

LODI NAUTA

ABSTRACT

Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457) has often been considered to be a sceptic. Equipped with an extremely polemical and critical mind, his whole oeuvre seemed to aim at undermining received philosophical and theological dogmas. More specifically he has been associated with the burgeoning interests in ancient scepticism in the fifteenth century. In this article the arguments in support of this interpretation will be critically examined and evaluated. Based on a discussion of two of his major works, *De vero bono* and the *Dialectica*, it will be shown that Valla was not a sceptic. Even though the first work betrays the techniques of the Academy as employed by Cicero, the appropriation of these strategies served an agenda which can hardly be called 'sceptical'. The second work contains his reform of Aristotelian dialectic, which seems to testify to a sceptical interest in arguments which rely on verisimilitude and dubious validity such as sorites and paradox. But rather than reflecting an endorsement of Academic scepticism, this work, on closer reading, shows Valla to be highly critical on such arguments. This raises the question of how scepticism is related to rhetoric. Their similarities and differences will be discussed in the final section: Valla the Christian orator was no proponent of doubt, uncertainty and a suspension of judgement, even though at times he used strategies derived from Academic scepticism.

Like all “-isms”, “scepticism” is a term with rather vague semantical contours.¹ It means different things to different people, and because historians do not always make clear in which sense they are using the term, debates about whether a particular thinker was a sceptic or not are bound to arise. Some scholars would only speak of scepticism if the main tenets of *ancient* scepticism are explicitly mentioned and endorsed—the equipollence

¹ Earlier versions of this article were read at a conference on scepticism, organized by Henrik Lagerlund, in Uppsala (May 2005) and at the annual conference of the Renaissance Society of America in San Francisco (March 2006). I am grateful to the audiences present at these occasions for stimulating discussions on the history of scepticism, in particular John Monfasani, Brian Copenhaver, David Lines and Dominik Perler.

of beliefs, the suspension of judgement, and the tranquillity of the mind. In a broader, less historically determined sense, it can mean the conviction that the human mind is principally incapable to grasp the truth of things. On this view, certainty and truth are out of reach for human beings, who should therefore be content with probability, verisimilitude or mere plausibility. This conviction can easily lead to fideism, and some thinkers in the past have used scepticism as a preparation for faith or have even regarded it as basically congruous with it.² In an even broader sense it means any form of questioning, doubting and undermining traditional beliefs, arguments, opinions or conventions. Used in this sense, historians may call any thinker in the past a sceptic who problematised or criticised established opinions and practices. And these are just some of the meanings which have been attached to the term.

It is clear that an historian using the term, for instance, in the first, strict sense distinguished here, will come up with a different history of scepticism than someone who uses it in the last, much broader sense. The first type of history will probably pass over the Middle Ages, since the principal texts of ancient scepticism—Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*, and Cicero's *Academica*—did not, or hardly, circulate then and were virtually unknown.³ The latter type of history will focus on those periods when traditional systems of beliefs were criticised, for example late-medieval nominalism, humanism, the Reformation, and the French Enlightenment.⁴ It is therefore important to be clear about one's understanding and use of the term, for otherwise one is bound to talk at cross-purposes. In this article I shall

² The rehearsal of sceptical arguments in the defence of faith can take different forms. It is one thing to use sceptical language and sceptical arguments to give expression to one's religious beliefs, as Montaigne did when he thought that the sceptical and the Christian positions are basically compatible, linking the sceptic's precept to comply with the customs and laws of society with his own preservation of "the ancient beliefs of our religion". It is another thing to employ sceptical arguments as a preparation for faith as Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola did in his *Examen vanitatis*, completed in 1516. See T. Penelhum, *Skepticism and Fideism*, in: *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. M. Burnyeat, Berkeley 1983, 287-318 on 296-97.

³ However, the circulation of Sextus Empiricus was somewhat wider than has hitherto been supposed; see R. Wittwer, *Sextus Latinus. Die erste lateinische Übersetzung von Sextus Empiricus' Pyrrōneioi Hypotyphōseis*, Leiden (forthcoming). For Cicero's *Academica* in the Middle Ages see C. B. Schmitt, *Cicero Scepticus*, The Hague 1972, 33-42 (e.g. pp. 39-41 on Henry of Ghent's use of it).

⁴ See now on medieval forms of scepticism Dominik Perler, *Zweifel und Gewissheit. Skeptische Debatten im Mittelalter*, Frankfurt am Main 2006.

argue that the debate on the so-called scepticism of Quattrocento humanism, in particular the scepticism of one its most famous representatives, Lorenzo Valla (1407-1457), has suffered from this vagueness or equivocation of the term. This is not surprising. Fifteenth-century Italian humanism saw the rediscovery and slow dissemination of ancient sources of scepticism, but it has also been frequently termed "sceptical" in the more general sense of doubting, questioning and undermining traditional systems of beliefs.⁵ Humanism defined itself in opposition to scholasticism, attacking scholastic modes of thinking and writing wherever it could. Humanists proclaimed intellectual freedom, rejecting what they saw as the *ipse dixit*-attitude of the scholastics. Their rediscovery of ancient literature, rhetoric and philosophy suggested to them that the truth of Aristotle was just one truth among many others, and that there was an intellectual life beyond the confines of what they saw as the rigid, dogmatic and closed-off world of the scholastics.

To many historians, these tendencies find no better expression than in the work of Lorenzo Valla.⁶ Equipped with an extremely polemical and critical mind, his whole oeuvre seemed to aim at undermining received philosophical and theological dogmas. He famously exposed as a forgery the Donation of Constantine, one of the pillars of the papal claim on worldly power. He approached critically the vulgate text of the Bible, comparing it, for the first time, with the Greek text of the New Testament, and drawing some theologically daring conclusions from it. He attacked Aristotelian-scholastic metaphysics and dialectics almost *tout court*. He was

⁵ The term features prominently in e.g. V. Kahn, *Rhetoric, Prudence, and Skepticism in the Renaissance*, Ithaca and London, 1985; B. Copenhaver and C. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, Oxford 1992, ch. 4; Erika Rummel, *The Confessionalization of Humanism in Reformation Germany*, Oxford 2000, 50.

⁶ See e.g. M. Fois, *Il pensiero cristiano di Lorenzo Valla nel quadro storico culturale del suo ambiente*, Rome 1969; C. Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness. Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, London, 2 vols., 1970, vol. 1, 103-50; S. I. Camporeale, *Lorenzo Valla. Umanesimo e teologia*, Florence 1972; R. Fubini, *Lorenzo Valla tra il Concilio di Basilea e quello di Firenze, e il processo dell'Inquisizione*, in *Conciliarismo, stati nazionali, inizi dell'umanesimo. Atti del XXV Convegno storico internazionale, Todi...* 1988, Spoleto 1990, 287-318; R. Fubini, *Due contributi su Lorenzo Valla*, in: *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, 8 (= n.s., vol. 5) (1994), 101-16; B. Copenhaver and C. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, Oxford 1992, 209-27; W. Scott Blanchard, *The negative dialectic of Lorenzo Valla: a study in the pathology of opposition*, in: *Renaissance Studies*, 14 (2000), 149-89; T. Izbicki, *Lorenzo Valla: The Scholarship in English Through 1992*, in: *Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation. Essays in Honor of Charles Trinkaus*, eds. J. O' Malley et al., Leiden 1993, 287-301. See n. 11 below for more studies on Valla.

highly “sceptical” about some religious practices, attacking the validity of vows of the clergy. Other scholars associate Valla, more specifically, with the burgeoning interests in ancient scepticism.⁷ Influenced by the Academic scepticism of Cicero, Valla was highly sceptical, according to these scholars, about the possibility of certain knowledge and the attainment of truth. This is also believed to be the reason why he pays considerable attention to forms of argumentation which rely solely on probability and verisimilitude—forms which had no place in the “sterile” scholastic study of Aristotelian syllogistics.

These arguments for Valla’s scepticism have not gone unchallenged. It has been pointed out that there is no reason to call Valla a sceptic.⁸ There is for instance nothing sceptical in his interest in topical invention and types of arguments which seem to destroy certainty.⁹ Indeed, Valla was highly critical of such captious reasonings. Valla’s appeal to freedom of inquiry, without adhering to one particular sect of philosophy, does not necessarily reflect a sceptical mind either. Lastly, Valla expressed his own opinions with a vehemence and self-confidence (not to say arrogance) which would have caused a sceptic to blush.

So, was Valla a sceptic after all or not? In this article I propose to examine the debate in more detail. The arguments in themselves are interesting enough and raise deeper questions, for instance, about the relationship between rhetoric and scepticism, between fideism and scepticism, but also about the different uses of the term and how this semantic ambiguity can lead to such controversies. And it may lead to a better appreciation of Valla’s achievements and limitations—a task which seems to me long overdue in view of the almost hagiographic tone of much scholarship on Valla.¹⁰

⁷ See esp. L. Panizza, *Lorenzo Valla’s De vero falsoque bono*, *Lactantius and Oratorical Scepticism*, in: *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 41 (1978), 76-107; L. Jardine, *Lorenzo Valla and the Intellectual Origins of Humanist Dialectic*, in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 15 (1977), 143-64; L. Jardine, *Lorenzo Valla: Academic Scepticism and the New Humanist Dialectic*, in: *Burnyeat* 1983 (n. 2), 253-86.

⁸ See esp. J. Monfasani, *Lorenzo Valla and Rudolph Agricola*, in: *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 28 (1990), 181-200, esp. 192-200 (repr. in his *Language and Learning in Renaissance Italy*, Aldershot, Hampshire 1994, no. V); P. Mack, *Renaissance Argument. Valla and Agricola in the Traditions of Rhetoric and Dialectic*, Leiden 1993, 83 and 109 n. 35 (on Valla). They do not discuss Panizza’s interpretation though.

⁹ We shall come back to this below.

¹⁰ I hope to fulfil that task in my forthcoming book on Valla: *In Defence of Common Sense. Lorenzo Valla’s Humanist Critique of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*.

De vero bono

I shall briefly discuss two works which have been seen as embodying Valla's sceptical position. The first one is his *De voluptate*, a brilliant piece of forensic oratory, which reveals his indebtedness to the sceptical works of Cicero and Lactantius. It is a dialogue, published in 1431 when Valla was still in his mid-twenties, between a "Stoic", an "Epicurean" and a "Christian" on the highest good.¹¹ The first version is entitled *De voluptate*; later versions, which differ in casting and setting (though not in argument), bear the title *De vero bono* and also *De vero falsoque bono*. The result of this confrontation between pagan and Christian moral thought is a combination of Pauline fideism and Epicurean hedonism, in which the Christian concepts of charity and beatitude are identified with hedonist pleasure, and in which the philosopher's concept of virtue is rejected. No reader can fail to notice the highly rhetorical character of the *De vero bono*, and the positions, therefore, defended by the interlocutors, cannot be automatically taken at face value. Appealing to Cicero's declaration of the orator's eclectic freedom to use arguments from whatever provenance, the interlocutors remind each other and the reader that their speeches are developed for the sake of debate rather than as defences of historically accurate positions. From the way "Stoicism" and "Epicureanism" are used, it is clear that they are simply labels which have hardly anything to do with the historical systems of ancient thought. "Stoicism" designates any kind of abstract rationalism, conveyed in dialectical argumentation, of the philosophers (including Aristotle); "Epicureanism" stands for a realistic view of human nature, based on empirical observation and exemplified by individual cases.¹² The oratorical strategies are explicitly

¹¹ The literature on *De vero bono* is vast. For discussions see for instance G. Mancini, *Vita di Lorenzo Valla*, Florence 1891, ch. 2; F. Gaeta, *Lorenzo Valla. Filologia e storia nell'umanesimo italiano*, Naples 1955, 15-53; H.-B. Gerl, *Rhetorik als Philosophie. Lorenzo Valla*, Munich 1974; G. Di Napoli, *Lorenzo Valla. Filosofia e religione nell'umanesimo italiano*, Rome 1971, 137-246; Fois 1969 (n. 7), 95-167; G. Radetti, *La religione di Lorenzo Valla*, in: *Medioevo e Rinascimento. Studi in onore di Bruno Nardi*, Florence 1955, vol. 2, 171-83; Trinkaus 1970 (n. 7), 103-50; B. Vickers, *Valla's Ambivalent Praise of Pleasure. Rhetoric in the Service of Christianity*, in: *Viator* 17 (1986), 271-319; M. de Panizza Lorch, *A Defense of Life: Lorenzo Valla's Theory of Pleasure*, Munich 1985; M. de Panizza Lorch, *The Epicurean in Lorenzo Valla's On Pleasure*, in: *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquillity. Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought*, ed. M. J. Osler, Cambridge 1991, 89-114.

¹² Cf. Gerl 1974 (n. 11), 97-118 and D. Marsh, *Quattrocento Dialogue. Classical Tradition and Humanism Innovation*, Harvard 1980, esp. 74: "Valla's Epicureanism opposes Stoic abstract

recognised by the interlocutors. They frequently state that they act and argue in oratorical manner (*oratorio more*), that they speak under false pretences (*simulate loqui*) and use irony, and that they know that the position of the speaker does not reflect his actual views.¹³

The highly rhetorical nature of the work has made it difficult to distract Valla's own position. Today most scholars are inclined to accept the Christian position as reflecting Valla's own point of view, which does not mean, however, that the "Stoic" and "Epicurean" positions are entirely rejected. They can be considered as stages of the plot or necessary steps in a dialectical movement—rather like thesis ("Stoicism") and antithesis ("Epicureanism")—resulting in the synthesis of the Christian position.¹⁴ This Christian position is given an highly oratorical presentation in the form of an imaginary voyage of the soul to heaven where it enjoys beatitude as ultimate pleasure. Adopting the Epicurean notion of pleasure as the universal motivation of human behaviour, the Christian interlocutor transforms the theme of earthly pleasures into that of heavenly pleasure.

Without entering into a full discussion of the contents of Valla's dialogue, it is evident that the argumentative strategies adopted betray the techniques of the Academy as employed by Cicero in several of his dia-

rationalism and its dialectical method by proposing an inductive empiricism which examines the lives and behavior of men by the practical and flexible methods of rhetoric".

¹³ Valla, *De vero falsoque bono*, ed. M. de P. Lorch, Bari 1970, 22 and 107; *On Pleasure/De Voluptate*, transl. A. Kent Heath and Maristella Lorch, New York 1977, 90 and 261. In what follows I refer to page numbers of the 1970 edition and the 1977 translation, separated by a slash, e.g. 3/53, 14/75. What Valla writes in the introduction must therefore be ironical (3/53): "I introduce as interlocutors on the subject very eloquent men who are also my good friends, assigning to each a discourse according to his character and position and consistent with the conversations they recently held among themselves".

¹⁴ See L. Nauta, *The Price of Reduction: Problems in Lorenzo Valla's Epicurean Fideism*, in: *Ethik—Wissenschaft oder Lebenskunst? Modelle der Normenbegründung von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*, eds. S. Ebbersmeyer & E. Kessler, Münster (forthcoming, 2006/07). A much longer discussion is found in chapter 5 of my forthcoming book (n. 10).

¹⁵ Even though Valla refers to Cicero as "academicus ac platonicus" (*Repastinatio dialectice et philosophice*, ed. G. Zippel, Padua 1982, 2 vols., 362 and 3), references to Cicero's *Academica* are scarce. In the *Repastinatio* there is only one quotation (absent in the first version), on p. 311. There is, as far as I know, just one quotation in the *Elegantiae*, in book III, 66 where Valla quotes the opening sentence from Book I (I checked *Laurentii Vallae Elegantiarum concordantiae*, eds. I. J. García Pinilla and M. J. Pareja, Hildesheim 1997). In a letter to Tortelli from 1447 Valla asks for information about "quatuor Academicorum Ciceronis" reported to have been recently found in Siena (*Laurentii Valle Epistole*, eds. O. Besomi and M. Regoliosi, Padua 1984, 312); it appeared to be a false report (see the editors' commentary, 301-2). In Valla's glosses to Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* we find four direct references to "Lucullus", "Hortensius" (twice) and "in Academica" (Valla, *Le Postille*

logues. Though references to the *Academica* are scarce,¹⁵ Valla drew in particular on *De Oratore*, the *Tusculanae Disputationes*, and the *De natura deorum*, which all testify to Cicero's ideal of an orator who argues the question on both sides (*in utramque partem disserere*), without drawing dogmatic conclusions or claiming to attain certainty and truth; for the function of philosophy, Cicero writes in *De Oratore*, is to elicit what is probable in every question.¹⁶ The presentation of opposing arguments often leads to a compromise (e.g. *De Finibus* and *De Natura Deorum*). Before this compromise is reached, various and often conflicting points of views are developed and the interlocutors freely play the devil's advocate. Sometimes, in typically sceptical vein, they deliberately pronounce opinions which do not reflect their own actual views; Socratic irony is used and explicitly acknowledged as an important tool for the orator. Seeing the matter from various angles, without committing oneself to one particular philosophical school, is essential to Cicero's Academic outlook: this *libertas disserendi*, frequently mentioned by him, has rightly been called the "a true hallmark of Academic scepticism".¹⁷ All these features recur in Valla's *De vero bono*, and in this sense of employing Ciceronian strategies Valla's method may indeed be termed a brand of sceptical oratory.

But does this turn Valla into a sceptic? If one focuses solely on these rhetorical devices and argumentative strategies the answer would perhaps be yes, but then we should call Descartes a sceptic too, since he too employed sceptical arguments (though of a wholly different kind). But of course, Descartes' aim in developing his radical doubt was to refute the sceptics by finding absolute certainties. And the history of philosophy provides several other examples of the use of sceptical arguments for

all' *Institutio oratoria di Quintiliano*, eds. L. Cesarini Martinelli and A. Perosa, Padua 1996, 75, 104, 135 and 243). Valla's acquaintance with the *Academica* does not appear to have been deep, which is fully in line with the picture Charles Schmitt drew in his studies of the reception of the *Academica*. See his *The Rediscovery of Ancient Skepticism in Modern Times*, in: Burnyeat 1983 (n. 2), 225-51.

¹⁶ *De oratore* 3.79. On Cicero's Academic scepticism, see W. Görler, *Silencing the Troublemaker: De Legibus I.39 and the Continuity of Cicero's Scepticism* and J. Glucker, *Probabile, Veri Simile, and Related Terms*, both in *Cicero the Philosopher. Twelve Papers*, ed. J.G.F. Powell, Oxford 1995, 85-113 and 115-43, where more literature is cited; J.E. Seigel, *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism. The Union of Eloquence and Wisdom, Petrarch to Valla*, Princeton, N.J. 1968, 16-30. For recent studies on Cicero's *Academica* see *Assent and Argument. Studies in Cicero's 'Academic books'*, eds. B. Inwood and J. Mansfeld, Leiden 1997.

¹⁷ Görler 1995 (n. 16), 103.

non-sceptical purposes; one may think of Kant. A similar case can be made for Valla. The argumentative strategies clearly serve an agenda that can hardly be called sceptical. This wider agenda can be distilled more easily from another work of Valla's, the *Repastinatio dialectice et philosophiæ*. In this work, much of the argumentation of the *De vero bono* recurs in a long chapter on the virtues.¹⁸ Valla here speaks in his own voice, and the argumentation is couched in a non-dramatic and non-literary form. This strongly suggests that Valla's position of a Christian hedonism could also be developed without these Academic strategies. In other words, Valla has a positive doctrine to teach.

Repastinatio dialectice et philosophiæ

Valla, however, not only put into practice the dialectical procedure of Academic scepticism, he is also said to have made it the heart of his reform of dialectics in his critique of Aristotelian-scholastic philosophy, the so-called *Repastinatio dialectice et philosophiæ*, or briefly, his *Dialectica*.¹⁹ He started this work in Pavia in the early 1430s, and continued to work on it throughout his life; three versions are extant, the last of which Valla was still working on by the time of his death. Valla envisaged it as a comprehensive work of philosophy and dialectic, corresponding roughly with the Aristotelian Organon. The first book of the *Repastinatio*, which deals with the categories and transcendentals, corresponds to the *Categories*; the second book, which deals with the combination of terms into propositions and with commonplaces, to the *De interpretatione*, the *Topica* and the *Rhetorica*; the third book, which deals with the combination of propositions into various forms of argumentation, to the *Analytica Priora* and, to a lesser extent, *De sophisticis elenchis*. Indeed, his project is only intelligible within the limits of this Aristotelian corpus of texts and Porphyry's *Isagoge*

¹⁸ This is discussed in Nauta 2006/07 (n. 14) and more fully in Nauta forthcoming (n. 10).

¹⁹ The work is extant in three versions; vol. 1 (pp. 1-356) of Zippel's edition contains Valla's third version, including a critical apparatus which lists variant readings from the second version. Vol. 2 (pp. 357-598) contains the first version (finished ca. 1438). On this work see C. Vasoli, *La dialettica e la retorica dell'Umanesimo*, Milan 1968, 28-77; Mack 1993 (n. 8); M. Laffranchi, *Dialettica e filosofia in Lorenzo Valla*, Milan 1999; L. Nauta, *William of Ockham and Lorenzo Valla: False Friends. Semantics and Ontological Reduction*, in: *Renaissance Quarterly*, 56 (2003), 613-51. A philosophically critical discussion and exegesis of the entire work will be found in Nauta forthcoming (n. 10).

(all in Boethius' translations) alongside Boethius' own commentaries. While Valla utterly rejected scholastic modes of thinking and writing, his knowledge of late-medieval logic was very meagre.²⁰

By far the longest book is the first one where Valla aims to cut at the roots of Aristotelian-scholastic metaphysics by criticising some of its fundamental notions, such as the ten categories, the six transcendental terms (such as "good", "one" and "true"), the predicables such as genus, species and *differentia* by which we can define a thing and allot it a place in the so-called tree of Porphyry. Further, he rejects the Aristotelian account of form and matter and act and potency. According to Valla, these terms, concepts and distinctions, couched in a 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 imposed on himself, therefore, is to cut through this useless superstructure of technical jargon and void concepts by reducing them to what he considers as the basic elements of a common-sense world view. These basic elements are things we perceive either physically or mentally, and they may be described as qualified substances, that is substances characterized by their qualities and actions. These three categories—substance, quality and action—are the only three from Aristotle's ten which Valla admits. The other accidental categories can be reduced to these three: from Valla's grammatical point of view there is no reason to keep the other categories: a thing is qualified by size, its relations, its place and time no less than by its qualities proper. The central term in Valla's picture, therefore, is "thing" (*res*): it is used to refer to the things we see and feel, but also to its elements (substance, quality and action) out of which a thing consists.²¹ Apart from metaphysics, Valla deals with a host of other issues in the first book of the *Repastinatio*, such as the soul, the virtues and natural philosophy.

²⁰ A. R. Perreiah, *Humanist Critiques of Scholastic Dialectic*, in: *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, 13 (1982), 3-22, on 7-8; Nauta 2003 (n. 19), esp. 617, 623-25, and 644-48.

²¹ See my *Lorenzo Valla and the Rise of Humanist Dialectic*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. J. Hankins, Cambridge (forthcoming 2007), and more extensively Nauta 2003 (n. 19), esp. 625-36. Given the purpose of this paper I shall refrain from explaining Valla's position in any detail here; it must suffice to give an indication of the outlines of his programme in order to assess the claim whether Valla can be called a "sceptic" or not.

Book II and III contain Valla's reform of dialectics. The main topics here are propositions and their *signa* (indicators of quality and quantity such as *omnis*, *aliquis*, and *non*), the square of contraries, proof and argument, and various forms of argumentation. It is especially these books which are believed to embody Valla's "distinctively skeptical dialectic", that is, his "coherent antidogmatist *ratio disserendi*".²² Even though Valla's endorsement of scepticism can only be inferred from "loaded quotation", Jardine believes that this work is "packed with arguments borrowed and cited from the key available works on Academic skepticism".²³ She argues that Valla's dialectics was aimed at making an inventory and analysis of a much broader range of arguments than the formal syllogism which was the central core of the scholastic study of logic. Stimulated by the rediscovery of ancient literature, philosophy and rhetoric, Valla and his contemporaries regarded language primarily as a vehicle for debate, persuasion, communication rather than as a formalised scientific tool, studied in abstraction from its living context of speech and discussion. So in his analysis of forms of argumentation Valla wanted to "shift away from syllogism and formal validity, and toward a survey of the varied and variously reliable active techniques for settling a matter in dispute".²⁴ Instead of studying formal validity and rules of inference *in abstracto*, Valla wanted to study and assess arguments in terms of persuasion and usefulness, thus adding to the syllogism all kinds of arguments which rely on probability and even problematic validity. The basic source for this reorientation of dialectics was Academic scepticism, and this—so the argument goes—entailed that for Valla "the pursuit of truth is an elusive if not impossible undertaking" and that "any study of ratiocination which restricts itself to, or even concentrates on, objective truth and techniques for arriving at it must be inadequate".²⁵ What Valla sought was "a dialectic rich enough to allow him to explore the relative probability of conflicting dogmas, while withholding overall assent".²⁶ This is why he was so interested—again, still according to this interpretation—in dilemmatic arguments, paradoxes, sorites and similar types of arguments which undermine "the possibility of certainty in knowledge".²⁷ Moreover, this theme of doubt is

²² Jardine 1983 (n. 7), 265.

²³ *Eadem*, 268.

²⁴ *Eadem*, 257.

²⁵ *Eadem*, 259.

²⁶ *Eadem*, 259.

²⁷ *Eadem*, 273.

underscored, Jardine argues, by Valla's rehearsal of ancient philosophical schools in the preface to his work and his defence of free inquiry.

Now it is not difficult to see that this interpretation is based on arguments which—to use the terminology of our theme—are doubtful and of dubious validity. First of all, there is no textual evidence that Valla endorsed the sceptical position of doubt and the impossibility of knowledge and certainty. In fact, he explicitly speaks of the “*firma atque indubitata principia*” which “Hippocrates, Euclides and some others” have established.²⁸ Nor does he ever suggest, *pace* Jardine, suspending judgement. Further, in the preface where he praises Pythagoras and enumerates a number of ancient schools and philosophers, he aims at criticising the *ipse dixit*-attitude of Aristotelians by showing that in Antiquity there were more positions available and that Aristotle was not considered the philosophical godhead as he is in Valla's time.²⁹ This is also the context of his reference to Socrates' famous dictum that the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing—an attitude which is contrasted to the *ipse dixit*

²⁸ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 6. In the *Dialogue on Free Will* the fictional Lorenzo, who clearly stands for the author, explicitly dismisses the “Academics with their point of view, who although they would put all in doubt, certainly could not doubt of their own doubts; and, although they argued nothing is known, nevertheless they did not lose their zeal for investigation. Furthermore, we know that later thinkers added much to what was previously found out; their precept and example ought to spur us to discovering other things also” (transl. C. Trinkaus in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, eds. E. Cassirer, P. O. Kristeller and J. H. Randall, Jr., Chicago 1948, 159). But even though it is asserted that the Academics wrongly denied that man can attain knowledge (*ibid.*), the treatise ends with a strongly fideistic note of Pauline stamp.

²⁹ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 2-4. Valla may have been inspired by Quintilian who writes that there is no need for an orator “to swear allegiance to any philosophic code” (*iurare leges*), and Quintilian explicitly includes the sceptics here (*Institutio oratoria* 12.2.24). In his glosses to Quintilian, Valla quotes here Aulus Gellius on the Pyrrhonists without further comment; *Le Postille*, eds. Cesarini Martinelli and Perosa (n. 15), 246, referring to Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae*, II, 5. 1-4 and II, 5, 8.

³⁰ Ed. Zippel, 2. Jardine 1983 (n. 7), 266 translates a passage from Valla's preface, but she omits certain phrases and sentences (present in the Latin text of the second version from which she translates) in which Valla clearly states that he does not belong to *any* sect, including that of the Academics. (And see the quotation from the *Dialogue on Free Will*, cited above in n. 28.) Thus she omits the phrase “quanto magis iis qui nulli secte se addixerunt” (which is Valla's own approach), and also “qui nullius secte hominum” (in the third version: “qui mihi nullius secte homini”; ed. Zippel, 2). Moreover, she refers to S. Camporeale's transcription of the first version in his *Lorenzo Valla. Umanesimo e teologia* (n. 6), but she does not cite the important passage: “Nunc igitur si me stoicum aut epicureum aut academicum aut, quod maius ac verum est, nullius secte dixerō . . .” (Camporeale, 407; ed. Zippel, 362). See also the previous note.

attitude of the Aristotelians. He frequently claims for himself the right to speak and think freely, without committing himself to any school.³⁰ This proclamation of philosophical liberty is certainly inspired by Cicero's *libertas disserendi* but as Valla explicitly mentions the Academics as one school out of many, he clearly does not profess himself to be an Academic sceptic.³¹

Apart from the absence of an explicit expression of support for sceptical philosophy, there is another reason why this interpretation is implausible. Valla's project in general is not only to criticise what he sees as perfidious developments in philosophy and theology, but also to repair and renew their foundations. The titles of the successive versions are significant: *Repastinatio* (the re-ploughing or retilling) *dialectice et philosophie*, *Reconcinnatio* (refabrication) *totius dialectice et fundamentorum universalis philosophie* and *Retractatio* (repair or restructuring) *totius dialectice cum fundamentis universe philosophie*.³² In other words, far from advocating suspense of belief or carefully balancing different positions in order to elicit what is most probable, Valla forcibly proclaims what he sees as the truth on a host of issues.³³ As he says at the beginning of the *Repastinatio*: the aim of his critique of Aristotle and the Aristotelians is to recall recent theologians from their mistaken engagement with Aristotelian philosophy and to lead them to "correct theologising" (*ad vere theologandum*).³⁴ And his own programme of recalling dialectic and philosophy to the common language of the great authors, rejecting all kinds of specialized idiom, is invariably couched in terms of the truth.³⁵ If he were a sceptic, he disguised the fact rather well.

It is therefore instructive to look at his notion of truth itself—a theme which would certainly have elicited comments from someone with sceptic

³¹ Cicero criticised the *ipse dixit* approach of the Pythagoreans in *De natura deorum* 1.5.10, referred to by Valla in his preface to his *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 360.

³² See Zippel's introduction of his edition, xii-xvi.

³³ See my *Lorenzo Valla's Critique of Aristotelian Psychology*, in: *Vivarium*, 41 (2003), 120-43. On natural philosophical issues Valla expresses a number of "dogmatic" opinions, even though at times he embraces a quasi fideistic position, urging natural philosophers not to speculate about things that really exist but about which it is impossible to know anything, at least in this life, such as the substance of the stars and heavens (422 and 98ff.).

³⁴ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 7.

³⁵ See e.g. the preface to the third book (ed. Zippel, 277-78): "Ergo vincere non possumus, nisi veritas vincat"; his enemies are "veritatis hostes". The prefaces to the *Elegantiae linguae Latinae* offer many other instances.

³⁶ See Nauta 2003 (n. 19), 242-44 and more fully in Nauta forthcoming (n. 10). See *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 378-79 and 19-20.

tic inclinations. Without going into details, Valla's eclectic account of truth combines an *adaequatio*-theory with an Augustinian notion of divine illumination.³⁶ Truth is first regarded as "knowledge or cognition of whatever thing"—a notion which goes back to Aristotle and was later developed at length in Thomas Aquinas. Valla however develops it into a different direction, comparing truth with "the light of the mind extending itself to the senses".³⁷ This light of the mind comes from within, not from without like solar light, though the sun in making vision possible is like God who makes intellectual vision possible: "Yet, as the sun shows and exhibits the colours of bodies to the eyes, so too God shows and exhibits the qualities of things to the mind. Plato proposed this theory somewhat differently (*nonnihil diverse*) in the *Republic*, when he said that truth is like the sun, knowledge and cognition like authentic vision (*sincerum aspectum*)".³⁸ Having defined truth in terms of knowledge or cognition, Valla goes on to apply true and false to spoken words. A verbal expression, he holds, is false when "someone, while his mind is not erring, speaks differently from what he thinks" (falsity out of wickedness) or "when someone, while his mind is erring, misleads himself rather than another" (falsity out of ignorance).³⁹ Whatever we may think of Valla's discussion of truth, it is clear that it does not show any traces of a sceptical mind, which doubts whether we can arrive at the truth of things.

What remains therefore of the claim that Valla's reform of dialectic reflects an endorsement of Academic scepticism is his interests in arguments which rely on verisimilitude or even dubiously inferential techniques and dubious validity. This claim seems to come in two parts: (1) Valla's

³⁷ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 378: "qualitas est que sensui mentis inest, et orationi" and 19: "verum sive 'veritas' est proprie scientia sive notitia cuiuscunque rei, et quasi lux animi, que ad sensus quoque se porrigit".

³⁸ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 19 referring to *Republic* 6.19, 508C-509B. It is interesting to notice that Valla's references to Plato's *Republic* ("*De re publica*") occur only in the later versions. His friend Decembrio had translated the work in the late 1430s (see J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols., Leiden 1990, vol. 1, 126), and there was obviously much debate about Plato's text which Bruni deemed unfit for translation because of its base morality. On Valla's knowledge and appreciation of Plato see Zippel's introduction to his edition, vol. 1, xcvi, n. 1.

³⁹ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 20, lines 11-14. In the first version this distinction is expressed in terms of "ignorance, that is wickedness" and "imprudence, that is injustice" (378, lines 25-7), which are omitted from the later versions. In the first version Valla further adds that we inquire after the truth of an issue only when a controversy about it has arisen. Truth is therefore the cognition of a disputed thing, falsity the ignorance of it (*veritas est notitia rei controversae, falsitas vero eiusdem inscitia*, 378:16-19).

interests in topical invention, that is, finding places from which one may draw arguments concerning a particular case, and (2) his interest in various kinds of arguments such as dilemma and sorites (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). Now, it is certainly true—and has in fact been widely recognised—that Valla rhetoricised the study of dialectics. For him dialectics, being defined as a species of confirmation and refutation, is merely a part of one of the five parts of rhetoric, namely invention.⁴⁰ Compared to rhetoric, dialectics is an easy subject—a *res brevis prorsus et facilis*—since it considers and uses the syllogism only *in abstracto*; its aim is only to teach. The rhetorician, on the other hand, uses not only syllogisms, but also enthymeme, epicheireme, example, and has to clothe everything in persuasive argument, since his task is not only to teach but also to please and to move. As long as an argument is persuasive or constitutes a good move in a disputation, dialogue or debate—whether in court or in philosophical discussion of moral and political issues—it should be admitted to the armoury of the debater or orator. Valla’s remark that dialectic is an almost puerile art is, of course, a polemical sneer at the elevated status of dialectics among the scholastics, but in his actual treatment of syllogisms and other forms of arguments Valla’s tone becomes less polemical, and he pays serious attention to syllogisms in their various figures and modes.

In his discussion of topics he relies heavily on Quintilian. As he says, he himself has nothing new to say on this theme, so he is happy to quote Quintilian’s discussion of enthymeme, epicheireme, induction and deduction and the topics based on things and person (*res atque personas*, 5.10.23). (This quotation from the fifth book of *Institutio oratoria* amounts to 30 pages in the modern critical edition.) For Quintilian the whole point of argumentation is to prove what is not certain by means of what is certain:⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 175. Cf. Monfasani 1990 (n. 8), 183. Valla’s formulation may have been indebted to Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* 5, prooem.2.

⁴¹ Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 5.10.11-12; transl. D. A. Russell, Cambridge, Mass. 2001, vol. 2, 371-73.

since Argument is proof-giving reasoning by which one thing is inferred from another, and which confirms what is doubtful, there must be something in the Cause which does not need Proof; for unless there is something which either is or seems to be true, and from which assurance may be given to what is doubtful, there will be nothing by which we can prove anything.

As certainties Quintilian lists sense perceptions, “things about which common opinion is unanimous”, “provisions of law”, “what has been accepted as moral custom”, “whatever is agreed between both parties”, “whatever has been proved”, and “whatever is not contradicted by our opponent”.⁴² On the basis of these certainties we may render doubtful things credible or probable. Quintilian elaborates on this notion of probability by distinguishing three degrees: (1) “the strongest” (*firmissimum*), “because almost always true”; (2) “the highly likely” (*velut propensius*); (3) “the merely compatible” (*tantum non repugnans*). Before embarking on his own discussion of the topics, Quintilian praises Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* for its “careful study of everything that commonly happens to all things and persons, and what things and persons Nature has made friendly or hostile to other things or persons”.⁴³ But he warns the reader not to think that he has a perfect and absolute knowledge of the subject if he has learnt all these rules.⁴⁴ Arguments were already used before their kinds were being noted and collected for publication by writers of rhetoric. And this qualification was certainly not lost on Valla, whose own position on the topics and the forms of argument is much indebted to Quintilian.

The oratorical context of Valla’s treatment of the topics and forms of argumentation naturally involves a consideration of arguments with different degrees of probability, just as we have seen in Quintilian. Valla distinguishes syllogisms with certain and true premises, leading to certain conclusion, 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*). 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

⁴² 5.10.12-14, transl. Russell, vol. 2, 373.

⁴³ 5.10.17, transl. Russell, vol. 2, 375.

⁴⁴ 5.10.119-120.

⁴⁵ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 243; I quote the translation from Mack 1993 (n. 8), 82.

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”.⁴⁵ As we have seen, this is basically the same as Quintilian’s view. Unless we want to call Quintilian a sceptic (and even Aristotle would come in for such a label in that case), there is no reason to think that the distinction between degrees of credibility is the hall-mark of Academic scepticism.

The second feature of Valla’s alleged scepticism is his interests in types of captious reasonings such as sorites, paradoxes and dilemmas.⁴⁶ In bringing about *aporia* and the suspense of judgement these rhetorical techniques are grist to the sceptic’s mill, but Valla interestingly thinks these and similar arguments sophistical and fallacious. Their force is easily broken if we examine the case carefully, paying attention to its wider circumstances and its chronology, and take 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 characterised 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 manoeuvre, taught mainly by rhetoricians, by which a dilemmatic argument can be countered by another one. Valla extensively discusses the famous dilemma reported by Aulus Gellius about a lawsuit between Protagoras and his pupil Euathlus.⁴⁷ The pupil has promised to pay the second instalment 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

⁴⁶ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 306-28. See esp. G. Nuchelmans, *Dilemmatic arguments. Towards a history of their logic and rhetoric*, Amsterdam 1991, 88-94; G. Nuchelmans, *Lorenzo Valla on the Dream Paradox*, in: *Historia Philosophiae Medii Aevi*, eds. B. Mojsisch and O. Pluta, Amsterdam 1991, 771-85; cf. Mack 1993 (n. 8), 90-92, 98-100, 105-8, Monfasani 1990 (n. 8), 194-98; Vasoli, *La dialettica e la retorica dell’Umanesimo* (cit. above n. 19), 68-74. For an extensive discussion see chapter 8 of Nauta forthcoming (n. 10).

⁴⁷ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 312-21, imagining himself making an oration on Protagoras’s behalf; see Mack 1993 (n. 8), 105-8. It should be noticed that Valla is not negative about dilemma itself, but about this technique of *antistrephon* (see ed. Zippel, 312).

Gellius thinks that the judges should have refrained from passing judgement 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. So while not denying that these arguments may deceptively appear to be convincing in creating an aporetic situation, he considers the genus more cunning, amusing and witty rather than sincere and valid (*genus magis argutum, festivum ac lepidum* rather than *sincera ac validum pro argumento*), finding corroboration in Quintilian's silence about it.⁴⁸

Yet, it should not be overlooked that Valla is one of the first in the Latin West who dealt with types of dilemmatic arguments, a genre which had been forgotten during the Middle Ages. As Nuchelmans writes: "A remarkable feature of medieval standard texts on logic (. . .) is the absence of reflections about dilemmatic reasonings".⁴⁹ Valla's discussion, then, testifies to the slow recovery of "forgotten parts of ancient dialectic and rhetoric". Furthermore, having narrated the law suit between Euathlus and Protagoras, just mentioned, Valla writes that there are others (*sunt qui*) who think this was said by Corax and Tisias rather than by Euathlus and Protagoras and that the judges drove them out of court shouting "a bad egg from a bad crow" (cited by Valla in Greek). From this Nuchelmans concludes: "an information which he must have obtained, directly or indirectly, from Sextus Empiricus (*Adversus mathematicos*, II, 97-9), since that is the only source reporting that the judges drove both Corax and Tisias out of court, shouting at them 'a bad egg from a bad crow'".⁵⁰ It is however unlikely that Sextus Empiricus was Valla's source. *Pace* Nuchelmans Sextus gives only the name of Corax, and, more generally, there is no textual evidence at all that Valla was familiar with Sextus.

The important question, however, is whether this enlargement of the restricted scope which dialectics may have had in medieval times, or

⁴⁸ *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 332-34 and 322. In his *Academica* Cicero too is negative about sorites, criticizing his teacher Antiochus for using it. One would expect Valla to cite this place too, if he had access to it. Cf. n. 15 above.

⁴⁹ Nuchelmans, *Lorenzo Valla*, 1991 (n. 46), 79.

⁵⁰ Valla, *Repastinatio*, ed. Zippel, 314. Nuchelmans, *Dilemmatic arguments*, 1991 (n. 46), 90, but see also 68 n. 24 where Nuchelmans lists other sources of the saying and the sending away of Corax and Tisias (e.g. *Suidae lexicon*, ed. A. Adler, Leipzig 1933, vol. 3, 14, lines 16-23). Zippel's reference to Cicero is less relevant. (The names of Corax and Tisias, without the story, also occur e.g. in Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 3.1.8.). I do not know from whom Valla obtained this information.

rather this subordination of dialectics to rhetoric, based on the rhetorical writings by Cicero and especially Quintilian, is sufficient for calling Valla an Academic sceptic. Let me therefore by way of conclusion address the more general question of the relationship between scepticism and oratory. This will also allow me to return to the different senses of scepticism and their application.

Conclusion: Scepticism and Rhetoric

Historically speaking, there is much reason to associate rhetoric and scepticism. Cicero felt attracted by the argumentative strategies of Academic scepticism. The oratorical method is well suited to the exploration of philosophical issues, since it does not express its conclusions in any dogmatic way but frankly acknowledges their provisional status as the most likely position. As one of the interlocutors says in *De Fato*: “there is a close alliance between the orator and the kind of philosophy of which I am a follower, since the orator borrows subtly from the Academy and repays the loan by giving to it a copious and flowing style and rhetorical ornament”.⁵¹ And the other interlocutor too brings them into close harmony when he answers: “I am acquainted with the rhetorical discourses of your school (*rhetorica vestra*), and have often heard and also often shall hear you in them; moreover your Tusculan Disputations show that you have adopted this Academic practice against a thesis advanced”.⁵² In defining itself as speech and counterspeech, as *in utramque partem disserere*, rhetoric looks uncannily close to scepticism, for scepticism is, to quote Sextus’ canonical description, “an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all”, followed by *epoche* and *ataraxia*.⁵³ Moreover, in opposing different sides of the matter, both rhetoric and scepticism do not aim at teaching any positive doc-

⁵¹ *De Fato* 3, transl. H. Rackham in Cicero, *De oratore III, De Fato, Paradoxa Stoicorum, De partitione oratoria*, Harvard, Mass. 1982, 195 (slightly adapted).

⁵² *De Fato* 4, transl. Rackham, 197. Of course, the borrowing of the sceptics’ terminology from the (Greek) rhetorical tradition included crucial terms such as *verisimile* and *probabile*; see Glucker 1995 (n. 16), esp. 136.

⁵³ *Outlines of Scepticism* 1.8, transl. J. Annas and J. Barnes, Cambridge 2000, 4. For the following I am indebted to I. Sluiter, *The Rhetoric of Scepticism: Sextus against the Language Specialists*, in: *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition*, ed. J. Sihvola, Helsinki 2000, 93-123, esp. 106-13.

trines. As a method of discourse, rhetoric has strong affinities with the way scepticism works. Indeed, it has been said that scepticism comes close to a discourse strategy, and one may even speak of a “sceptic rhetoric as long as its status as useful practical guidelines without epistemological claims is acknowledged”.⁵⁴ This suggests another resemblance between the two. Both concern our linguistic representation of the appearances rather than the appearances themselves. This is evident in the case of rhetoric, but also the sceptics “say what is apparent to themselves and report their own feelings without holding opinions, affirming nothing about external objects”: “When we investigate”, Sextus writes, “whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent—and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself”.⁵⁵ It is interesting to notice that Sextus himself found the proximity between rhetoric and scepticism so disturbing that he sought to refute it, hardly convincingly, by redefining rhetoric as the production of useless and incomprehensible speech.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, there is an obvious difference between the two: the orator argues one side of the case in order to win, while the sceptic only opposes the dogmatist in order to balance the case; or he may argue both sides of a particular case himself. Oratory does not thrive on doubt but on credibility, that is, on the ability to put forward arguments as persuasive and strong as possible in order to render doubtful things credible—*facere ad fidem*.⁵⁷

By now it should be clear that Valla cannot be called a sceptic. In the *Repastinatio* we do not see a balancing of opinions, an arguing *in*

⁵⁴ Sluiter 2000 (n. 53), 120 n. 6 who adds that Sextus himself speaks about *skeptikoos legein* (*Against the Mathematicians* 11.19).

⁵⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism* 1.15 and 1.19, transl. Annas and Barnes 2000 (n. 53), 7 and 8. As Sluiter 2000 (n. 53), 107 argues: “*Pistis* and *apistia*, and the whole concept of *peithein/peithō* is also one that is in a sense essential to both the sceptic’s and the rhetorician’s enterprise. It is central to rhetoric as an art of persuasion (. . .). For the sceptic, the problematization of *peithō* is central to the theory of *epochē* (. . .) Since the system is to oppose things that are equally likely to generate *peithō*, neither form of *peithō* will clinch the matter, and hence *peithō*’s power is broken by its use”.

⁵⁶ See Sluiter 2000 (n. 53), 110.

⁵⁷ Within the forensic setting of oratory only cases about which opinions divide—which may be termed *dubia materia*—are to be discussed and settled; but it is precisely the settling of doubtful matters by rendering doubtful things credible that is the orator’s aim. Hence, the *dubia materia* should not be confused with the doubt of the sceptic. In Jardine 1977 (n. 7), the two seems to be conflated (e.g. p. 262).

utramque partem. What we see is a debunking of all kinds of philosophical doctrines in a highly polemical, self-confident and frequently aggressive style. As such it is—no less than the dialogue *De vero bono*—the work of an orator, but an orator with a message, which, in the *Repastinatio*, is broadcast in a style utterly alien to the Academic probing of diverse positions. The dominant role allotted to rhetoric entails a widening of the scope of forms of argumentation to be examined and employed by the rhetorician. The drive behind this development is to do more justice to the multiple way in which arguments are used in actual speaking and writing than the formalised study of the Aristotelian syllogism could do. And since the issues, discussed in court, in daily life or in the houses of men of letters in leisured retreat, do not usually fall under the category of absolute necessity, certainty and indisputable truth, it is only natural that this entails an examination of the less certain arguments. This however need not reflect a sceptical attitude at all.

There is a sense however in which the term “scepticism” may rightly be applied to the humanists of the Quattrocento and their successors.⁵⁸ The overall effect of the study of classical antiquity in all its aspects, including of course the study of the classical languages, was a widening of perspectives, and this could easily lead to feelings of doubt and uncertainty—an erosion of the confidence people had in authorities, traditions, customs, in the reliability of the Vulgate and so forth. It is hardly surprising that anyone who—perhaps willy-nilly—contributed to this process of dislocating old certainties was branded a sceptic, or, worse, an atheist. These terms of abuse often tell us more about the accuser than about the accused. It is important therefore to distinguish between intention, aim, strategy, effect (intentional or unintentional) when calling someone a sceptic or something sceptical. The overall effect may be the dissemination or even encouragement of a sceptical outlook, but this does not mean that this was the original intention or the aim of the thinker in question. In other words, we should not let the retrospective significance interfere with the perspective of the historical agent. To do so is to generate what Quentin Skinner has called “the mythology of prolepsis”, that

⁵⁸ Cf. Rummel 2000 (n. 5), 50 who speaks of “crypto-skepticism and informal expressions of a Skeptical frame of mind”. According to her, “these took the form of a preference for certain literary genres such as open-ended dialogue, paradox, and rhetorical declamation, forms that allowed the author to present arguments on both sides of a question or to play the devil’s advocate”.

is, “the conflation of the asymmetry between the significance an observer may justifiably claim to find in a given historical episode and the meaning of that episode itself”.⁵⁹ In the case of Quattrocento humanism we may be especially prone to generate such a type of mythology, since ancient sources of scepticism did slowly become available at this time. It is all the more expedient then to examine our sources critically and ask what our writer was *doing* in presenting his contribution. Well, what Valla certainly was *not* doing was to subscribe to or propagate a sceptical position, even though as a defender of Christian oratory he at times used strategies derived from Cicero’s Academic scepticism.

University of Groningen
Faculty of Philosophy

⁵⁹ *Meaning and understanding in the history of ideas*, in his *Visions of Politics*. Vol. 1: *Regarding Method*, Cambridge 2002, 73. (A thoroughly revised version of his article that appeared under the same title in *History and Theory*, 1969.)