

THE STOIC ORIGINS OF ERASMUS'  
PHILOSOPHY OF CHRIST

*This page intentionally left blank*

ROSS DEALY

# The Stoic Origins of Erasmus' Philosophy of Christ

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS  
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press 2017  
Toronto Buffalo London  
[www.utppublishing.com](http://www.utppublishing.com)  
Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-1-4875-0061-0 (cloth)

∞ Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer recycled paper with vegetable-based inks.

---

### Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Dealy, Ross, author  
The stoic origins of Erasmus' philosophy of Christ / Ross Dealy.

(Erasmus studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4875-0061-0 (cloth)

1. Erasmus, Desiderius, –1536 – Criticism and interpretation. 2. Jesus Christ. 3. Stoics. I. Title. II. Title: Erasmus' philosophy of Christ. III. Series: Erasmus studies

B785.E64D42 2016 199'.492 C2016-904332-0

---

This book has been published with the help of a grant from the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, through the Awards to Scholarly Publications Program, using funds provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, an agency of the Government of Ontario.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency  
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Funded by the  
Government  
of Canada

Financé par le  
gouvernement  
du Canada

Canada

*For Ruth Englhart Dealy*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Contents

*Preface* ix

*Abbreviations* xi

**Introduction: A Philosophy beneath the Rhetoric** 3

**Part I: The Fifteenth-Century Background: One-Dimensional  
Stoicism within Either/Or Mindsets** 19

**Part II: Erasmus' Two-Dimensional Stoicism** 48

- 1 Building Blocks of *De taedio Iesu*, 1499–1501,  
and the *Enchiridion*, 1503 48
- 2 Distinguishing Stoic Meanings: Erasmus'  
Edition of *De officiis*, 1501 56
- 3 The Applicability of *De officiis* 67
- 4 What Had Drawn Erasmus to Stoicism?  
A Resolution of Bodily and Mental Issues 83

**Part III: Stoic Natural Instinct and Christ's Fear of Death,  
*De taedio Iesu*** 101

- 1 *Oikeiosis*, Inborn Character Traits, and True Bravery 105
- 2 Versus Origen: The Soul Is Neither Flesh Nor Spirit 126
- 3 Unbending Principles, but Not “*Alacritas*” 141

**Part IV: Larger Philosophical Issues 151**

- 1 Objections of Orthodox Stoics: Colet becomes “Colet” 152
- 2 “My Stoics”: Terror from *Phantasiai* or Natural Instinct? 164
- 3 Christ in Gethsemane and the Stoic in the Typhoon 177

**Part V: Correcting a Thousand Years of Christology 185**

- 1 Pre-Emotion versus Emotion: From Seneca, Origen, and Jerome to Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, and Aquinas 188
- 2 Emotion versus Pre-Emotion: Correcting Bonaventure 221

**Part VI: Beyond Devotionalist Assumptions 246**

**Part VII: Spiritual Warfare: Christianizing *Katorthoma*/  
*Kathekon*: The *Enchiridion militis christiani* 263**

- 1 Correcting Origen on *Indifferentia* 267
- 2 Correcting Origen and Socrates on the Origins of Human Diversity 282
- 3 Not Flesh/Spirit but *Indifferens*/Spirit 290
- 4 A New Type of Warfare: Syncretizing Two Opposite Types of Value 316

Conclusion 333

*Bibliography* 353

*Index* 381



# Preface

Research does not always follow a straight path. In my case two years travelling by motorcycle from the Arctic Circle to the tip of South America and throughout Africa as an undergraduate (1952–6) led to an interest in the impact of the intellectual history of Europe on the larger world. Ford Foundation grants later allowed me to spend two years in Europe researching in the Archive of the Indies (Seville, Spain) the influence of Thomas More and Erasmus in the Spanish New World, particularly on Vasco de Quiroga, which resulted in a dissertation on this subject (1975). What followed was a decades-long conviction, based on deep and independent analysis, that something is fundamentally wrong with accepted interpretations of the thought of More, as seen in his *Utopia* (1516), and of his friend Erasmus. It was *Utopia* that first impelled me to study Erasmus. How did More's mind work as he went about composing *Utopia*? Was there somehow a connection to the thinking of Erasmus? Against all odds I ultimately came to see that Erasmus' war writings, free-will writings, and *The Praise of Folly* and More's *Utopia* reflect a set way of thinking, but for years I was unable to discover the basis of this thinking. Only detailed analysis of Erasmus' earliest writings finally provided the answer – which is what the book at hand is about.

Along the way I have profited from positions at the University of Wisconsin-Marinette, Brown University (one year as Curator of Books in the John Carter Brown Library and one year as Visiting Scholar), and St John's University in New York City. I am particularly indebted to St John's in that those in charge overrode various countervailing forces and allowed time to continue research, including a research leave. As for individuals, no one has influenced my interest in research more than

Professor Gerald Strauss at Indiana University. Not of little importance has been the enduring support of my life partner Ruth Englhart Dealy, whom I met so memorably in her hometown, Aschaffenburg, Germany.

Thanks also to Suzanne Rancourt, Executive Editor of the Press, for her patience. I appreciate as well the editorial assistance of Barbara Porter and Miriam Skey and earlier (locally) Wayne Losano. Immensely helpful have been the insights and suggestions of two anonymous readers.

# Abbreviations

Ac.	Cicero, <i>Posterior Academics</i>
Allen	<i>Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami</i> . Ed. P.S. Allen, H.M. Allen, and H.W. Garrod. 12 vols. Oxford, 1906–58
ASD	<i>Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami</i> . Amsterdam, 1969–
Ben.	Seneca, <i>De beneficiis</i> (On Benefits)
Brev.	Seneca, <i>De brevitate vitae</i> (On the Shortness of Life)
C.N.	Plutarch, <i>De communibus notitiis adversus Stoicos</i> (On Common Conceptions)
CWE	<i>Collected Works of Erasmus</i> . Toronto, 1974–
CWM	<i>The Complete Works of St. Thomas More</i> . 15 volumes. New Haven, CT, 1963–97
D.L.	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of the Philosophers</i>
<i>De ira</i>	Seneca, <i>De ira</i> (On Anger)
<i>De or.</i>	Cicero, <i>De oratore</i> (On the Orator)
Disc.	Epictetus, <i>Discourses</i>
Ep.	Erasmus, <i>Epistolae</i> (Letters)
Ep.	Seneca, <i>Epistulae morales ad Lucilium</i> (Moral Letters to Lucilius)
Fin.	Cicero, <i>De finibus bonorum et malorum</i> (On Moral Ends)
GCS	<i>Die griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller</i> . Berlin, 1897–
Gellius	Aulus Gellius, <i>Noctes Atticae</i> (Attic Nights)
H	<i>Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus: Ausgewählte Werke</i> . Ed. Hajo Holborn and Annemarie Holborn. Munich, 1933
Inv.	Cicero, <i>De inventione</i>
LB	<i>Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia</i> . Ed. J. Clericus. 10 vols. Leiden, 1703–6

<i>Leg.</i>	Cicero, <i>De legibus</i> (On the Laws)
LS	<i>The Hellenistic Philosophers</i> . Ed. A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley. 2 vols. Cambridge, 1987
<i>Off.</i>	Cicero, <i>De officiis</i> (On Appropriate Actions)
Olin	<i>Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus</i> . Ed. and trans. John C. Olin. New York, 1965
<i>Op.</i>	Poggio Bracciolini, <i>Opera Omnia</i>
<i>Or.</i>	Cicero, <i>Orator</i> (Orator)
<i>Ot.</i>	Seneca, <i>De otio</i> (On Leisure)
<i>Par.</i>	Cicero, <i>Paradoxa Stoicorum</i> (Stoic Paradoxes)
PG	<i>Patrologia graeca</i> . Ed. J.-P. Migne. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–66
PL	<i>Patrologia latina</i> . Ed. J.-P. Migne. 221 vols. Paris, 1844–64
<i>Princ.</i>	Origen, <i>De Principiis</i> (On First Principles)
<i>Sent.</i>	Peter Lombard, <i>Sententiae in IV libris distinctae</i>
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa theologiae</i>
T	Tracy, <i>Erasmus of the Low Countries</i> . Berkeley, 1996
<i>Tr.</i>	Seneca, <i>De tranquillitate animi</i> (On Peace of Mind)
<i>Tusc.</i>	Cicero, <i>Tusculan Disputations</i>

THE STOIC ORIGINS OF ERASMUS'  
PHILOSOPHY OF CHRIST

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Introduction: A Philosophy beneath the Rhetoric

How did Erasmus' mind work? For decades scholars have focused on the rhetorical makeup of his mind, his relation to the rhetorical tradition and within this context his thought on religion.<sup>1</sup> Humanists are considered rhetoricians, not philosophers, and Erasmus was a humanist. Humanists sometimes made use of ideas found in various philosophies but not, we are shown, in any systematic way. They tended to see the ideas that interested them in rhetorical terms and to make them fit particular rhetorical needs. And Erasmus was unquestionably a great rhetorician. He wrote extensively on rhetoric and brilliantly displayed his rhetorical skills in works such as *The Praise of Folly* and *Colloquies*. Erasmus not only taught and employed rhetoric, he thought, it is contended, in rhetorical terms. In proof that the very matrix of his mind was rhetorical, scholars have uncovered, for one thing, a "rhetorical theology."

This book reveals something radically different. There was a set way of thinking beneath the rhetoric. Erasmus' mind was framed by a particular ancient philosophy. That philosophy was not Platonism, currently the rage among humanists, but Stoicism. Never recognized, Erasmus early on grasped the meaning and importance of the Stoic two-dimensional mindset. What interested Erasmus about Stoicism was not odd tidbits gathered from here and there but the core *katorthoma*/

---

<sup>1</sup> In his *Erasmus in the Twentieth Century*, Mansfield concludes: "The recovery of his reputation as a religious thinker and the recovery of his connection with the rhetorical tradition are the two great achievements of Erasmus scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century" (223).

*kathekon* (and, closely related, *honestum/indifferens*, *honestum/utile*) frame of thought. Employing his unparalleled philological skills he correctly defined the meaning of *katorthoma* and *kathekon* – something the philologist Angelo Poliziano (d. 1494) was unable to do – in his 1501 edition of Cicero's *De officiis*. His 1499 debate with John Colet at Oxford shows that he had been systematically employing Stoic concepts, particularly *oikeiosis*, even earlier. He had become deeply attached to the Stoic mindset not simply because his philological skills allowed him to see a new way of conceptualizing reality but, most of all, because it answered very consciously to deep-seated mental, physical, social, and religious problems. He was to transfer this way of thinking to the very heart of Christianity. Indeed, "the philosophy of Christ" for which he is known was not built from rhetoric, as is commonly believed, but from this philosophy.

Erasmus worked out this two-dimensional but unitary way of thinking and placed it at the very core of his outlook in the most crucial years of his intellectual and emotional development, beginning around 1497. Therewith he brought to life an outlook that had not been recognized or employed since late classical times. Unlike previous humanists he grasped and was deeply affected by the Stoic focus on human nature, including natural instinct (*oikeiosis*), and the way two seemingly opposite types of value combine. Throughout *De taedio Iesu* (1501) and the *Enchiridion* (1503) he insistently and consistently rewrites Christianity and the authors with whom he deals – including fathers of the church, scholastic theologians, "devotionalists," and humanists – in terms of his new way of seeing himself and the world. His sources in particular were Cicero's *De finibus*, *De officiis*, and *Tusculan Disputations*, and Aulus Gellius' quotes and illustrations in *Attic Nights* of the arguments found in Book 5 (now lost) of the *Discourses* of Epictetus. Even where he very consciously revises Stoicism – on emotion – he was not motivated by, or even thinking about, ancient Peripatetic criticism. Nor does he here discard the essential categories of Stoic thought. Supported by his own experientially based philosophic analysis he simply transfers emotion from its governance by Stoic reason (*ratio*) to Stoic natural instinct (*oikeiosis*).

It is noteworthy that Erasmus was not at this time interested in the writings of Seneca. In a letter of 1523, he states that before age twenty (1486 or 1489?) he had preferred Seneca over Cicero and indeed could not bear to read Cicero at length, but after age twenty he had reversed



his assessment.<sup>2</sup> One could say, that is, that Erasmus came to prefer Cicero's rendering of Stoicism far above the Stoic writings of Seneca that he had read. *De taedio Iesu* and the *Enchiridion* bear this out.

### Outlines of the Stoic *katorthoma* / *kathekon* mindset and "the philosophy of Christ"

So what is the *katorthoma* / *kathekon* way of thinking from which Erasmus early on built his "philosophy of Christ"? The Stoics describe with these words two types of value, one perfect and the other imperfect, one unbending and the other bending. Both types of value are encompassed by their fabled wiseman. On the bending side, everything the wiseman does is "an appropriate act," *kathekon* (Latin *officium*) (*Fin.* 3.20) – a word first used by Zeno himself (335–262 BCE) (D.L. 7.108). An appropriate act is "an act so performed that a reasonable account can be rendered of its performance" (*Fin.* 3.58) or, stated otherwise, "an act of which a probable reason can be given" (*Off.* 1.8).<sup>3</sup> Even those not wise can and sometimes do carry out appropriate acts. In contrast, however, the Stoic wiseman at all times acts appropriately – "selecting," employing reason, courses of action that are most in accord with nature and rejecting, employing reason, those that are contrary to nature.

Remarkably, the wiseman's selections do not in themselves contribute to virtue. Selecting is simply essential to his character and activities, his virtue and happiness (*Fin.* 3.58–9). He always acts appropriately because not to do so would be to abolish virtue itself (*Fin.* 3.12). What the wiseman has that others do not have and cannot have is *katorthoma*, or "right action" (*rectum factum*, *Fin.* 3.45). An act carried out with a virtuous disposition is a "right action," whereas the same act done without a virtuous disposition – by those not wise – is not virtuous. In Seneca's words: "The same act may be either shameful or honorable: the purpose and the manner make all the difference" (*Ep.* 95.43). Every right act (*katorthoma*) is also an appropriate act (*kathekon*) and every appropriate act (*kathekon*) is for the wiseman – though never for others – a right act (*katorthoma*).

Critics in the ancient world, vigorously supported by Plutarch (d. 120 CE), berated Stoics for – unlike all other schools – setting up two ends,

<sup>2</sup> *Ep.* 1390. Allen 5, 340/103–8, CWE 10, 99/113–17.

<sup>3</sup> Translations are from printed editions found in the bibliography, unless otherwise stated.

one being that which is obtained by *katorthoma* and the other being that which is obtained by *kathekon* (C.N. 1070F–1071B). Responding to these objections, Antipater (2nd cent. BCE) compared the operation of the wiseman's mind to that of an archer (*Fin.* 3.22). To accomplish his primary goal – the end, the ultimate good – the archer does everything in his power to obtain the secondary goal – hit the target. But the degree to which the secondary goal is accomplished or not accomplished has no bearing on the primary goal. So, in fact, Antipater held, the two types of value converge; they do not contradict each other.<sup>4</sup>

*Honestum* (Greek *καλόν*, D.L. 7.100), moral worth, is what the perfect wiseman, unlike other humans, possesses. *Honestum* is "something that, even though it be not generally ennobled, is still worthy of all honour; and by its own nature, we correctly maintain, it merits praise, even though it be praised by none" (*Off.* 1.14).<sup>5</sup> *Honestum* is the sole good. As the Stoic Cato states in *De finibus*, "The essential principle not merely of the system of philosophy I am discussing but also of our life and destinies is that we should believe moral worth (*honestum*) to be the only good" (3.26). In calling virtue *honestum*, Zeno "denoted a sort of uniform, unique and solitary good" (*Ac.* 35). Virtue, including the four cardinal virtues (wisdom, justice, temperance, and fortitude), is inherent to *honestum*, as is reason itself (*Fin.* 2.48). "Haec ratio perfecta virtus vocatur eademque honestum est" (*Ep.* 76.10). Reason, virtually indistinguishable from nature, proves that *honestum* is the only good (*Fin.* 3.75). The wiseman is at all times perfectly happy because he has a fixed inner orientation towards the good, *honestum* (*Fin.* 3.26).

Zeno also argued that things neither good (*bonum*) nor bad (*malum*) are "indifferent," *indifferens* (Greek *adiaphoron*) (*Fin.* 3.53), and that some of these indifferents are "preferred" and others "rejected" (*Fin.* 3.15).<sup>6</sup> Of the indifferents, some have positive value, others negative value,

4 Agreeing with Antipater, Striker concludes: "It is simply wrong to assume that there can be only one reference-point of all action." See "Antipater, or the Art of Living," *The Norms of Nature*, 203 and 204. And yet Antipater still fails to explain, Long and Sedley note, "how it can be rational to make happiness depend upon aiming at objectives whose attainment is irrelevant to happiness" (LS 410).

5 Andrew R. Dyck points out that prior to the arrival of Stoicism the ideals *honestum/honestas/honestus* were "rarely used and of vague significance in the Roman political vocabulary." See *A Commentary on Cicero, De Officiis*, 31.

6 "Indifferens" is a word that occurs for the first time in Cicero's works. See Powell, "Cicero's Translations from the Greek," in *Cicero the Philosopher*, 296.

and others are neutral (*Fin.* 3.50). Positive values comprise things such as health, beauty, wealth, fame, and freedom from pain (D.L. 7.102). Negative values comprise things such as ill health, pain, and poverty.

Another core Stoic doctrine is that of “*oikeiosis*,” which means something like “self perception” or “orientation to oneself.” In Chrysippus’ words, “The dearest thing to every animal is its own constitution and its consciousness thereof” (D.L. 7.85). Cicero Latinizes *oikeiosis* as “*sensus sui*” (*Fin.* 3.16). Invented, it appears, by the Stoics, no comparable concept is found in Plato or Aristotle.<sup>7</sup> All animals, humans included, exhibit at birth a self-preservation and (logically secondary to it)<sup>8</sup> self-love instinct. Self-preservation is “a primary impulse of nature” (*Fin.* 3.16) and as such will relate to types of appropriate actions (*kathekonta*) and eventually, with the advent of reason, *katorthomata* (*Fin.* 3.20–4). In exemplifying natural instinct at birth, Seneca avers that it is not experience, which teaches only slowly, that makes a young chicken fear a cat and not a dog. The skills of bees and spiders were not taught. No matter how dumb animals may be, they are all equally clever at living. As for humans, every one of us knows that something stirs our impulses – but we don’t know what it is (*Ep.* 121.20–4, 13).

Note the tie of the Stoic outlook to both the nature of the individual and the nature of the universe. Diogenes Laertius quotes Chrysippus in his *Lives of the Philosophers* as follows:

The end may be defined as life in accordance with nature, or, in other words, in accordance with our own human nature as well as that of the universe ... The virtue of the happy man and the smooth current of life are found when all actions promote the harmony of the spirit dwelling in the individual man with the will of him who orders the universe. (7.88)

The dynamism and tension in the Stoic unitary but two-dimensional mindset is brought out by the Stoic Epictetus (d. 135 CE):

(Material things) must be used carefully, because their use is not a matter of indifference, and at the same time with steadfastness and peace of mind,

---

<sup>7</sup> See Long, “Hierocles,” 250. Cf. Pembroke, “*Oikeiosis*,” 132–41, and Gill, *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought*, 36–46. *Oikeiosis* also has an important social dimension.

<sup>8</sup> Long, “Hierocles,” 254.

because the material is indifferent ... It is, indeed, difficult to unite and combine these two things – the carefulness of the man who is devoted to material things and the steadfastness of the man who disregards them, but it is not impossible. Otherwise happiness were impossible. (*Disc.* 2.5.7–9)

Depending on the standpoint, that is, material things are either of no importance or – what popular modern referrals to Stoicism miss – all important. At every instant the wiseman combines both standpoints. Material things are indifferent, but not with regard to the wiseman's use. The wiseman is steadfast and confident regarding internal things, moral right, but careful and cautious regarding material things. Based on rules, he decides what actions regarding material things are the most appropriate (or not appropriate) at the same time as he holds firm to moral right. In short, the wiseman's outlook is not either/or (other than holding that the opposite of *honestum* is *turpe*) but unitarily both/and.

### A new humanist mindset

Erasmus not only recognized the spirituality of *katorthoma*, the double meaning of *indifferentia*, the unique importance of natural instincts at birth, *oikeiosis*, and surrounding everything the unitary both/and frame of thought, he worked out these concepts in terms of his own life and Christianity. Deeply motivated by his youthful mental and physical suffering and his conviction with the help of Stoicism that this suffering had been needless, brought about by a failure to recognize that the traits he was born with are ineradicable, Erasmus was determined to show in *De taedio Iesu* that Christ himself was racked by ineradicable natural instincts – while at one and the same time contemplating the divine. In *De taedio Iesu* and throughout the *Enchiridion* he works out *oikeiosis* and other Stoic concepts within Stoic two-dimensional but unitary *katorthoma/kathekon* and *honestum/indifferens* ways of thinking. There-with he inextricably binds together the worldly and the non-worldly, the mundane and the spiritual, the active life and the contemplative, action and reason, individual nature and universal nature, emotion and rigid precepts.

Previous humanists, most of them Italian, had made hardly anything of the words *katorthoma* and *kathekon* and the thinking surrounding them – such as *oikeiosis*. They could have learned much from the technical discussions found in Cicero's *De finibus*, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*, and many other available sources, but such discussions were largely

beyond their interests and mental capacity. Humanists were by training rhetoricians and unlike Cicero were mere novices in philosophy. What they most admired about Cicero were his writings on rhetoric and his active life. They were, it is true, interested in his *De officiis*, a philosophical work that relates to worldly affairs, but even here they had made little or nothing of the encompassing Stoic *honestum/utile* theme, the fact that *honestum* and *utile* are not rhetorical words but philosophic words, unitary both/and words that go back to Zeno and Chrysippus.<sup>9</sup> Not unlike medieval thinkers, who like them held *De officiis* in high regard, they were able to focus on various theses within the work but the author's overall outlook and purpose was beyond their grasp. Their blindness to the Stoic unitary both/and mindset also blinded them to Cicero. They did not see the degree to which Cicero admired Stoicism (albeit questioning and reworking some doctrines, such as *apatheia*) and that *De officiis*, his most original work, is fundamentally Stoic. They did not see that Stoicism is worldly as well as otherworldly, bending as well as unbending, and as such, directly applicable to contemporary affairs.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, the Stoic *katorthoma/kathekon* model – and related doctrines – existed. But when would someone see or take an interest in this model? How could it ever be a humanist? In Cicero's books on philosophy rhetoric serves philosophy (even if rhetoric in certain ways influenced philosophy) – philosophy does not serve rhetoric. Is it to be believed that a humanist would come along who would put rhetoric in the service of the Stoic unitary both/and mindset – as distinct from placing pieces of Stoicism in the service of rhetoric? Even more improbable, what would ever impel a humanist to apply the Stoic *katorthoma/kathekon* way of thinking to his own life and the society and intellectual/religious climate that surrounded him?

---

9 For the Stoic Panaetius, whose views Cicero worked out in Books 1 and 2 of *De officiis*, the *utile* was a criterion for judging actions – related to *kathekon*. On employment of the term in Stoicism and especially Panaetius' usage, see Dyck, *A Commentary on Cicero, De Officiis*, 353–4 and 492–3.

10 Perhaps, states Dyck, "Cicero's major contribution to Roman political thought is his radical identification of *honestum* and *utile*, with the consequences worked out in detail in Off. 3." "Ironically, it is in Book 3, where Cicero boasts of his independence of sources (3.34) and where the scale of values can ostensibly be either Stoic or Peripatetic (3.33), that the rigor of the older Stoa reasserts itself (cf. ad 3.62–3, 97–115, 119)." See *A Commentary on Cicero, De Officiis*, 33 and 37.

But these improbabilities actually happened. Erasmus set in play a profound shift in the humanist mindset. Cicero developed 250 years of Stoicism within a Roman context and Erasmus, 1500 years later, applied Stoicism to yet another psychological, social, intellectual, and religious setting. What Erasmus brought to the table was not just a collection of ideas but a way of thinking that had not been recognized for a thousand years. There is a reason why the *Enchiridion* was to become so popular – even if understood in limited ways – and why scholars have been so perplexed as to why this was the case. *De taedio Iesu* and the *Enchiridion* are not as has been thought mere rehashes of traditional views. They are radical books in that they lay out a new way of looking at oneself and at larger issues. Erasmus stated that he was setting forth a new type of spiritual “warfare” and he did just that.

What is most important about Erasmus' employment of Stoicism is not that it shines a light, which it does, on a heretofore hidden link in the history of philosophy. However much he admired key Stoic doctrines, Erasmus was not writing as a philosopher for philosophers. Nor, unlike previous humanists, was he writing simply for a coterie of intellectuals. He had in mind something he considered incomparably more important. The *Enchiridion* and many of the writings which followed were designed to have a large religious relevance and appeal and they in fact significantly impacted the religious, social, and political development of Europe. Through these works Stoicism played a role in Renaissance history that has been little seen.

### **Modern research on Erasmus: Vacillations between worldly and non-worldly**

Concentrating on the Stoicism represented by the humanists they study, historians of the Renaissance have seen almost nothing of the two-dimensional but unitary way of thinking.<sup>11</sup> What specialists on Erasmus see is not unitary both/and thinking, Stoic or otherwise, but something that appears to be the opposite, an Erasmus who vacillated – guided above all by rhetorical methodologies – between contradictory poles of thought: non-worldly and worldly, spirit and flesh. Bruce Mansfield alludes to this perception of a vacillating mind where he concludes, in

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Jill Kraye's summaries, “Stoicism in the Renaissance,” and “The Revival of Hellenistic Philosophies.” See also her “The Humanist as Moral Philosopher.”

his *Erasmus in the Twentieth Century: Interpretations c 1920–2000* (2003), “There are well-founded arguments that he distinguished sharply between spirit and flesh and was in a kind of inner retreat from the world. There are equally well-grounded views that he exalted natural gifts and natural powers and cherished the ordinary lives of men and women in the world” (226).

Answers to this apparent polarity have been sought, deeper research reveals, in the wrong places. Rhetoric, lack of scholastic logic, devotionalist influences, Platonism, and personality cannot account for the way of thinking found in *De taedio Iesu* and the *Enchiridion*. These writings are throughout explained by Stoicism, a philosophy that does not vacillate between worldly and non-worldly but is all about the oneness of two radically different types of value.

### Erasmus’ use of non-Stoic sources

Erasmus’ referrals to non-Stoic authors in *De taedio Iesu* (1501) and the *Enchiridion* (1503) have not, in truth, been analysed. Since Erasmus seldom criticizes the sources he refers to, researchers have simply assumed that he is merely adding a rhetorical flourish to accepted and traditional views. As a consequence *De taedio Iesu* has been largely ignored and though often discussed the *Enchiridion* has been subjected to rather little study. And one can understand why Erasmus’ 1499 trip to England, which spawned these works, has appeared to be “unremarkable” and why a mystery has surrounded his “sudden transformation from rootless Latin poet to northern Europe’s most influential scholar and inspirer of religious reform.”<sup>12</sup> What the book at hand will demonstrate is that Erasmus’ 1499 trip was eminently remarkable, crucially important for understanding his early motivations, the nature of his writings, and indeed his entire life. Nor is there a mystery regarding his “sudden transformation” from poet to scholar and inspirer of religious reform.

Close analysis of the sources Erasmus refers to with regard to particular issues opens up his writings – and his mind. It is precisely the contrast between the statements and meanings of the writings directly in front of him and his own theses – what he does with these

---

<sup>12</sup> See Nauert, “Rethinking ‘Christian Humanism,’” 175. There is no direct referral to *De taedio Iesu* in either Tracy’s *Erasmus of the Low Countries*, or Mansfield’s *Erasmus in the Twentieth Century*.

writings – that shows most clearly what he is doing and what his thinking is about. Erasmus corrects these authors – consciously and consistently and systematically – in terms of a particular way of thinking and particular doctrines. In *De taedio Iesu* and the *Enchiridion* he rewrites with all diligence Origen, Gellius, “Colet,” Bonaventure, and Socrates (as well as authors who figure less prominently, such as Augustine and St Bernard) in terms of Stoic *oikeiosis* and the Stoic unitary (*katorthoma/kathekon*, *honestum/indifferens*, *honestum/utile*) frame of thought – and in the process revolutionizes long-standing views of Christ and Christianity and the human predicament.

Nor does Erasmus swing carelessly or fitfully, in rhetorical fashion, from one source to another without a clear plan. He uses the sources he brings in, however diverse, to develop step by step a thesis. Although a casual reading does not show this, his mind is set. He knows where he is going. Whether mentioning Plato or Origen or St Paul or a passage in the Bible or, now and then, some literary figure, he does not simply state a view and go on to the next. He very consciously revamps these sources, either directly or contextually, to make them fit a set way of thinking and outlook – one moulded by Stoicism.

Plato had become the vogue in late fifteenth-century Europe, gravitating out from Florence, and readers of the *Enchiridion* have repeatedly held that here, more than in perhaps any of his writings, Erasmus sees Christianity in terms of Platonist one-dimensional other-worldly ideals. A core proof given is that Erasmus mentions Plato more often than any other pagan. What has not been seen, however, is that without exception Erasmus places Plato's outlook within a Stoic frame – on the unbending side. From cover to cover the work is built from Stoic or Stoic-based sources. Cicero had sometimes referred to Plato in his philosophical works and so too does Erasmus, but he does not think in terms of Plato's transcendent view of truth anymore than had Cicero.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> As Julia Annas comments, “The ethical discussions of Cicero's time assume that our ethical aims are limited to the fulfillment of our human nature; they are all naturalistic, in a common understanding of that term. Plato does not appear as a participant in these debates because his most striking claim is that the virtuous person should ‘become like God’, transcending human nature as much as he can [she cites *Theaetetus* 171d–177c]. This idea does not fit into Hellenistic ethical debate at all, though it was to have a great future in later antiquity.” See *On Moral Ends* [*De finibus*], ed. J. Annas and trans. R. Woolf, xxii.



## Themes

**Part I** (“The Fifteenth-Century Background: One-Dimensional Stoicism within Either/Or Mindsets”) shows that humanists prior to Erasmus never thought in Stoic two-dimensional but unitary terms – much less expressed interest in Stoic *oikeiosis*. Due in particular to their educations and worldly activities they saw in *De officiis*, published in 1465, either/or, *honestas* or *utilitas* arguments as distinct from *honestum/utile* arguments. This either/or mindset was pervasive, as in their debates over “Epicurean or Stoic,” “Stoic nobility or inherited nobility,” “active life or contemplative.” Leonardo Bruni had an acute mind but he too little grasped (he favoured Aristotle) the Stoic *kathekon/katorthoma*, active/contemplative, bending/unbending frame of mind. The many humanist “mirror-for-princes” treatises advocate for princes Stoic-type precepts, based on Seneca’s *De clementia*, but here too nothing is seen of the larger and more authentic two-dimensional Stoic way of thinking. Even Machiavelli in his criticisms of these treatises, in *The Prince*, nowhere recognizes the Stoic *honestum/utile* mindset – a mindset that could be considered an alternative to his thesis.

**Part II** (“Erasmus’ Two-Dimensional Stoicism”) works out the following theses. (1) Erasmus’ *On Contempt of the World*, written around 1485–8, and other writings prior to his debate with John Colet at Oxford in 1499, portrays a Christianity that is about making either/or choices – flesh or spirit, worldly or non-worldly, active life or contemplative life. Nothing relates to the Stoic unitary both/and mindset. (2) Scholars have given diverse definitions of Erasmus’ “philosophy of Christ” but no one imagines that Erasmus was ever thinking of a true philosophy. (3) Analysis of Erasmus’ 1501 edition of *De officiis* reveals an unprecedented grasp of the meanings of *katorthoma* and *kathekon* and of the importance of Stoic thinking on natural instinct (*oikeiosis*). (4) In his preface to *De officiis* Erasmus recognizes that Stoicism is not so much about the solutions to particular social, political, and intellectual problems as about how to go about solving such problems. And he was determined to apply this method to the world he knew. (5) Erasmus deeply grasped the religiosity of Stoicism and *De officiis*. (6) His 1509 motto appears to have been Stoic inspired. (7) One reason scholars have considered *De taedio Iesu* of little importance is that they have misread statements of Erasmus at the beginning and end of the work. (8) Contrary to the widely held view that Erasmus’ later complaints about his youth were for various reasons largely made up, detailed consideration of all the evidence shows the

seriousness of his mental and physical suffering in his youth and, more than this, that he became deeply attached to Stoicism as a direct result – which analysis of *De taedio Iesu* will further confirm.

**Part III** (“Stoic Natural Instinct and Christ’s Fear of Death, *De taedio Iesu*”) shows that the debate between Erasmus and Colet at Oxford in 1499 was over the nature of Christ’s Passion, a subject that had been tied for a thousand years to conceptions of the nature of Christ and of Christianity. While Colet held that Christ could not have feared death Erasmus argued that he was overwhelmed by fear. Chapter 1 analyses Erasmus’ reasons for contending that the Stoics consider fear of death a natural instinct and assesses the relationship of his arguments to the ancient sources. Having concluded, with the help of Stoicism, that natural instincts and character traits are given at birth and vary greatly, Erasmus questions the meaning of bravery. Is bravery really about overcoming one’s nature? Can bravery be ascertained by merely observing a person’s physical and/or mental reactions to danger? Do natural disabilities decrease or increase one’s opportunities for virtue? Chapter 2 shows that Erasmus emphatically rejects, based directly on the Stoic *honestum/indifferens* mindset, the views of the Greek father Origen (d. 255) on the nature of the soul. The soul does not tie itself to either spirit or flesh. It has a substantive and independent existence in-between spirit and flesh. Soul is comprised of natural instincts, things that are “indifferent.” Chapter 3 details Erasmus’ argument that martyrs may have experienced a joy that wipes out natural instincts but Christ was not a martyr. Building on the Stoic two-dimensional mindset Erasmus shows that Christ experienced *unitarily* incomparable fear and incomparable joy (Stoic *gaudium*, not *alacritas*).

**Part IV** (“Larger Philosophical Issues”), chapter 1, reveals the differences between the views of Colet expressed at the actual debate and the “Colet” Erasmus refers to in *De taedio Iesu*. Though Colet the person knew nothing about Stoicism, Erasmus has “Colet” argue orthodox Stoic views against his corrections of Stoicism – “my Stoics.” Chapter 2 works out Erasmus’ objections to the Stoic contention that the wise-man’s involuntary physical or mental reactions to such things as a bolt of lightning do not indicate fear in that his reason immediately overcomes the initial “pre-emotion.” What these discussions of “pre-emotion” miss, Erasmus shows, is emotion that comes about internally. Gellius’ story about the Stoic in the typhoon does not prove what Gellius thinks it proves in that the Stoic was demonstrably unable to overcome his fear before the typhoon subsided – and during this time

reason could do nothing. Chapter 3 points out a relationship between Christ in Gethsemane and the Stoic in the typhoon. Christ's fear was overwhelming and it was not overcome but lasted as long as he was alive – and yet the other side of his soul remained at one and the same time serene, at one with reason and the contemplation of heaven.

**Part V** (“Correcting a Thousand Years of Christology”) describes the thinking of patristic and scholastic theologians on Christ's Passion and Erasmus' carefully worked out rejections of their arguments. Chapter 1 delineates Jerome's thinking on pre-emotion, which he inherited from Seneca and Origen, and the changes inaugurated by scholastics such as Peter Lombard, Bonaventure, and Aquinas. While Jerome had contended that Christ only “began” to be sad and thus never suffered full-blown emotion, scholastics demonstrated, based on complex logic-based “distinctions,” that Christ's pre-emotion was brought about and governed by reason. Chapter 2 describes the ways in which Erasmus argues – against Jerome and Bonaventure directly – that Christ suffered full-blown emotion. While the church fathers and scholastics had not realized that their thinking on pre-emotion was originally derived from the Stoics, Erasmus fully understood and yet he was determined to show that Stoic thinking is here misguided in that talk about pre-emotion from external happenings covers up emotion that is actually a natural instinct (and found in Stoic *oikeiosis*). In being a human Christ suffered from emotions such as fear from the very beginning, even in the state of innocence. Reason had nothing to do with his fear of death, a fear greater than ever experienced by a human. In his Passion Christ demonstrated (expanding the Stoic mindset) that he “could be both willing and unwilling, both dread and desire the same thing in equal measure and at one and the same time.”

**Part VI** (“Beyond Devotionalist Assumptions”) considers the larger social and religious environment in which Erasmus lived. Could it be that Erasmus was simply reflecting in some way a view of the Passion embedded in late medieval culture, not least relevant being his youthful contacts with the *Devotio Moderna* from 1475 to 1493? Leaving aside Erasmus' Stoic mindset, a fundamental difference is that the devotionalist accounts of Christ's death emphasize in graphic detail his physical suffering. Erasmus goes out of his way to reject the view of the Passion represented by St Bernard, who was extremely popular among fifteenth-century devotionalists, and to tie Bernard with Colet. In emphasizing the physical suffering of Christ and Christ's overcoming of emotion Bernard advised working one's way upward from flesh to spirit and mystical union with God.

**Part VII** ("Spiritual Warfare: Christianizing *Katorthoma/Kathekon*: The *Enchiridion militis christiani*") shows that the *Enchiridion* is all about Christianizing for ordinary people the Stoic mindset. Unlike *De taedio Iesu*, the *Enchiridion* was written as an advice book and was to have a Europe-wide impact, especially on the Reformation inaugurated by Luther and on the social/political/religious environment that would emerge in England with Henry VIII's separating of the Church of England from Rome. And yet *De taedio Iesu* and the *Enchiridion* have in common the fact that they both build directly from Erasmus' youthful existential problems and the resolution of these problems by Stoicism. Demonstrating again the deep-seated nature of these problems and the degree to which they affected his outlook, Erasmus corrects in the *Enchiridion*, in terms of his new understanding of natural instinct and its relation to Christianity, Origen and Socrates on the origins of human diversity at birth and Socrates' fable of the good and bad horses. Nor, against a view everywhere accepted, does Erasmus see himself as having a modest and gentle disposition or as even favouring dispositions like modesty and docility. And yet Erasmus shows throughout that Christianity is an extension of the Stoic two-dimensional mindset – only one side of which relates to natural instinct and worldly situations as such.

Although the beginning of the *Enchiridion* closely correlates with the tone and wording at the beginning of *De officiis*, the arguments in the work swirl around core theses of the Stoic wiseman as set forth in *De finibus* in particular. While Erasmus emphasizes the oneness of the *honestum* and the *utile*, as in *De officiis* 3, his primary focus is on the oneness of *katorthoma* (virtue, reason, spirit, intention) and *kathekon* (seen as *indifferentia*) as in the old Stoa and *De finibus* 3.

The "soul" is found on the indifferent side of this unitary both/and mindset. Against the theologians (not least being Origen), as well as contemporary Neoplatonists (such as Marsilio Ficino, greatly admired by Colet), the soul is not simply a decider between two opposites, flesh and spirit (Stoic *turpia* and *honestia*, vice and virtue, bad and good); it has an independent and material reality. As in Stoicism, things "intermediate" and "indifferent" comprise everything in the world that is not *turpe* or *honestum*, carnal or spirit. Having no connection with either flesh or spirit, the soul "constitutes us as human beings," "seeks what is necessary," and is "the life-giving element." Substantive, inclusive, and variable, the soul is at the very core of what it means to be human. The indifferents that the soul first needs to deal with are the particulars of one's own body and mind.

“Spirituality” has no meaning in itself. Whether one’s life is at any particular moment spiritual or not depends entirely on the degree to which one works out two opposite but inseparable types of value, one unbending the other bending. Over and over Erasmus refers to the mindset required as a type of “warfare.” Note what this warfare is not.

- (a) It is not about the traditional opposition (as with, in their own ways, Origen and Colet) between Christian ideals and worldliness.
- (b) It is not about rhetorical debate between two opposed but more or less equally viable positions, between for example *honestum* and *utile* or contemplative life and active life, as in fifteenth-century humanism.
- (c) It is not about the one-dimensional and mystical “ascent to God” represented by the Neoplatonism gyrating out from Florence, inspired in particular by Ficino.
- (d) It is not about the logicizing “distinctions” of scholastics, such as Thomas Aquinas, by which the validity of actions – such as, for example, physical warfare – is decided on.

The model and frame is through and through Stoic. Holding high and unbending Christ’s absolute precepts (such as charity and the denial of warfare) entails working out things that are not absolute in appropriate real world ways, ways that are also inherent to Christ’s teachings and inseparable from one’s hold on the absolutes.

As in Stoicism “intention” is a crucial factor in this mindset and accompanying course of action. Erasmus had deeply grasped, first demonstrated in his editing of *De officiis*, the inherency of intention to *katorthoma*. An act carried out with a virtuous disposition is a “right action” (*rectum factum*) whereas the same act done without a virtuous disposition is not virtuous. Purpose and manner are critical components of a “right action.” The Christian takes over where the Stoic wiseman leaves off in that this purpose and manner – motivation, intention, spirit – is about faith in a revealed truth as well as the virtue and reason that reigns in the universe. It is a fault, argues Erasmus, to perform a good action – whether a religious ceremony or any other positive worldly action – lacking a spiritual purpose.

In short, analysis of the *Enchiridion* reveals that Erasmus transfers the Stoic unitary two-dimensional mindset to Christianity and that this is what he is thinking about when he states in a 1504 letter that the work

is about "fixed procedures." Evil exists (cf. *turpe*) and contrasts with spirit (cf. *honestum*) but Christianity, "the philosophy of Christ," is not fundamentally about this either/or choice but about a unitary *indifferens/spiritus* mindset.

The conclusion sums up the main theses and then points out that many of Erasmus' writings that followed *De taedio Iesu* and the *Enchiridion* need to be restudied. There is reason to believe that many works considered "rhetorical" (one obvious example being *The Praise of Folly*) are in fact built from a philosophy. In illustration of the point it is shown that *Ecclesiastes* (1535), one of Erasmus' last works, is about the rhetorical tools needed in preaching and yet the goal is not built from rhetoric but from Stoic philosophy. The influence of the *Enchiridion* in the sixteenth century was phenomenal and it was understood and employed in many ways but one thing seems evident: no one (other than, I will demonstrate elsewhere, Thomas More) clearly recognized the sources of Erasmus' thought or the larger meaning of the work.

# PART The Fifteenth-Century

## I Background: One-Dimensional Stoicism within Either/Or Mindsets

Two Propositions:

- (1) No humanist prior to Erasmus ever truly grasped or employed the Stoic two-dimensional but unitary (*katorthoma/kathekon*, *honestum/indifferens*, *honestum/utile*) frame of thought.
- (2) Within this frame – or even outside it – no previous humanist ever focused on or employed Stoic thinking on natural instinct at birth (*oikeiosis*). The standing of these propositions is of more than esoteric interest. Historians know that it is impossible to validly evaluate thought outside of context and are thus interested in the personal, social, political, intellectual, and religious contexts in which thought emerges. Changes in the meaning and relationships of words such as *honestum* and *utile* may denote far-reaching shifts both in mindset and society. In this regard, was Erasmus' outlook just a continuation of common assumptions – or something radically different? Only analysis of previous humanist theses and arguments can make the differences, to be revealed in [Parts II–VII](#), stand out.

Fifteenth-century humanists, proponents of the *studia humanitatis* – rhetoric, grammar, poetry, history, and moral philosophy – were commonly employed as schoolmasters, professors of literature, court poets, political secretaries, ambassadors, chancellors, and high-level civil servants.<sup>1</sup> Considering on the one hand their training and on the other their

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought*. On the educational interests, goals, methodologies, and professional duties of earlier humanists, such as Lovato dei Lovati (d. 1309) and Albertino Mussato (d. 1329), before even Petrarch (1304–74), see Witt, *In the Footsteps of the Ancients*. Paul F. Grendler describes the grammar and rhetoric taught in the fourteenth-century university in *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance*, 199–205.

employment it may not seem surprising, as often noted, that humanist thinking could and did vacillate greatly. The rhetorical need to suit an argument to place, time, and situation (*De or.* 3.210–12) and in that way to prove, to please, and to sway (*probare, delectare, flectere*) (*Or.* 69) was directly applicable to the worldly functions of many humanists.<sup>2</sup> They used their rhetorical skills to respond to particular social, political, economic, intellectual, and emotional factors.<sup>3</sup> And we can see why the same person would sometimes argue one position only to argue something else at another time or in a different context. In Bruni's "Dialogue to Pier Paolo Vergerio," for example, Niccoli attacks Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio in Book 1 only to retract and praise them in Book 2.<sup>4</sup> Nor did humanists espouse a singular political ideology.<sup>5</sup> For them, worldly endeavours required adaptability, not expertise in consistent or systematic thinking.<sup>6</sup> In short, there is good reason why humanist thought is often shifting, ambiguous, ambivalent, confusing, or contradictory.

It was within this rhetoric-based milieu that humanists turned the pages of Cicero's philosophical works. They were much impressed by the harsh and unbending side of the Stoic wiseman epitomized in Cicero's *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, published in 1465, but saw little of the worldly side of this wiseman, evident in his unbending/bending way of dealing with personal, social, and political affairs. To the extent they considered *Paradoxa Stoicorum* by itself, it is not difficult to understand their misperception. *Paradoxa Stoicorum* is but a short caricature of the wiseman.<sup>7</sup> The wiseman presented here has nothing in common with the

---

<sup>2</sup> Building on ancient practices, humanists focused on types of persuasion (logos, pathos, ethos), branches of oratory (judicial, deliberative, epideictic), the various categories (invention, argument, style, memory, delivery), the parts of a speech (exordium, narration, partition, confirmation, refutation, conclusion), and rhetorical devices (such as alliteration, amplification, and synecdoche). Cf. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*; Murphy, *Renaissance Eloquence*; Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric*; and Wood, "The Teaching of Writing in Medieval Europe."

<sup>3</sup> Writings on the nature and importance of eloquence by Petrarch, Salutati, George of Trebizond, Valla, Agricola, Pico, and sixteenth-century humanists, including Erasmus, are found in Rebhorn, *Renaissance Debates on Rhetoric*. Kathy Eden shows that *style* was central to humanist expressions of inmost feelings in letter writing, evidenced by Petrarch, Erasmus, and Montaigne. See *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Intimacy*.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts*, 63–84.

<sup>5</sup> Regarding Hans Baron's contrary thesis, see among many works, Hankins, "The 'Baron Thesis' after Forty Years," and *Renaissance Civic Humanism*.

<sup>6</sup> On the relationships between rhetoric and the development of social and political theory in the early fifteenth century, see Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, esp. 1:101–12.

<sup>7</sup> On Cicero's purposes in writing *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, see Baraz, *A Written Republic*, 131–6.



assumptions and practices of ordinary folk. Only the wiseman is noble, good, happy, virtuous, rich – lacking even a penny, subject to no authority, unconquerable, immune to emotion. Contemptuous of what goes on in the world of affairs, the wiseman considers everyone else foolish and insane, not free but slaves, and sees all sins as equal.

And yet humanists had at hand a plethora of texts that detail the unitary both/and nature of Stoic ethical thought, epitomized by the wiseman.<sup>8</sup> Among these works were Cicero's *De finibus*, *De officiis*, *Tusculan Disputations*, *De legibus*, *Academica*, and *De natura deorum*; Seneca's many essays, such as *De constantia sapientis*, *De vita beata*, and *De tranquillitate animi*, and *Letters (Epistulae morales)*; Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Philosophers*; Epictetus' *Enchiridion* and *Discourses*; Plutarch's lengthy discussions of Stoicism in his *Moralia*, especially *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* and *De communibus notitiis contra Stoicos*; and, not least, the quotations, summaries, and illustrations of Stoicism in Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights (Noctes Atticae)*.<sup>9</sup>

Paul F. Grendler reveals that Italian Renaissance Latin schools gave little attention to Cicero's philosophical works, ignoring not only *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, *De finibus*, and *Tusculan Disputations* but even *De officiis*. The focus was on rhetorical rules and definitions and letters.<sup>10</sup> At the universities, fifteenth-century humanist professors concentrated on Latin poetic and rhetorical texts. Grendler lists the poetical and rhetorical works taught from 1458 to 1469 by Cristoforo Landino at Florence and by Angelo Poliziano, from 1480 to 1494 (which includes a number of works by Aristotle). At the University of Rome, by way of exception, Martino Filetico incorporated into his teaching between the 1470s and 1490s Cicero's *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, *Tusculan Disputations*, and *De officiis*.<sup>11</sup> However, Grendler does not show that *De finibus* was ever studied in fifteenth-century Italian universities.

*Paradoxa Stoicorum* and *De officiis*, published together in 1465, were the first works of classical literature printed.<sup>12</sup> Not without significance,

8 "The question which comes first, theory or practice, is not relevant to the Stoics, because philosophy is always inextricably linked to one's being in the world and in society." See Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics*, 90. Cf. D.L. 7.130.

9 On the availability of these and many other relevant authors, such as Sextus Empiricus or Dio Chrysostom, see Hankins and Palmer, *The Recovery of Ancient Philosophy in the Renaissance*.

10 Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy*, 216–17.

11 Grendler, *The Universities of the Italian Renaissance*, 237–9.

12 See Ronnick "The Raison d'Être of Fust and Schoeffer's *De Officiis et Paradoxa Stoicorum*, 1465, 1466."

*Paradoxa Stoicorum*, with its harsh, one-dimensional, and counter-intuitive depictions of the wiseman, went through more editions (69) before 1500 than even *De officiis* (64). Since *De officiis* emphasizes the worldly side of Stoicism and *Paradoxa Stoicorum* the hard and abstract side, one could imagine those responsible for the printing had in mind the both/and nature of Stoicism. But this was clearly not the case. I know of no instance where a humanist compares the one-dimensionality of *Paradoxa Stoicorum* with the two-dimensionality of *De officiis*, the distorted view of the wiseman in the former and the unitary *honestum/utile* way of thinking focused on in the latter. *De officiis* was something of a textbook for humanists,<sup>13</sup> as it had been for many medieval thinkers, but the Stoic frame of the work was outside the humanist purview.

At the beginning of *De officiis* Cicero points to the Stoic focus on nature and the self-preservation instinct (1.11–14) and emphasizes that the book is framed by the Stoic way of thinking. Regarding this way of thinking he explicitly refers to the Greek words *katorthoma* and *kathekon* and states that they embody the difference between “absolute” duty, that which is “right,” and “mean” or “ordinary” duty (1.8). He also points to the particular influence of the Stoic Panaetius on the first two of the three books. Near the beginning of Book 3 he discusses the frame of thought of the fabled Stoic wiseman and states that his goal is to adapt this outlook to the lives and understandings of ordinary humans (3.13–17). Throughout Book 3 he shows – “in perfect harmony with the Stoics’ system and doctrines” (3.20) – that anyone who thinks the issues of life are to be seen in either/or terms, either *honestum* or *utile*, simply does not understand fundamentals. The *honestum* cannot be separated from that which is actually *utile* and that which is actually *utile* cannot be separated from *honestum*. Against Peripatetics and common opinion it is not the case that something can be *honestum* and not *utile* or *utile* and not *honestum*. The *honestum* and the *utile* (as distinct from that which is only apparently *utile*) are two very different types

---

<sup>13</sup> Nearly 700 manuscript copies have been located, the overwhelming majority dated to the fifteenth century. See Winterbottom, “The Transmission of Cicero’s *De Officiis*.” Half of Jones’ *Master Tully* describes the transits of Cicero’s writings before their arrival in England. In *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature 1430–1530*, Wakelin shows the contexts within which Cicero’s writings were read in England and how they were read. On the influence of *De officiis* from Cicero’s death to 1500, see Walsh, *Cicero: On Obligations* xxxiv–xliv; Dyck, *A Commentary on Cicero, De Officiis*, 39–44; and Zielinski, *Cicero im Wandel der Jahrhunderte*.

of value but they are inseparable. This unitary both/and is not simply an abstract moralistic ideology; it has to be worked out anew, Cicero demonstrates, in every situation. On one side various and complex aspects of *honestum* (including not only reason per se but wisdom, justice, greatness of spirit, and decorum) have to be distinguished and applied and there is always a possibility that there are two morally right courses that have to be differentiated. On the other side, complex distinctions have to be made regarding various or unique circumstances and the most appropriate response. Does a particular course of action only appear to be *utile* or is it actually *utile*? Then too one must hold in mind that a decision will also need to be made should two actions both be *utile*.

But again, where do previous humanists see or take interest in the larger philosophic meaning of *De officiis*, not to mention the *katorthoma/kathekon* background? Far from building on Petrarch's interest in the Stoic wiseman, particularly his doctrine of *apatheia* (freedom from emotion), humanists who followed increasingly tended to ridicule Stoicism. Like Petrarch they saw little of the Stoic two-dimensional way of thinking and virtually nothing of the *katorthoma/kathekon* mindset and natural instinct at birth. They saw a Stoicism that consists of little more than rigid and abstract doctrines and often placed this outlook in an either/or frame opposite worldliness and the active life.

Petrarch in his tract "How a Ruler Ought to Govern His State" (1373) refers at one point to the dictum of Cicero, "the most learned and wisest of men," that "Nothing can be useful that is not at the same time just and honourable" (*nihil esse posse utile, que non idem iustum honestumque sit*) but illustrations are lacking and we are left with the belief that this is nothing but moralizing.<sup>14</sup> His "Dialogue on Pain" in *Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul* portrays, like so many of his writings, a vacillating either/or frame of thought with Stoic reason (person Ratio) on one side and pain as an emotion (person Dolor) on the other.<sup>15</sup> Charles Trinkaus shows that Petrarch – followed by Salutati, Bruni, Valla, and other humanists – oscillated between contradictory positions, between emotion and reason, the internal and the external, subjective and objective, experienced truth and revealed truth, his own professional career

14 See Kohl and Witt, *The Earthly Republic*, 63, and Petrarch, *Opera omnia*, 1:429.

15 See *Petrarch's Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*, ed. and trans. Rawski, 3:267–91, 4:440–55.

and the lives of monks, pride in his worldly achievements and contemplative truths, a sense of self and an eschatological vision.<sup>16</sup>

Ronald Witt quotes from the letters of Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406), Florentine chancellor 1375–1406, the following statement:

For who, I ask, without the writings of the ancients, with nature alone as a guide, will be able to explain with sufficient reason what is honest (*honestum*), what useful (*utile*) and what is the meaning of this battle of the useful and honorable? Doubtless nature makes us fit for virtues and secretly impels us to them but we are made virtuous not by nature but by works and learning.<sup>17</sup>

Although Witt does not tie this statement to Stoicism, much less *De officiis*, a relationship seems apparent.<sup>18</sup> Note the referral not only to *honestum* and *utile* but to “nature alone” as guide and the fact that nature “secretly impels,” which is the Stoic “inborn seeds of virtue” theme (*semina innata virtutum*) (*Tusc.* 3.2).<sup>19</sup> But where does Salutati develop the meanings or apply this thinking to particular intellectual or worldly issues? In seeing *honestum* and *utile* as involving a “battle” he is not seeing them as Cicero saw them, as unitary, but conceptualizing a rhetorical debate between opposed positions, *in utramque partem*. Perhaps knowledge of some aspects of Stoicism increased during the fifteenth century but where is there a grasp of the two-dimensional but unitary Stoic frame of mind, one obvious exemplification being *De officiis* 3?

For a better understanding of the difficulties humanists had in seeing the Stoic *honestum/utile* mindset, let us look more closely at the place of *honestas* and *utilitas* within rhetoric. Within the three classical types of oratory – judicial, deliberative, and demonstrative (or epideictic) – the ancients had set forth various topics for discussion, particularly

16 See “Themes of a Renaissance Anthropology,” 393, and *The Poet as Philosopher*, 89. Compare McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism*, 72, and Zak, *Petrarch’s Humanism and the Care of the Self*, 158; also Mazzotta, *The Worlds of Petrarch*.

17 Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads*, 69–70. The quote is from *Epistolario di Coluccio Salutati*, ed. Francesco Novati (Rome 1891), 1:106 (dated 1369).

18 The basis of Witt’s assertion elsewhere that Stoicism influenced Salutati more than any other philosophy is unclear. It appears that Witt may be relating only particular statements in Books 1 and 2 of *De officiis*. See *Hercules at the Crossroads*, 64 passim.

19 Nature’s greatest service, states Seneca, is “that Virtue causes her light to penetrate into the minds of all; even those who do not follow her see her” (*Ben.* 4.17.4).

important being *honestas* (honour) and *utilitas* (utility).<sup>20</sup> Orators would support one approach or the other, but not both in the same speech. In considering a particular issue, what course of action would be the most advantageous or, on the other side of debate, what would be the most honourable path? Or, by chance, could *utilitas* and *honestas* not be in conflict? Deliberative rhetoric tended to consider *utilitas* the ultimate end whereas demonstrative rhetoric considered *honestas* the ultimate end.<sup>21</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance the two main textbooks for such issues were Cicero's *De inventione*, which he wrote as a teenager (92–88 BCE), and the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (85–80 BCE).<sup>22</sup> A complete copy of Quintilian's massive *Institutiones oratoriae* (c. 96 CE) was discovered only in 1416 and intact copies of Cicero's mature works, *De oratore* and *Orator*, appeared only in 1421.<sup>23</sup> *Rhetorica ad Herennium* focused on expediential factors and has been related to Machiavelli's *The Prince*,<sup>24</sup> while *De inventione* was more moralistic in tone. *De inventione* allowed that expedience (security) could override the moral on certain occasions, but this should not be the goal.<sup>25</sup>

Not at odds with fifteenth-century humanists they study, modern researchers have often failed to clearly distinguish rhetorical meanings of *honestas* and *utilitas* from philosophic meanings. John F. Tinkler, for example, does not look for or notice – in an often cited article – any difference in humanists' employment of *honestas* and *utilitas* in rhetoric

<sup>20</sup> On the practice and theory of the three types of rhetoric in the classical world, see Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric*. On their use in humanistic circles, see O'Malley, *Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome*, esp. 36–51.

<sup>21</sup> See Tinkler, "Praise and Advice," 204, and Cicero, *De inventione* 2.12–13, 155–75, *De oratore* 2.333–49, and *Topica* 91. Cf. however Virginia Cox, "Machiavelli and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*."

<sup>22</sup> See Monfasani, "Humanism and Rhetoric"; Ward, "From Antiquity to the Renaissance"; and "Renaissance Commentators on Ciceronian Rhetoric."

<sup>23</sup> Note Matthew B. Roller's comment on Quintilian's *Institutes* 3.8.22–47: "Though the basic *divisio* he specifies for *suasoriae* nominally sets the *honestum* against the *utile*, he notes repeatedly that courses of action advocated fundamentally on the basis of utility must also be claimed as morally right, or at worst indifferent; they must never be conceded as morally wrong." See "Color-Blindness," 112. See also Ward, "Quintilian and the Rhetorical Revolution of the Middle Ages"; Monfasani, "Episodes of Anti-Quintilianism in the Italian Renaissance"; and Walzer, "Quintilian's 'Vir Bonus' and the Stoic Wise Man."

<sup>24</sup> See Virginia Cox, "Machiavelli and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*." Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which was little known, also emphasized expediential factors.

<sup>25</sup> Cicero, *De inventione* 2.156 (against Aristotle's view) and 2.174–5.

and their understanding of the meaning of *honestum* and *utile* in *De officiis*.<sup>26</sup> Seeing *De officiis* 3 in terms of Quintilian's rhetoric Victoria Kahn holds that Stoic *honestas* has nothing to say regarding real world effectiveness (*utilitas*).<sup>27</sup> Without doubt Cicero employed his rhetorical skills in composing *De officiis* but *De officiis* is a work on philosophy and here *honestum* and *utile* are built (even if augmented by rhetoric) from the thinking of Zeno and Chrysippus.<sup>28</sup>

Anthony Long notes that even contemporaries of Cicero would have been more familiar with the conflict between *honestas* and *utilitas* discussed in rhetorical works such as Cicero's *De oratore* (2.335) than with the definition of *honestum* and the uniting of the *honestum* and the *utile* found in *De officiis*.<sup>29</sup>

### **Not philosophers but rhetoricians: Rhetorical debate *in utramque partem***

One aspect of the humanist rhetorical approach to problem solving, also imported from classical practices, was the dialogue. The dialogue form allowed rendering of opposed positions, *in utramque partem disserere*. A negative consequence of dialogic thinking was that it allowed the trivialization of serious philosophical issues. Although Cicero had employed the dialogue in his books on philosophy (such as *De finibus*) as well as those on rhetoric (such as *De oratore*), humanists, unlike Cicero, had no significant philosophical training or expertise. Lacking a grasp of the differing suppositions, methodologies, and teachings of the various ancient philosophies, pitting a superficial grasp of a thesis

<sup>26</sup> Tinkler, "Praise and Advice," 192.

<sup>27</sup> Kahn, "Virtu and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli's *Prince*," 247.

<sup>28</sup> Paul O. Kristeller, along with Hans Baron the most influential Renaissance historian of the twentieth century – trained in philosophy, particularly Plato – displays little knowledge of Stoic thought. "Where questions of virtue and vice are not involved the Stoic sage is allowed and even encouraged to follow expediency. With virtue and vice often limited to a few ultimate decisions, the sway of expediency becomes very large indeed, and the Stoic moralist, while continuing to be rigorous in theory, may turn out to be lax, if not selfish, on most practical questions." See *Renaissance Thought II*, 36. Cf. his *Greek Philosophers of the Hellenistic Age*, 30–1, 84.

<sup>29</sup> Long, "Cicero's Politics in *De Officiis*," 218 n. 13. On the difference between Augustine's *uti* (or *usus*) and *frui* (or *fruitio*) and Cicero's *utile* and *honestum* and the evolution of thought on the *res publica* up through the fifteenth century, see Kempshall, "De Re Publica 1.39."

found in one philosophy against a superficial grasp of a thesis found in another philosophy in a rhetorical debate *in utramque partem* often did little to advance understanding. Humanist assessments of Stoicism exemplify these shortcomings. Within their dialogues, David Marsh points out, “the group often mocks or isolates dogmatic rigidity, represented in the person of an intractably ‘Stoic’ interlocutor out of touch with practical realities.”<sup>30</sup> Placing the unbending side of Stoicism within a rhetorical context, it was easy not to see or take seriously the bending side of the Stoic wiseman’s mindset, much less the relationships between the two sides.

### Epicurean philosophy or Stoic philosophy?

The most sustained and brilliant dialogue in opposition to Stoicism was Lorenzo Valla’s *De voluptate* (*On Pleasure*) (1431–49), in later editions titled *De vero falsoque bono*.<sup>31</sup> Influenced by Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria*, Valla looked at issues not from the standpoint of philosophy but, very consciously, as a rhetorician (cf. 2.29.12; 3.11.6).<sup>32</sup> Rhetoric for him included everything that involves being a human. In three books the work ridicules Stoics and their *honestum* (represented by Catone) in favour of an Epicurean-rooted pleasure philosophy (represented by Vegio). Explicitly rejecting Cicero’s siding with Stoicism against pleasure philosophy, in Book 2 of *De finibus* and elsewhere, Valla shows that it is in fact pleasure and self-interest that willy-nilly govern all of life. There is all the difference between the way Stoics imagine humans should act and the way, by nature, they actually do act. The actions of even the most important worldly proponents of *honestum*, such as Cato and Scipio, were in fact self-interested. They obtained great pleasure from being heroic (2.3.3). It is silly to put country above personal advantage. Once you are dead your country is dead to you (2.1.5). It is better to save oneself than a hundred thousand people (2.1.7). “We should not fight against the crowd, as the Stoics do, but go along with it, as with a rapid river” (1.46.2). In the creation of cities and states, “no prince, administrator, or king

<sup>30</sup> Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue*, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Valla, *On Pleasure/De voluptate*, and *De vero falsoque bono*.

<sup>32</sup> See Gerl, *Rhetorik als Philosophie*. Richard Waswo sees Valla as a forerunner of Ludwig Wittgenstein in that both see epistemology as one with the ordinary use of language. See *Language and Meaning in the Renaissance*, 88–113, esp. 103–4.

was ever chosen unless men expected great advantage from him" (2.32.1). Laws and concepts of justice have come about because of their usefulness to people, not because of any abstract truth (1.33.2). "You may cheat, deceive, or defraud someone in a contract; however, you should do it craftily and subtly" (2.27.3). Prudence "consists in knowing how to procure advantages for yourself and avoid what is disagreeable" (1.33.1). Kindness can be very advantageous. Life is about pleasure, not the rigidity and death advocated by the morose and marble-like Stoics (2.2.1–3). Illustrating the point, Valla spends a good deal of time on sex. The breasts and body of a nude female are beautiful (cf. 1.20.2).<sup>33</sup> What does it matter whether one makes love to one's wife or, provided there are no unacceptable consequences, a lover? (1.38.1). If a woman gets raped there is no sense in her killing herself (2.4.4). Honour as such is ridiculous. *Honestum* has no reality or meaning (cf. 1.35.1, 2.15.2). Not only is the hard side of Stoicism denied and ridiculed, the bending side goes unmentioned and, apparently, unnoticed. Passing over the role of indifferents in Stoicism and the fact that some are preferred and others dispreferred, Stoics are lambasted for not (like Aristotelians) allowing goods of the body and external goods (1.16.1). Although at one point Stoics are censured for "saying that the advantageous derived from the virtuous" (*dicentes utile ab honesto manare*) (2.32.9), there is no recognition of the both/and dynamics of Stoic thought.

In the third book Valla attempts to go beyond the views of both the Stoic Catone and the Epicurean Vegio. Raudense, a Franciscan monk, shows that the hope and faith of Christianity change everything. The beauty of women is trifling in comparison to heavenly beauty. The heavenly state will be the highest pleasure of all (3.23.5–9). Notwithstanding the introduction of Christianity, *honestum* is still seen in terms of pleasure, delight, and joy. Pleasure in this world is a stepping stone to pleasure in the hereafter. Christian pleasure (*voluptas*) motivates Christian *honestas*, not the other way around.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Valla's emphasis on the pleasure of sex and the beauty of the female body appears to go beyond that of Epicurus and the Epicurean Lucretius (d. 55 BCE). On the latter, see Brown, *Lucretius on Love*.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Lorch, *A Defense of Life*, 263. *De voluptate* plays a central role in Charles Trinkaus' rendering of "theologia rhetorica." See his *In Our Image and Likeness*, 105–50.



## Stoic nobility or inherited nobility?

While Stoicism was most commonly ridiculed,<sup>35</sup> Niccolo Niccoli (d. 1437) supported Stoicism. But how did he understand Stoicism and what was his motivation? Famous for his collecting of ancient works, the evidence for his Stoicism is found in a dialogue, “On Nobility” (*De nobilitate*) (1440), written by Poggio Bracciolini (d. 1459).<sup>36</sup>

Opposing Lorenzo Medici, Niccoli employs Stoicism in arguing against inherited wealth and a variety of current and past ideals of nobility. Custom and common opinion, he contends, are out of sync with Stoic philosophy. After a referral to things that are “good” or “evil” or “indifferent” that seems to conflate *honestum* and *turpe* with preferred indifferents and dispreferred indifferents (75, *Op.* 72–3), we are informed that nobility, as commonly understood, has no place in any of this. Goods of the body (such as health and beauty) and external goods (such as wealth) do not denote true nobility and neither, surprisingly, do goods of the mind. “Prudence makes one prudent, wisdom makes one wise, justice makes one just, temperance makes one temperate” but none of these, as such, makes one noble. True nobility is found in virtue alone (*a solis virtutibus*), not – and this is the central point of his argument – in family, country, or ancestors, and not in honours, deeds, or public offices (82, *Op.* 78).<sup>37</sup> When pressed Niccoli does not deny the possibility that a wealthy person can have virtue but thinks this would be rare and in any case cannot be passed on to offspring (79). Virtue must be “the controlling principle” in winning honours and public offices (83). Truth and reason alone constitute virtue and true nobility. The Stoics considered Plato the source of their view that nobility is found only in the virtue of the wise and that, “honor, which is stable and enduring, is the highest good and rules our conduct, while fortune is fleeting” (83).<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism*, 100–3, 136–9.

<sup>36</sup> See Bracciolini, “On Nobility” in *Knowledge, Goodness, and Power* and “De nobilitate” in *Opera Omnia*.

<sup>37</sup> On Niccoli’s equating of virtue and nobility and the fact that this theme was to become a humanist commonplace, as for example with Alberti (d. 1472), Landino (d. 1498), and Platina (d. 1481), see Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 224–9, and *Foundations*, 1:82.

<sup>38</sup> Niccoli cites Diogenes Laertius on Plato’s four categories of nobility (6.72) (83). *De officiis* 1.15 ties *honestum* with Plato’s statement that “if it could be seen with the physical eye, it would awaken a marvellous love of wisdom” (*Phaedrus* 250d).

In response, Lorenzo Medici cites Aristotle on the importance of things such as wealth and health for virtue and contrasts Stoics. For Stoics, “generosity is a disposition of the mind, not a deed” (82). Like a philosopher hidden in his study, “virtually unknown even unto himself,” Stoics like Niccoli lead “a lonely, destitute existence, since it does not advance the society and community of people” (87).

To which Niccoli replies that one can be noble without involvement in worldly affairs. Learning tied to virtue, even if one leads an isolated life, can result in knowledge of what things should be desired and avoided (87).<sup>39</sup> “What need has virtue of external aid when, content with its own resources and wealth, it excels all other things?” (88) (cf. *Fin.* 3.75, *Par.* 6). At the conclusion we learn that besides being the truest view (cf. *Tusc.* 5.82), Stoic virtue can be more useful than other philosophies in everyday life. But how, we may wonder? How can perfect, abstract, and unbending virtue help humans in their day-to-day activities? Seeing Stoicism in one-dimensional terms, Niccoli imagines that in simply putting aside common ideas of nobility humans would discard the laziness evident in accepting what they are born with and be motivated to seek true nobility, as well as happiness and immortality, by right action (89, *Op.* 83).

Nowhere does Niccoli take up the Stoic distinction between appropriate actions (*kathekonta*) and the right actions (*katorthomata*) inherent to virtue. What Niccoli conveniently passes over is the fact that wealth and money-making are, in Stoicism, not denigrated. What matters – Erasmus would see – is only how wealth is treated and how one makes money. Making money by trickery or craft is not expedient, for it destroys the very basis of civilization, “the law of nature,” “a bond of fellowship uniting all men” (*Off.* 3.69). While wealth separated from *honestum* quickly turns into vice, wealth tied to *honestum* results in worldly attitudes and practices that are at one and the same time truly expedient and truly honourable.

As for property, it is a duty to make money, but only by honorable means; it is a duty also to save it and increase it by care and thrift (*Off.* 2.87). “When a man enters the foot-race,” says Chrysippus with his usual aptness, “it is his duty to put forth all his strength and strive with all his might

---

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Bruni, n. 71 below.