their ideas, and often their own theories consisted in a simplification and revision of scholastic terminology and distinctions without radically changing the linguistic paradigm.²

The rise and growth of humanism, however, is the most visible sign of change in the Renaissance (though its origins went back to the late thirteenth century), and it is to the humanists' reform of the arts of the trivium that this chapter is devoted. Obviously, this is a huge theme, and no attempt has been made here to cram into the space of one book chapter all the important names and their works – Valla, Agricola, Erasmus, Sturm, Vives, Lefèvre d'Étapes, Latomus, Melanchthon, Ramus, to mention just a few key figures.³ It would be like leafing through a telephone directory: lots of names but still no connection. So two humanists have been singled out for a more detailed exposition: Lorenzo Valla and – more briefly – Rudolph Agricola, for they are generally held responsible, each in his own way, for having inaugurated the transformation of Aristotelian–scholastic logic into a humanist dialectic.

Humanist dialectic is marked by a study of argumentation and forms of reasoning that were tailored to the practical goal of analyzing the argumentative structures of classical texts, then using this knowledge in composing one's own persuasive discourse of whatever kind.

Not all modern scholars, however, have been convinced of the *philosophical* importance of the humanists' achievement, and some historians of logic have even accused the humanists of impeding the progress of formal logic.⁴ True, the humanists made important contributions to classical and biblical scholarship, to literature and history, but their calumnies against the scholastics should be dismissed as misdirected and irrelevant, since they stemmed from a failure to recognize the fundamentally different research goals of the scholastics. The scholastics approached language, reasoning, and argumentation from an almost scientific point of view, much in the vein of modern linguists and logicians. They studied language in order to lay bare the logical forms inherent in it. They were interested in the properties of terms and how terms were related to things in the world, and tried to formalize patterns of reasoning in order to establish truth conditions and rules of inference. What made their studies vulnerable to the scornful laughter of the humanists was their use of Latin – a particular idiom of Latin to be sure – based on the medieval Latin spoken in the universities. Hence, humanists could believe that they shared the same interests, the Latin language. And what better and more natural way to analyze language could there be – so the humanists countered – than to examine the linguistic practice of the great Latin writers in order to determine the meaning of terms and rules of grammar and syntax? Such an objection is perfectly understandable but, one may argue, it misses the point, for the scholastics did not aim at analyzing this or any other particular brand of Latin at all but language in general. And in the absence of symbolic notational systems, they could only have recourse to their own language, which was the Latin of the schools. This language then functioned as a kind of metalanguage, a technical jargon which is virtually inherent in all kinds of theoretical speculation, and it was certainly not meant to rival the classical Latin resurrected by the humanists. Yet it was not solely a metalanguage, for in making semantic claims about particular words, word classes and grammatical constructions, they also turned it into their *object* of study, and here the humanists obviously had a foothold for attack.

While neo-Latinists and literary historians may at times tend to copy uncritically the disparaging attitude of the humanists towards the scholastics, historians of logic should realize that the rise of disciplines such as informal logic, argumentation theory, and pragmatics in the twentieth century have demonstrated that there is room for another, more informal approach to language and reasoning, which ties logic more closely to real language and

real arguments, to the way people actually speak, write, and argue. (This is not to say that it should *replace* the formal type of approach. The two can coexist, as they do in modern logic.) That humanists “selected” classical Latin as the language par excellence, in which people *ought* to speak and write, is immaterial. Their point is, one may say, that language cannot be abstracted from the living context in which it functions and from which it derives its meaning and power. This had important pedagogical consequences as well. It is a valuable point which has been repeated, in various different guises, in later times.⁵ Of course, some humanists did not always fully realize the implications of all this. Most of them were content to stress the aesthetic and moral qualities of classical Latin and its practical use in public life. Lorenzo Valla was a humanist who clearly saw further than this.

Lorenzo Valla

Lorenzo Valla’s contributions to humanism can hardly be overestimated. He gave the humanist program some of its most trenchant and combative formulations, but also put it into practice by studying the Latin language as no one had done before, discussing a host of morphological, syntactical, and semantical features in his widely influential *Elegance in Latin* (*Elegantiae Linguae Latinae*, 1441). But he went even further than this. His aim was to show the linguistic basis of law, theology, philosophy, and in fact all intellectual activities, thus turning the study of language into a sharp-edged tool for exposing all kinds of errors and misunderstandings. Whoever misunderstands the use of words will fall prey to muddled thinking and empty theorizing. Language is the key to thinking and writing. Since only classical Latin was acceptable to Valla and his fellow humanists, post-classical authors were heavily criticized for having adulterated and defaced classical Latin. This does not seem to be a spectacular conclusion in itself: to despise and criticize the scholastic idiom is the humanist’s second nature, but Valla’s motive was not just aesthetic; it carried a serious philosophical message. This can best be seen in the prefaces to the six books of the *Elegantiae*. For the employment of his method we will look at his reform of Aristotelian–scholastic metaphysics and dialectic, the so-called *Reploughing of Dialectic and Philosophy* (*Repastinatio dialectice et philosophie*, first version 1439).

The *Elegantiae* is not an easy work to summarize or even to characterize. It is often called a handbook, but it is perhaps better viewed as a commentary.⁶ In six books comprising 235 brief chapters, Valla criticizes, corrects, and expands on explanations of words, grammar, syntax, and morphology offered by late classical grammarians such as Priscian, Donatus, Servius,

and Nonus. (Valla's motive for writing is to correct others, as he explicitly concedes in a letter to Giovanni Tortelli.⁷) Based on examples culled from the classical authors, his aim is to show what the right usage of a word, an expression or a construction is. By "right usage" he means grammatically correct and rhetorically effective, *elegantia* standing for semantic precision and refinement rather than for stylishness. Good Latin is even more important than good grammar – a distinction which Valla derives from Quintilian.⁸ Following the oratorical ideals formulated by Quintilian, Valla believes that it is more important to speak in accordance with the accepted usage of common speech than to speak in accordance with grammar when viewed as a set of highly regular patterns of word formation.

Thus, common usage (*consuetudo*), based on a close reading of the *auctoritates*, is the fundamental criterion of correct speaking and writing, and as such it also provides an easy yardstick to sift the "barbarians" from those who speak the refined Latin. The barbarians are identified as the Goths and the Gauls, that is, the legal glossators and grammarians and the French logicians and philosophers.⁹ More generally, technical discourse or specialized terminology is to be rejected, since it usually consists of neologisms, ungrammatically formed words, or words with a new, unclassical meaning. The primacy given here to the ordinary common speech is fully in line with the classical ideal of the orator, a man full of wisdom and endowed with the best linguistic skills, who dedicates his rhetorical training to the public cause. The orator must teach, delight and persuade, and this can only be done by employing the accepted usage, not the idiom of philosophers or other theoreticians. As Quintilian had written: "usage is the surest guide in speaking, and language should be used as a coin with public stamp." Cicero had used the image of the balance: the orator should not weigh his words in the goldsmith's balance, but rather in a sort of popular scale.¹⁰ Language is primarily a means for communication, for persuasion; the outlandish, esoteric language of the philosophers, logicians, theologians, and medieval legal glossators should be utterly rejected.

The notion of convention and custom becomes, in Valla's hands, part of what has been called – using perhaps too grand a phrase – his "theory of culture."¹¹ Communal intelligibility is a *sine qua non* for the development of culture, as Valla makes clear several times. As long as each nation used its own peculiar language, the sciences and arts were "meager and almost nothing": "but when the power of the Romans spread and the nations were brought within its law and fortified by lasting peace, it came about that very many peoples used the Latin language and so had intercourse with each other."¹² Dissociating Latin from the political constellation in which it had originated and developed, Valla holds Latin to be the vehicle of cultural

growth, and the great motor behind the development of arts, sciences, the legal system, and wisdom in general. This is a common sentiment among humanists from Petrarch onward, but Valla gives it a particular twist in stressing the fact that progress is only made possible by the work of many hands; people like to vie with each other and contend for glory, improving and expanding on the work of others. (One easily recognizes an autobiographical note in Valla's account.) The sharing of a common language leads to a common tradition in which individual achievements are recognized, valued, and compared.

The emphasis on development, growth by competition, conventions, and customs gives Valla's account a modern, descriptive ring, but we should not forget its essentially normative point: while recognizing and accepting the development of Latin in the classical period, he rejects, as noted, any development later than the second century. In aiming at one universal language (which in Valla's case was essentially the Latin spoken between the time of Cicero and Quintilian, and especially the Latin of those two orators themselves), Valla may be said to have pursued a chimera, neglecting the rise of the vernaculars and failing to draw the full consequences of his own view of language as the expression of a culture.¹³ For if language is historically embedded and cannot be viewed separately from its users at a particular time in history, it is difficult to see how we can dissociate the Latin language from the Roman Empire, as Valla explicitly does in the preface to the first book.¹⁴ For him, however, as for all humanists, classical Latin was a timeless tool of expression and communication, transcending boundaries of time and place, as were – it was often assumed – the values and views expressed by that language. Thus we seem to have two views of language here, insufficiently distinguished at a conceptual level: on the one hand, language as the expression of a historically and geographically bounded culture with its thought patterns, systems of beliefs, and so forth; on the other hand, Latin as an eternally valid language for developing arts, sciences, literature, and refined communication. In the former sense, language is historically embedded and cannot be viewed apart from the historical and cultural world of its users. In the latter sense, the emphasis is on language as a tool which may be employed, at various times in various cultures, for expressing opinions and beliefs different from those of its original users – a view which implies that the same language can be used for expressing different things.

Perhaps we should not press this conceptual distinction too far, and it would certainly be unfair to criticize Valla for having failed to draw all the implications of his programmatic statements; after all, they gave the humanist movement its ideological underpinning and impetus. But perhaps even more importantly, he showed how his programmatic statements could

be put into practice. Small wonder then that his *Elegantiae* became a best-seller, commented upon and adapted to teaching by generations of school-teachers and humanists.¹⁵

But Valla, as already noted, extended his program far beyond the confines of literature and aesthetics. Latin is not just a beautiful, precise, and fine medium to be replicated in oratory, poetry, and prose compositions but should be the alpha and omega in all intellectual pursuits. Its semantic precision and syntactical complexity, its rich vocabulary and power of expression make it a most apt instrument of thinking, writing, and speaking: whoever lacks knowledge of language (*facultas loquendi*) is bound to go wrong.¹⁶ So, a critique of theories, ideas and notions takes, in important ways, the form of a language critique, and Valla is quite explicit about this. No work illustrates this better than his *Repastinatio dialectice et philosophie* in which he attempted to reform Aristotelian–scholastic philosophy and dialectic. He had started the work in Pavia in the early 1430s, and continued to work on it throughout his life; three versions are extant, on the last of which Valla was still working by the time of his death in 1457.¹⁷

The *Repastinatio* consists of three books. In Book I Valla aims to cut at the roots of Aristotelian–scholastic metaphysics by criticizing some of its fundamental notions, such as the ten categories (substance and nine accidental categories: quality, quantity and relation etc.); the six transcendental terms such as “good,” “one” and “true”; concepts such as genus, species and *differentia* (the predicables) by which we can define a thing and allot it a place in the so-called “Tree of Porphyry”; form and matter; act and potency. According to Valla, these terms, concepts, and distinctions, couched in an ungrammatical or even rebarbative Latin, complicate and confuse rather than enlighten and clarify our picture of the world, which should be based on common sense and expressed in good classical Latin. The principal task he has therefore imposed on himself is to cut through this useless “superstructure” of technical jargon and empty concepts by reducing them to what he considers to be the basic elements of a commonsense world view. These basic elements are things we perceive either physically or mentally, and may be described as qualified substances. Thus, “thing” (*res*) is the central term in Valla’s account, transcending the three categories substance, quality, and action, which are the only three from the Aristotelian ten he accepts. His methods in bringing about a simplified picture of the world are varied: he frequently relies on Latin grammar to reject terms from scholastic discourse. Thus, the word *ens* (being) is resolved into *id quod est* (that which is) and with *id* (that) being resolved into *ea res* (that thing) we get the result: *ea res que est*. In this way it becomes clear that we do not need the laborious formula “that which is” (*ea que est*): *lapis est ens* (stone is a being) or its analyzed equivalent *lapis est res que est*

(stone is a thing which is) is an unclear, laborious, and absurd way of just saying that *lapis est res* (stone is a thing).¹⁸ Because *ens* can be resolved into *res*, the latter is of wider application, and has of course the further advantage of being an everyday term. This fits perfectly Valla's aim, to replace all difficult, abstruse metaphysical speculation and concomitant terminology by a common-sense worldview, conveyed through ordinary language (that is, classical Latin), using which we can unproblematically pick out and describe ordinary things. Another well-known example of his grammatical approach is his rejection of scholastic terms such as *entitas*, *hecceitas*, and *quidditas* because they do not conform to the rules of word formation – rules which can be gleaned from a detailed study of classical texts.¹⁹ Related to this analysis is Valla's repudiation of what he presents as the scholastic view of the distinction between abstract and concrete terms, i.e. the view that abstract terms ("whiteness," "fatherhood") always refer to quality only, while concrete terms ("white," "father") refer to substance and quality. In a careful discussion of this distinction, taking into account the grammatical categories of case, number, and gender, Valla rejects the ontological commitments which such a view seems to imply, and shows, on the basis of a host of examples drawn from classical Latin usage, that the abstract term often has the same meaning as its concrete counterpart (*utilelutilitas*, *honestum/honestas*, *verum/veritas*).²⁰ In other words, there is no need to posit abstract entities as referents of these terms; they refer to the concrete thing itself, that is, to the substance, its quality or action (or a combination of these three components into which a thing can be analyzed). Hence, one of his main concerns throughout the first book is to determine to which category a word refers. This is not always an easy task: "there are many terms whose category is difficult to discern."²¹

These categories – substance, quality, and action – are therefore the only three Valla admits.²² The rest of the Aristotelian categories such as quantity, relation, time, and place, are to be reduced to these three. The grammatical approach is fully at work here too. For Valla, such qualifications as size, relationship (e.g. fatherhood), position, time and place are in no way different from those traditionally associated with the category of quality such as color and shape. From a grammatical point of view, all these terms are essentially qualitative terms, providing us with information about a substance, i.e. how it is qualified or how it acts. Valla's basic assumption then seems to be that the categories should reflect or point to things in the world, and he has therefore no need for the other categories.

The result is a simplified ontological picture which resembles that of the medieval nominalist William of Ockham. It is therefore not surprising that many scholars have bracketed their names, speaking of Valla's "nominalism" and his "Ockhamism."²³ Their interests, approach, and arguments, however,

differ vastly. Unlike Valla, Ockham does not want to get rid of the categorical system. As long as one realizes, Ockham says, that categories do not describe things in the world but categorize *terms* by which we signify real substances or real inhering qualities in different ways,²⁴ the categories can be maintained and the specific features of, for example, relational or quantitative terms can be explored. Thus, Ockham's rejection of a realist interpretation of the categories is accompanied by a wish to *defend* them as distinct groups of terms.²⁵ An obliteration of the distinction between categories (such as Valla proposed) would precisely be the effect of philosophical realism, Ockham argues, since by believing that, say, "similarity" signifies an independently existing quality in things, relation is reduced to quality, so that there would be no way to distinguish relational terms from quality terms with respect to the mode of signification. His own terminist interpretation therefore is aimed at saving rather than destroying the categorical system. Valla, on the other hand, seems to take categories in a realist sense: they are said to comprise all things and have things as their individual members (*singula*). The categories categorize things or aspects of things rather than terms, even though other statements conflict with such an interpretation.²⁶ The safest conclusion is that Valla's rather eclectic approach does not allow us to categorize his position either as "nominalist" (let alone "Ockhamist-terminist") or as "realist".

What Valla and Ockham have in common, however, is the idea that from conceptual distinctions and differences at the linguistic level we should be wary of inferring ontological differences, that is, differences and distinctions between things. But they share this notion with a number of other thinkers, and it has of course always been a perennial philosophical question how language does or does not adequately reflect the world (and if it does, how we should characterize this notion of "adequateness," and how do we know when it *is* adequate?). Moreover, the way they circumvent and try to solve this problem is vastly different. Ockham's program is explicitly addressed to the question of how a nominalist, who admits of only singular entities, can explain generality in thought and language without having recourse to universals. His solution, which will not be discussed here, is to ground spoken and written language on the mental language of our concepts, that is, singular entities in the mind which stand for their singular referents. Valla, on the other hand, does not refer to mental concepts as the primary language on which to ground the meanings of spoken and written language. He does not deal with the philosophical problem of generality, and what he writes against the use of abstract terms and concepts is motivated by his aversion to ungrammatical Latin and his wish to stay within the limits drawn by the imagination and the senses.²⁷

For Valla, the grammatical and semantical features of classical Latin offer the best guideline we have for describing the inventory of the world – that is, things or qualified substances – but, interestingly, at various points Valla himself signals that there is no perfect match between things and our linguistic characterization of them. Thus, when we say that qualities are things which “are present to the substance,” this wrongly suggests that they can exist apart from each other – “however, we cannot speak otherwise.”²⁸ Moreover, he frequently hints at the limits of our linguistic resources in naming things: there are more things than words for them – an old topos going back to Aristotle (*Sophistical Refutations* 165a11).²⁹

Related to this is Valla’s acknowledgment that there is a difference between speaking according to “the standard of truth” and “our common way of speaking.” For example, words like “rounder” and “fuller” are, strictly speaking, not correct – one circle is not “rounder” than another – but the linguistic practice of great authors sanctions such a usage.³⁰ The way Valla phrases this distinction – “the most demanding and Stoical law of truth” (*exactissima veritatis lex ac stoica*) versus “popular custom” (*consuetudo popularis*), and “the nature and truth of the thing” (*natura et veritas rei*) versus “spoken usage” (*usus loquendi*) – seems to imply that he admits that the popular or ordinary usage does not always adequately reflect the nature and truth of a state of affairs.³¹ For Valla, however, the common way of speaking has primacy over a possibly more correct way of describing things: “it is one thing to speak according to the very standard of truth, it is another thing to speak according to popular custom, common to virtually the whole human race.”³² Truth and custom, in other words, are not always identical.³³ This distinction is derived from the age-old debate, noted above, between the grammarians on the one hand and the orators on the other hand, for whom speaking refined Latin is more important than speaking it in accordance with a rigid set of grammatical rules. But Valla broadens the distinction and hence the concept of truth so as to include other types of instances where one phrase matches the facts better than another. It is not only limited to the contrast between grammatically true versus approved linguistic custom, but also applies to speaking in accordance with the way a thing or state of affairs is versus approved linguistic custom. What we see here is that the *Repastinatio*, rather than being the theoretical foundation of the *Elegantiae*, as is often maintained, reveals how the grammatical approach works in practice, though it should not be forgotten that Valla’s critique is frequently founded on nonlinguistic grounds as well: in their theoretical speculations philosophers often go beyond sense perception and imagination, conceiving lines without width, points without a certain quantity, matter without form, quality without a substance, and speculating about natural

phenomena which are out of reach of human sense perception – a practice Valla repudiates.³⁴

After having criticized Aristotelian–scholastic metaphysics, ethics, and natural philosophy in Book I of the *Repastinatio*,³⁵ Valla turns to dialectic in Books II and III, treating, for instance, propositions and their *signa* or signs (indicators of quality and quantity such as *omnis*, *aliquis*, and *non*, what scholastics would call syncategorematic terms), the square of opposition, proof and argument, and various forms of argumentation. These themes were standard topics in the Aristotelian tradition, but Valla believes that the logical approach of the *natio peripatetica* is of little value for the orator, whose habitat is the public domain where opinions and beliefs are exchanged, convictions expressed, cases made and disagreements voiced. For him, language is primarily a vehicle for communication, debate, and persuasion, and consequently arguments are to be evaluated in terms of their usefulness, effectiveness, and persuasiveness rather than in terms of formal validity. Of course, it is useful to study Aristotelian syllogisms and issues such as (formal) validity and truth conditions, but one should not take the part for the whole. Dialectic, Valla argues, is merely a species of confirmation or refutation, and as such merely a part of one of the five parts of rhetoric, invention.³⁶ Compared to rhetoric, dialectic is an easy subject, which requires little time to master, since it considers and uses the syllogism only *in abstracto*; its sole aim is to teach. The orator, on the other hand, uses not only syllogisms, but also the enthymeme (incomplete syllogism), the epicheireme (a kind of extended reasoning) and example, and he has to clothe everything in persuasive arguments, since his task is not only to teach but also to please and to move. Thus Valla rhetoricizes dialectic by subsuming the study of one type of argument, the Aristotelian syllogism, under a much broader range of forms of argumentation, approaching them from an oratorical point of view. His guide is Quintilian, according to whom the whole point of argumentation is to prove what is not certain by means of what is certain.³⁷ As certainties Quintilian lists sense perceptions, things about which there is general agreement and things which are established by law or have passed into current usage. On the basis of these certainties we may render doubtful things credible or probable. Quintilian elaborates on this notion of credibility by distinguishing three degrees: “the strongest” (*firmissimum*), “because almost always true”; “the highly likely” (*velut propensius*) and “the merely compatible” (*tantum non repugnans*). Following this account, Valla distinguishes syllogisms with certain and true premises, leading to certain conclusions, from those syllogisms with premises which are not so certain, that is, half true and half certain (*semivera ac semicerta*, with a conclusion which is *seminecessaria*).³⁸ For instance: a

mother loves her son; Orestes is Clytemnestra's son. Therefore, it is probable or credible, or at least possible, that Clytemnestra loves Orestes – a likely though not certain proposition, for it is not necessarily the case that a mother loves her son. Having divided kinds of proof into necessary and credible ones, Valla writes that “all proof arises through true things which are certain, and through these things truth itself makes some other thing which was previously uncertain appear certain, and it does this either necessarily or plausibly.”³⁹ This view is basically the same as Quintilian's. Valla is quite explicit about his indebtedness to Quintilian: he is happy to give a long quotation from the *Institutio oratoria* (5.10.23), amounting to thirty pages in the modern edition of the *Repastinatio*, because Valla, as he himself concedes, has nothing new to say on forms of argumentation such as the enthymeme, induction and deduction, and the topics based on things and persons.

Widening the scope of arguments beyond the strictly formal, valid ones, Valla also discusses captious forms of reasoning such as the sorites,⁴⁰ paradoxes, and dilemmas. Some modern scholars have interpreted this interest as proof of Valla's endorsement of ancient skepticism, since these types of argument seem to undermine the possibility of certainty in knowledge and teach us to be content with verisimilitude and probability.⁴¹ Valla, however, can hardly be called a skeptic. Apart from the lack of textual evidence that Valla endorsed the skeptical position of doubt and the impossibility of knowledge and certainty, his treatment of captious forms of reasoning such as the sorites and the dilemma reveals a critical and suspicious attitude rather than gleeful acceptance. In bringing about *aporia* and the suspense of judgment these rhetorical techniques are indeed grist for the skeptic's mill, but Valla, interestingly, considers these and similar arguments to be sophistical and fallacious. Their force is easily broken if we examine the case carefully, paying attention to its wider circumstances and its chronological course and taking notice of the normal meaning of words. Such an approach will dispel their air of insolubility. The dream paradox, for instance, in which a dream tells the dreamer not to believe dreams is characterized as a dream which asserts something which defies proper verification. Valla is particularly interested in what the Greeks call *antistrephon* and Cicero *conversio*, that is, the maneuver, taught mainly by rhetoricians, by which a dilemmatic argument can be countered by another one.⁴² Valla extensively discusses the famous dilemma reported by Aulus Gellius (*Attic Nights* v.10.5–16) about a lawsuit between Protagoras and his pupil Euathlus. The pupil has promised to pay the second installment of the fees after having won his first case. However, he refuses to pay, and Protagoras brings him to court. If Euathlus loses the case, he will have to pay the rest of the fee because of

the judges' verdict; if he wins, he will have to pay as well, but now on account of his agreement with Protagoras. Euathlus, however, converts the argument: in either case he will not have to pay. Aulus Gellius thought that the judges should have refrained from passing judgment because any decision would be inconsistent with itself. But Valla rejects such a rebuttal of dilemmatic arguments and thinks that an answer may be formulated in response to such a dilemma, imagining himself making a speech on Protagoras' behalf. So while not denying that these arguments may deceptively appear to be convincing in creating an aporetic situation, he considers this kind of argument "cunning, amusing and witty rather than sincere and valid," finding corroboration in Quintilian's silence about it.⁴³ Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that Valla seems to be one of the first in the Latin West who dealt with types of dilemmatic arguments.

Valla's appeal to the broader context of an argument in order to evaluate its effectiveness returns in a different form in some of his other works. Thus, in his dialogue on the highest good, *De vero bono*, he considers the fable of Gyges, in which Gyges' ring enabled him to become invisible and to do wicked things. Valla rejects it on account of its internal inconsistency and the implausibility of the chronological order of events: "the fable does not square with itself and lacks coherence" (*fictio non quadrat nec sibi constat*).⁴⁴ The same appeal to internal consistency also informs Valla's famous demonstration that the Donation of Constantine, the medieval document used by the papacy to claim political power within the Roman Empire, is a forgery. Valla not only marshals linguistic arguments of various kinds but also points to the psychological impossibility of the whole case: for example, in donating a large part of his imperial domains to Pope Sylvester, the Emperor Constantine would behave in a way different from that presented in the document. And how could he hide such an act from his relatives and friends? "But if, having been such a man as he was, he had been transformed as it were into another man, there would certainly not have been lacking those who would warn him, most of all his sons, his relatives, and his friends."⁴⁵ The whole case goes against the logic of events and the logic of Constantine's known behavior patterns.

Inspired by the ideal of the orator as sketched by Cicero and Quintilian, Valla seeks to broaden considerably the range of parameters for assessing the power of arguments. His approach to meaning and argumentation therefore may be called "holistic" as it points to the entire context in which arguments function and hence ought to be evaluated – a context which is considerably wider than the single-sentence examples of the scholastics. It is also distinctively practical in that it takes as its point of departure real language rather than the semi-formalized dialect of the scholastics. It is

therefore understandable that his programme of a dialectic based on real language and exemplified by his own analysis of words and arguments in the *Elegantiae* and *Repastinatio* is often called a transformation or a reform of the late medieval Aristotelian–scholastic dialectic. But since his aims and methods differed so vastly from those of professional logicians, it may be better to speak of a reorientation or alternative to scholastic dialectic – an alternative which in the hands of the northern humanist Rudolph Agricola (1444–85) became a powerful tool to read, analyze, and compose argumentative texts designed to teach and convince.

Rudolph Agricola

Agricola may be said to have completed what Valla initiated: the writing of a dialectical manual based on real language. His *De inventione dialectica*, completed in 1479 but first printed only in 1515, became a best-seller in the sixteenth century with forty-four editions of the text and thirty-two editions of epitomes within sixty years.⁴⁶ This is in striking contrast with the limited circulation of Valla's work on dialectic, which would have been unsuitable for teaching in any case. But what Valla did for grammar in his *Elegantiae*, which did enjoy immense popularity, Agricola did for the study of dialectic, inaugurating a new tradition of textbooks in rhetoric and dialectic and influencing illustrious humanists such as Erasmus, Latomus, Vives, Melanchthon, and Ramus.

The link with Valla seems obvious: both humanists reject a formal approach to language and argumentation and aim at a dialectic using real language. The differences, however, far outweigh the similarities.⁴⁷ Apart from different positions on a number of points, the scope and strategy of Agricola's work are different. His aim is not to demolish the Aristotelian metaphysical edifice – he seems, for instance, to accept the basic structure of the categories – nor does he seem to endorse Valla's ideal of orator. Far from downplaying (as Valla did) the role of dialectic as an easy and almost puerile activity, defined as a mere part of invention and hence of rhetoric, Agricola makes dialectic the core of the linguistic arts, allotting to rhetoric the modest task of decoration and to grammar the care of correct usage.

Agricola's work is devoted to the finding (*inventio*) rather than the judging of arguments (*iudicium*) – a distinction which goes back to antiquity.⁴⁸ He assigns to dialectic the fundamental task of teaching, that is, speaking convincingly (*probabiliter*) on all subjects, for this is how he defines it. Basing himself on Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and Boethius, but moving beyond these authorities, Agricola systematically explores the whole range of issues involved in speaking convincingly. Whenever we want to be persuasive

we must consider in advance which arguments we must establish in order to prove our point, how to structure and order them, what type of discourse is fitting in a particular case, how to present our case in words, and how to take into account our audience or readers. These and many other issues are dealt with in a systematic way, and illustrated by examples culled from the great authors. Thus, Agricola offers a guide not only to thinking about effective and convincing argumentation or, more generally, communication, but also to reading and analyzing the classical texts.⁴⁹ Orations of Cicero for instance (but also Virgil's *Aeneid*) present excellent examples of argumentative structures, often present just below the surface level of rhetorical fireworks, and the reader is shown, in a number of close readings, how to distill the main and subsidiary questions and how to lay bare the dialectic infrastructure of arguments of various kinds.

Thus everything hinges on the invention of good arguments: that is, what creates conviction in doubtful matters. The principal part of Agricola's work is therefore devoted to the finding of arguments through the *loci* (places, topics, seats of arguments): that is, headings from which arguments can be drawn. Thus the topic "cause" applied to the theme of "war" should trigger thoughts, concepts, and words about the causes of war which may be developed into kinds of arguments in a given situation: "by the prompting of the topics, as if by certain signs, we are enabled to turn our minds around the things themselves and perceive whatever in each of them is convincing and suitable for what our speech sets out to teach."⁵⁰ Such lists of topics had a long and complicated history.⁵¹ Agricola drew in particular on those of Cicero, Quintilian and Boethius in establishing his own systematic and well-reasoned list, which includes definition, genus, species, property, whole, parts, action, efficient cause, final cause, effects, place, time, comparison, similars, and opposites. These "places where the arguments are found" (as Cicero famously described them) offer a heuristic tool in registering all kinds of aspects of one's subject:⁵²

every thing has a certain substance of its own, certain causes it arises from, certain effects it produces . . . As if following these things, when we alert our mind to consider any given subject, at once we shall go through the whole nature of the thing and its parts, and through all the things which are consistent or incompatible with it, and we shall draw from there an argument apposite to the subject proposed. These common headings, just as they contain within themselves everything that can be said about any subject, so also they contain all the arguments.

In applying the *loci* universally to all kinds of argumentative discourse, Agricola rejects Boethius' formal approach to the topics. Boethius had

stressed the difference between rhetoric and dialectic, each with its own system of topics. In his account the topics were treated as the foundations, that is, the premises of a dialectical syllogism, from which it derives its firmness and validity. This formal approach differs from Cicero's. In his *Topica* he presented one system of topical invention for all the arts, and it is to this more flexible, pragmatic use of the topics that Agricola returns. As he writes, the topics help the scientist no less than the teacher and debater in providing general principles of argumentation and organizing one's discourse.⁵³ Even though Agricola assigns a seemingly modest role to rhetoric as the art of decoration, the overall effect of his program is a rhetoricization of dialectic by uniting rhetorical and dialectical invention into one universal system, which could be extended to inquiries in all branches of knowledge. In his hands it has become a logic of inquiry rather than, as it had been for Boethius and his medieval followers, a logic of disputation in which the topics as universal propositions guarantee the validity of assertions made in disputation and argument.

Agricola's approach was taken up and developed in various directions by later humanists, depending on their wider aims and interests. An important name here is Melanchthon, one of Luther's closest associates, who reformed educational practices in Germany by writing a series of textbooks in the Agricolan vein on dialectic and rhetoric.⁵⁴ In all his writings the close connection between dialectic and rhetoric is stressed: dialectic tells us how to find, structure and present arguments for making a case. Rhetoric makes use of much the same tools as dialectic, and in Melanchthon's case this means especially the topics and their rhetorical pendant, the *loci communes*: that is, general notions belonging to a particular field of inquiry, which are not the reader's own invention but reflect the deep structure of nature.⁵⁵ This dialectical apparatus is developed at great length, incorporating terms and concepts from the traditional syllabus, based on Aristotle's *Organon*, but its aim remains distinctively practical and pedagogical: it aids the student in reading and analyzing classical texts and the Bible, in laying bare the argumentative armature by running through a set of basic questions and headings. And it also aided in composing one's own works. Thus, in readdressing the balance of dialectic towards real language and the arguments deployed in order to communicate and obtain conviction, humanism opened up new ways of reading and composing texts, built partly on the precepts of ancient dialectic and rhetoric, partly on their own imaginative and creative interpretations of these old texts. This move towards a new hermeneutics, a new approach to texts, arguments, and meaning is perhaps the most significant contribution of humanism.

NOTES

1. See Ashworth 1985; Nuchelmans 1980 and 1983. Another approach should also be mentioned. In the magical tradition, which became especially popular after the rediscovery of Plato's *Cratylus* and the rise of Hermeticism and natural magic, the divine origin of words was stressed. Words were believed to reveal the inner natures or essences of things, and biblical support for this view was found in the story of Adam's giving all creatures their names. On these traditions see e.g. Klein 1992.
2. For Hobbes see Leijenhorst 2002; for Locke see Ashworth 1981 and 1984; for Descartes see, for example, Ariew 1999, Rozemond 1998; for the entire period see Garber and Ayers 1998. On the dominance of the Aristotelian paradigm (according to which spoken and written words derive their meaning from mental concepts) during the Renaissance see Demonet 1992; for a different perspective see Moss 2003.
3. For excellent discussion covering the entire period see e.g. Vasoli 1968, Wels 2000 and Moss 2003.
4. Kneale and Kneale 1962, 298–316; Risse 1964; C. S. Lewis quoted by Perreiah 1982, 20. See Jardine 1988a, 173–4.
5. See e.g. Harris 1980 and 1981 for a critique of modern “scientific” approaches to language.
6. Cf. Ax 2001.
7. Valla 1984, 214 and 216.
8. Valla 1982, 217. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 1.6.27; see Camporeale 1972, 181–2; Marsh 1979; Giannini 1996.
9. Latin text in Garin 1952, 598; cf. Moss 2003, 36–7.
10. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 1.6.3; Cicero, *De oratore* 11.38.159; see Marsh 1979, 105.
11. Baxandall 1971, 118; see the literary appropriation of Valla's name in J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, 2003, 128–30.
12. From the *Oratio in principio studii*, delivered at Rome in 1455; edited in Rizzo 1994; translation in Baxandall 1971, 119.
13. Cf. Regoliosi 1995, esp. 154–7; Nauta 2004, esp. 108–12.
14. Text in Garin 1952, 596; see Nauta 2006b.
15. On this tradition see Jensen 1996 and Moss 2003, 43–63.
16. Text in Garin 1952, 610; Valla 1982, 5:7–8, 145:7, 278:1 and elsewhere.
17. What follows is based on Nauta 2003a and Nauta forthcoming 1. For the Latin text of the three versions see Zippel's edition (Valla 1982). For other discussions see esp. Vasoli 1968; Mack 1993; Laffranchi 1999.
18. Valla 1982, 14.
19. *Ibid.*, 30–6.
20. *Ibid.*, 21–30; see Nauta 2003a, esp. 619–25.
21. Valla 1982, 443:17.
22. *Ibid.*, 112–13 and 135–56.
23. For references see Nauta 2003a, 613–15; the next two paragraphs are based on this article.
24. Ockham 1974, 167–8.

25. E.g. Ockham 1974, 167–8; Ockham, 1978, 158–9. See Moody 1935, 132 and 172–3.
26. Valla 1982, 363:24 and 15:28. An extensive analysis of these and other passages will be found in Nauta forthcoming 1, chs. 1–3.
27. See Nauta 2004 and Nauta forthcoming 1, chs. 1–3.
28. Valla 1982, 365:9.
29. Valla 1982, 420:3; 117:3 and 118:15. This should qualify some modern statements to the effect that in Valla’s view there are no things without names (see Camporeale 1986, 227).
30. Valla 1982, 435:23–4; 162:11; 387:3.
31. Valla 1982, 386:26–8; 387:3; 160:8–15; 162:11–13; see 221:19.
32. Valla 1982, 386:26–8. See Camporeale 1972, 180 and 205, n. 9, and Tavoni 1984, 144–5, who concludes that *consuetudo* for Valla means what the *periti*, the orators and learned, say: that is, the literary practice of the best authors, rather than ordinary people’s parlance. The latter is even at times repudiated by Valla (145, n. 49; see Tavoni 1986, 212–13). This is true, yet Valla clearly speaks of “almost the entire human race” here. For an analysis, see Nauta forthcoming 1, Conclusion.
33. See his statement “to give truth and custom each their due” (Valla 1982, 46:8) and his hesitation between “essence” and “substance”; the latter is more common, but the former may bring us closer to the truth (46:2–16).
34. Nauta 2004.
35. On Valla’s critique of the Aristotelian conception of the soul, see Nauta 2003b, and Nauta forthcoming 1, ch. 4; on his ethics see *ibid.*, ch. 5 and Nauta forthcoming 2.
36. Valla 1982, 175–6.
37. *Institutio oratoria* 5.10.8.
38. Valla 1982, 239–41. See Mack 1993, 80–4, and Nauta forthcoming 1, chs. 7–8.
39. Valla 1982, 243; I use Mack’s translation in Mack 1993, 82.
40. The so-called “heap argument”: if 100 grains constitute a heap, 99 certainly also constitute a heap. But if we go on subtracting grains, we may arrive at the conclusion that just one grain constitutes a heap. The argument discredits ideas of limit.
41. Jardine 1983; see Panizza 1978 on Academic skepticism in Valla’s *De vero bono*.
42. Valla 1982, 306–28. See esp. Nuchelmans 1991a, 88–94; Nuchelmans 1991b; Mack 1993, 90–2, 98–100, 105–8, Monfasani 1990; Nauta 2006a. Valla does not seem to have any principal problem with dilemma itself but only with the rhetoricians’ technique of the “conversion” of a dilemma (Valla 1982, 332, line 11).
43. Valla 1982, 333–4 and 322.
44. Valla 1977, 188–9. See Langer 2002.
45. Valla 1976; tr. Coleman in Valla 1993, 37. See Nauta 2004, 106–8.
46. See Mack 1993, ch. 13.
47. Monfasani 1990, Mack 1993, 244–50 (with a full list of differences on 248–9). See Vasoli 1968, 147–82.
48. E.g. Agricola 1992, 12–20 and 196–206 (1.2 and 2.1).
49. Mack 1985, Mack 1993, Meerhoff 1990.
50. Agricola 1992, 10; tr. Mack 1993, 139.

51. See Cogan 1984 on the topical systems of Cicero, Boethius, and Agricola, and their differences.
52. Agricola 1992, 18–20, tr. in Mack 1993, 140.
53. Agricola 1992, chapters 2.7, 2.28, and at various other places.
54. Vasoli 1968, Meerhoff 1994a and 1994b; Moss 2003, esp. 153–69 and 247–50; Wels 2000.
55. Melanchthon speaks of “forms or rules of all things” (*formae seu regulae omnium rerum*); see Moss 2003, 160, n. 5.