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Humanists as Philosophers: The Place of Renaissance Humanism in the History of Thought

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Summary

Renaissance humanism is one of the formative traditions of modern Western civilization. Yet it is conspicuously absent from the philosophical canon. Histories of philosophy jump from the scholastics of the Middle Ages to Descartes at the beginning of the modern era. Humanism is considered to be a literary-cultural movement, important for the rediscovery of classical literature and the arts but irrelevant for the development of philosophy with as hallmarks: conceptual analysis, rigorous argumentation and a specialized terminology. Most historians of humanism agree: humanists were not philosophers but men of letters. This programme rejects this view. True, humanists were not scholastic philosophers, yet philosophical assumptions did drive their textual-linguistic studies and did have important implications for their views on language, history and culture. The programme therefore aims at uncovering the philosophical foundation of humanist scholarship. In six projects, it proceeds along two, closely related fronts.

To assess the place of humanism within the development of philosophical thought, the first part studies the ways in which humanists engaged with scholasticism. It examines the conceptual affinity between nominalism and humanism, and studies the works of Josse Bade and Lefèvre d'Étaples, important humanists who helped to foment the cultural-linguistic transformation of Western Europe. The second part uncovers the philosophical assumptions and convictions as they inform humanist editions, translations, textual-rhetorical commentaries and grammars. This part will analyse the philosophical *pointe* of the humanist critique of scholastic language. Humanist thinking on the role of language in the shaping of thought and culture will be explored through study of their comparative study of languages. Here, notions from modern philosophy will be used as heuristic tool for recognizing and teasing out the philosophical significance of Renaissance humanism. Its impact on Early Enlightenment will be studied through the work of Thomas Hobbes, one of the founders of 'modern' philosophy.