

Erasmus among the Dialecticians: Copia and Its Discontents

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Abstract

Erasmus' sceptical attitude towards the discipline of dialectic in his early writings is well known. In this article, I revisit Erasmus' relationship with the arts of reasoning, tracing a trajectory from *The Praise of Folly* and *De Copia* to his final work, *Ecclesiastes*. Erasmus' treatise on preaching, I suggest, develops a new approach to copious speech and writing by combining the resources of rhetoric and dialectic, in dialogue with the textbooks on the arts of discourse that had appeared in the 25 years since the composition of *The Praise of Folly*.

Keywords

dialectic – rhetoric – homiletics – copia – definition

When Erasmus' Folly steps forward to deliver her oration, one of the first things that strikes us is her complete confidence:

Whatever is generally said of me by mortal men, and I'm quite well aware that Folly is in poor repute even amongst the greatest fools, still, I am the one—and indeed, the only one—whose divine powers can gladden the hearts of gods and men. Proof enough of this is in the fact that as soon as I stepped forward to address this crowded assembly, every face immediately brightened up with a new, unwonted gaiety and all your frowns were smoothed away. You laughed and applauded with such delightfully

happy smiles[;] ... it only takes the mere sight of me to give you all a different look.¹

As the opening of an encomium, this is decidedly odd: even the most unorthodox theorists of epideictic rhetoric do not recommend starting a speech with the proof or confirmation of argument. Folly, we realise from the start, will be doing things her way. She is irreducibly herself, she goes on to tell us, no matter what the circumstances: 'I am myself wherever I am'.² Who or what that is, however, will turn out to be a rather tricky question. At the most basic level, as Pierre Mesnard has pointed out, we can't even be sure what Folly is wearing: the cap and bells of Holbein's marginal illustrations are suggestive, but they don't do justice to the deliberate slipperiness of Folly's self-description.³ She claims that she will 'make it perfectly clear who I am from the look on my face', for instance, but since we have no idea what she looks like, this is not especially helpful. Folly keeps promising us something more fully present and embodied than the tools of language and rhetoric can offer, and she proclaims the immediate, almost physical, impact of her personality: 'as soon as I stepped forward', she says, 'every face ... brightened up'. These insistent references to her unmediated presence are channelled through visual cues—she keeps inviting us to look at her—but any attempts to connect in this way are rebuffed by the lack of information about her physical appearance. At some level, of course, this is Folly having a laugh at our expense; that, at least, we know about her. But there is also something more serious in Erasmus' odd juxtaposition of a representational vacuum with a delighted audience response. To state the painfully obvious, any experience of Folly we may derive from the text will be generated by the materials of language, rather than by a painter's brushstroke. The terms of Folly's argument, then—her claims that we know who she is and that her appearance will gladden our hearts—raise profound questions about how the medium of the written word participates in the production of both knowledge and affect.

1 CWE 27:86; ASD IV-3:71–72, ll. 5–10, 17: 'Vt cunque de me vulgo mortales loquuntur, neque enim sum nescia, quam male audiat stulticia etiam apud stultissimos, tamen hanc esse, hanc, inquam, esse vnam quae meo numine deos atque homines exhilaro, vel illud abunde magnum est argumentum quod, simulatque in hunc coetum frequentissimum dictura prodii, sic repente omnium vultus noua quadam atque insolita hilaritate enituerunt, sic subito frontem exporrexistis, sic laeto quodam et amabili applausistis risu, ... ita vobis me conspecta mox alius accessit vultus'.

2 CWE 27:87; ASD IV-3:74, l. 69: 'Sumque mei vndique simillima'.

3 Pierre Mesnard, 'Erasmus et la conception dialectique de la folie', in *L'Umanesimo e 'la follia'*, ed. by Enrico Castelli (Rome: Edizioni Abete, 1971), pp. 43–61 (p. 53).

Previous work on Erasmus' representational strategies—and, more specifically, on the question of how language can make ideas and concepts present and emotionally palpable—has focussed on the resources of rhetoric; the title of Terence Cave's 1976 article on Erasmus and the 'rhetoric of presence' gives a pretty good flavour of this approach.⁴ I want, by contrast, to look at the representational resources of another discipline in the trivium, the one that Erasmus finds most complex and troubling—dialectic.⁵ More particularly, I want to investigate how dialectic operates as an instrument of cognition in the crucial arena of religious instruction, where the ability to generate faith and devotion through embodied words and truths is all-important. And in describing Erasmus' relationship with dialectic, at various stages of his career, I will focus on one particular linguistic instrument that helps make things present, as we will see, to the intellect and the emotions alike: the definition.

This may seem like a counterintuitive move. Definition, after all, is a strategy that Folly decisively rejects at the very beginning of her oration: 'what purpose', she asks, 'would it serve for a definition to produce a sketch which would be a mere shadow of myself when I am here before you, for you to look at with your own eyes?'⁶ Why converse with the shadows in Plato's cave, she asks, when you can have the real thing? (Except we can't, of course, and so it comes as no surprise when the next words she speaks come precisely in the form of a definition: 'For I am as you see me, the true bestower of good things.'⁷) As Folly's argument develops, she will associate the concept of definition not simply with dialectic, but with the crumbling theoretical edifices of scholastic theology. St Paul, for example, may be a living monument to the Christian faith but, Folly notes sarcastically, his definition of faith in the Epistle to the Hebrews is 'quite unscholastic'; and, she continues, 'though he provides the finest example of charity, in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, he neither divides nor

4 Terence Cave, *'Enargeia': Erasmus and the Rhetoric of Presence in the Sixteenth Century*, *L'Esprit Créateur*, 16 (1976), 5–19.

5 There is a significant body of scholarly literature on Erasmus' relationship with the early modern trivium. By way of introduction for rhetoric, one might cite Peter Mack's work on Erasmus in chapter 5 of *A History of Renaissance Rhetoric, 1380–1620* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 76–100; and for grammar, Brian Cummings, 'Erasmus and the End of Grammar: Humanism, Scholasticism, and Literary Language', *New Medieval Literatures*, 11 (2009), 249–270. For a recent engagement with Erasmus' perspective on dialectic, see Anita Traninger, 'Erasmus' *Personae* between Rhetoric and Dialectics', *Erasmus Studies*, 37 (2017), 5–22.

6 CWE 27:87; ASD IV-3:74, ll. 60–62: 'Tametsi quorsum tandem attinet mei velut vmbram atque imaginem finitione repraesentare, cum ipsam me coram praesentes praesentem oculis intueamini?'

7 CWE 27:87; ASD IV-3:74, ll. 62–63: 'Sum etenim, vti videtis, vera illa largitrix ἐξ᾽ αὐν'.

defines it according to the rules of dialectic'.⁸ These absurd rules, and the workings of definition in particular, will eventually cause Folly to drop her mask of ironic detachment and lose her cool, at least temporarily: 'Others too think it a damnable form of sacrilege and the worst sort of impiety for anyone to speak of matters so holy, which call for reverence rather than explanation, with a profane tongue, or to argue with the pagan subtlety of the heathen, presume to offer definitions, and pollute the majesty of divine theology with words and sentiments which are so trivial and even squalid.'⁹ Definitions are associated, in many of Erasmus' writings, with the scholastic exercise of disputation, which taught students to internalise a series of highly technical moves in order to master the requirements of academic examination. For Erasmus, these disputations represented a singularly ineffective approach to thinking and speaking well because they had no application outside the university; they were, however, an excellent delivery system for human pride and vanity. If the scholastic theologians have such a high opinion of themselves, Folly mockingly suggests, why not send them to fight 'the Turks and Saracens' and see how they fare in combat?¹⁰ In his *Ratio ... ad veram theologiam* (1518), Erasmus condemns the pointless academic battles of these paper tigers more explicitly:

what sort of sight is it for an eighty-year old theologian to do nothing in the schools but either teach or practise the exercises in dialectic and philosophy appropriate to a forum of debate? To chatter away endlessly here with no tongue to preach the Gospel of Christ, and right to the end of life to do nothing else than dispute—not to say prattle. ... [T]he chief goal of theologians is to explain prudently divine literature, to give an account of the faith and not of frivolous questions, to discourse seriously and effectually on godliness, to elicit tears, to set our souls aflame for heavenly things.¹¹

8 CWE 27:127; ASD IV-3:150, ll. 424–425 ('parum magistraliter definiuit') and ll. 425–426 ('Idem vt charitatem optime praestitit, ita parum dialectice vel diuidit vel finit in priore ad Corinthios epistola, capite decimotertio').

9 CWE 27:129; ASD IV-3:154, ll. 480–484: 'Sunt qui velut sacrilegii genus execrentur summamque ducant impietatem de rebus tam arcanis et adorandis magis quam explicandis tam illoto ore loqui, tam prophanis Ethnicorum argutiis disputare, tam arroganter definire ac diuinae Theologiae maiestatem tam frigidis, imo sordidis verbis simul et sententiis conspurcare.'

10 CWE 27:129; ASD IV-3:154, l. 473 ('Turcas et Saracenos').

11 CWE 41:516–517; Holborn, p. 193: 'quale spectaculum est octogenarium theologum nihil aliud quam in scholis dialecticam ac philosophiam vel docere vel decertare palaestram?'

The *Paraclesis* (1516) conveys the same idea more economically: ‘The philosophy of Christ lies more in the inclinations and intentions of the heart than in syllogisms. It is a way of life rather than a form of argument. ... It is transformation rather than argumentation.’¹²

If the story of Erasmus’ views on dialectic so far sounds familiar, this is because it has been told with far more erudition and elegance by other scholars—most notably by Erika Rummel, in her analysis of the educational and exegetical writings of the 1510s.¹³ But things begin to look rather different when we fast-forward to Erasmus’ final work: the *Ecclesiastes* of 1535, his most expansive and detailed treatise on theological education. In the summary of the preacher’s training that concludes the fourth and final book of *Ecclesiastes*, we now find Erasmus insisting that ‘[s]cholastic disputes contribute considerably’ to homiletic excellence.¹⁴ And even more surprisingly, most of book 2 is devoted to dialectical strategies of argument, among which definition features prominently. Unless we want to attribute this shift of perspective to senility or the inexorable logic of mortality—Erasmus was convinced that completing the work would kill him and he died less than a year after its publication—something significant must have happened to occasion such a dramatic change in tone and attitude.

It is true that a great many of Erasmus’ writings give us a clear indication of dialectic’s shortcomings, offering both a critique of its theory and an overview of the damage it has caused in the realm of religious doctrine and practice. On closer inspection, however, it quickly becomes clear that Erasmus—like many other outspoken humanist critics of dialectic—is not ready to dispense with the resources of formal reasoning entirely. In the *Apologia ad monachos hispanos* (1528), for instance, Erasmus defended himself against charges of Arrianism by using the signature move of any self-respecting dialectician: the syllogism. In *The Praise of Folly*, Erasmus had mocked theologians who operate in the erroneous belief that ‘three syllogisms arm them enough to go straight to

Hic sine fine garrere ad praedicandum Christi euangelium elinguem et ad extremum usque vitae nihil aliud quam disputare, ne dicam argutari? ... At praecipuus theologorum scopus est sapienter enarrare divinas litteras, de fide, non de frivolis quaestionibus rationem reddere, de pietate graviter atque efficaciter disserere, lacrimas excutere, ad caelestia inflammare animos.’

12 CWE 41:415; Holborn, pp. 144–145: ‘Hoc philosophiae genus in affectibus situm verius quam in syllogismis vita magis est quam disputatio[.] ... [T]ransformatio magis quam ratio.’

13 Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and the Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

14 CWE 68:1097; ASD V-5:384, l. 448: ‘Huc plurimum conducent scholasticae conflictationes.’

battle on any subject with any man',¹⁵ but in his own confrontation with the Spanish monks, the techniques of logical deduction proved crucial. At issue in the *Apologia* was the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son in the Trinity, a doctrine denied by the Arians and, in the view of Erasmus' clerical opponents, defended with insufficient conviction by the Dutchman. Erasmus clarifies his position by acknowledging a problem: the technical term describing the consubstantial relationship between Father and Son, '*homoousios* [,] ... is not in the Divine Scriptures', and so the Arian position cannot simply be refuted by invoking God's word directly.¹⁶ Instead, he devises an alternative mode of attack that draws on the strategies of dialectic. Erasmus begins by constructing a series of definitions and then crafts them into a deductive argument:

From this [i.e. E's previous reflections] a syllogism arises: 'If he [the Son] is born in a singular manner from the Father, he is a Son not by adoption, but by nature. If by nature, he is born from the substance of the Father. But the substance can in no way be divided, as it cannot be increased or diminished. It follows, therefore, that the Father and the Son have the same undivided substance.'¹⁷

What matters about this example is not the granular detail of Trinitarian theology, but the insight it affords into Erasmus' methodology. He clearly implies that there are important aspects of Christianity that require the cooperation of Scripture and dialectic. Erasmus' controversial writings of the late 1520s, then, provide some evidence of a more nuanced attitude towards the arts of reasoning.¹⁸ For a fuller theoretical justification of how dialectic can be mobilised to teach the philosophy of Christ, however, we need to turn to *Ecclesiastes*.

Erasmus' treatise on preaching was a long time in the making.¹⁹ As the excellent Toronto edition by Frederick McGinness and James Butrica reminds us, the

15 CWE 27:125; ASD IV-3:144, ll. 358–360: 'tribus instructi syllogismis incunctanter audent quavis de re cum quouis manum conserere.'

16 CWE 75:45; ASD IX-9:292, l. 78: '*homusion* non est in literis diuinis.'

17 CWE 75:45; ASD IX-9:293, ll. 93–96: 'Ex his oritur collectio: Si nascitur singulari ratione a Patre, non adoptione Filius est, sed natura. Si natura, nascitur e substantia Patris, sed Dei substantia diuidi nullo modo potest, quemadmodum nec augeri nec minui. Consequitur igitur eandem et indiuiduam esse substantiam Patris ac Filii.'

18 Traninger, 'Erasmus' *personae*', argues that Erasmus adopted and adapted elements of the scholastic disputation because he 'aspired to challenge theologians on their home ground' (p. 22).

19 Erasmus, *Ecclesiastae, sive de ratione concionandi libri quatuor* (Basel: Froben, 1535).

work took almost sixteen years to complete.²⁰ By Erasmus' own admission, its structure is uneven and would have benefitted from revision, but, as he admitted ruefully in the dedicatory letter to the Bishop of Augsburg, 'I could not face going over such a massive work again.'²¹ The modestly titled 'Introductory Note' by the Toronto editors (which turns out to be 160 pages long and may just be one of the longest notes in history, as well as one of the most brilliant) begins by informing the reader that *Ecclesiastes* occupies a full 333 Folio columns in the Leclerc edition of Erasmus' *Opera Omnia* and two whole volumes in the ASD.

This kind of heft means that Erasmus had space to explain things, sometimes several times over, and while it is wise to be wary of retrospective rationalisations, it is still worth noting that some passages in *Ecclesiastes* serve as a useful gloss on Erasmus' earlier treatment of the arts of discourse. And with a subject like dialectic, where the early works present a tension between negative programmatic statements and actual discursive practice, Erasmus' career reflections in *Ecclesiastes* are particularly illuminating. Take the example discussed above, for instance, on Trinitarian consubstantiality. In book 2 of *Ecclesiastes*, as part of a lengthy discussion of theological methodology, Erasmus provides a rationale for the process of logical deduction employed in *Adversus Monachos* and extends the scope of formal reasoning into the arenas of exegesis and preaching: 'Reasoning [from syllogisms]', he says, 'clearly comes into play when there is no Scripture that clearly defines the matter in question, and the divine will is inferred instead by reasoning from the comparison of several scriptural passages.'²² This is an explicit endorsement of the arts of argument: in the case of Scripture passages that do not pronounce with certainty on a point of doctrine or religious practice, dialectic furnishes the analytical processes that allow us to infer God's will and reason out divine intent. *Ecclesiastes* also justifies the use of dialectical method on the basis of biblical precedent. 'The Lord argues from consequents', Erasmus insists, and 'Paul reasons from incompat-

20 CWE 67:79.

21 CWE 67:243; ASD V-4:30, l. 36: 'Ne dicam dolo, piguit vastum opus retexere'.

22 CWE 68:499; ASD V-4:271, ll. 531–533: 'Incidit et ratiocinatio, quum nulla Scriptura extat quae liquid definiat id de quo quaeritur, sed ex variis Scripturae locis inter se collatis, ratiocinando colligitur diuina voluntas.' The roots of this comparative method are Augustinian; in *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine argues that it 'is a wonderful and beneficial thing that the Holy Spirit organized the holy scripture so as to satisfy hunger by means of its plainer passages and remove boredom by means of its obscurer ones. Virtually nothing is unearthed from these obscurities which cannot be found quite plainly expressed somewhere else.' (*De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. by R.P.H. Green [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 2.6.8). The language of inference is Erasmus' addition.

ibles', for example.²³ By reclaiming Scripture as the true source of dialectical reasoning, Erasmus aims to strip away at least some of the scholastic accretions acquired by the discipline during the previous millennium. That is the theory, at least, although in practice the exercise of dialectic requires constant vigilance to prevent a descent into Medieval sophistry. The temptations of 'fallacious subtleties' ('captiosas argutias') are everywhere, waiting to breed doubt and undermine religious conviction.²⁴ This attempt to return *ad fontes* proves no less problematic than many others.

Before we turn to the role of the definition in Erasmus' homiletic theory, it is helpful to survey the main outlines of his programme of dialectical study. He begins by prescribing the appropriate reading in the subject, noting that '[a]ll the books that Aristotle wrote on logic are helpful', but particularly endorses the *Topics* and *Rhetoric*.²⁵ In addition to these works of ancient philosophy, Erasmus also recommends a more recent text, the *De Inventione Dialectica* by Rudolph Agricola—'a man', Erasmus says, 'who deserves an undying glory'.²⁶ In *Ecclesiastes*, Erasmus prescribes training in the use of the dialectical topics or *loci*, which he says will help with the interpretation of Scripture and the composition of sermons; he also advises on how to structure and assemble propositions and covers the four main forms of argument: syllogism, enthymeme, induction, and example. Throughout his analysis of dialectical method, Erasmus stresses its connections with the other two disciplines in the trivium, rhetoric and grammar. He observes, for instance, that dialectic is 'an art so akin to rhetoric that it is almost the same' ('ars sic rhetoricae cognata vt pene sit eadem').²⁷ Dialectic precedes rhetoric, Erasmus says, 'for there must be judgement before there is expression, knowledge before speech, just as in nature a spring comes before a river, and in the arts sketching comes before painting'.²⁸ However, it is grammar that forms 'the basis of all the disciplines'

23 CWE 68:711–712; ASD V-4:460, l. 284 ('Ex consequentibus ratiocinatur Dominus'); ASD V-4:460, ll. 291–292 ('A repugnantibus ratiocinatur Paulus').

24 CWE 68:468; ASD, V-4:248, l. 44.

25 CWE 68:612; ASD V-4:368, ll. 68–69: 'Conducunt omnes libri, quos Aristoteles scripsit de logicis'.

26 CWE 68:646; ASD V-4:402, l. 877: 'vir immortalis gloria dignus Rodolphus Agricola'. On Agricola and Erasmus, see E.H. Waterbolk, *Een hond in het bad: enige aspecten van de verhouding tussen Erasmus en Agricola* (Groningen: Wolters, 1966); Peter Mack, *Renaissance Argument: Valla and Agricola in the Tradition of Rhetoric and Dialectic* (Leiden, New York: Brill, 1993), pp. 303–304.

27 CWE 68:468; ASD V-4:248, l. 41.

28 CWE 68:473; ASD V-4:252, ll. 131–133: 'Necesse est enim vt prius sit iudicium quam eloquium, prius sapere quam dicere, quemadmodum in natura prior est fons quam fluuius et in artibus prior est delinatio quam pictura.'

(‘disciplinarum omnium fundamentum’), defined in good humanist fashion not merely as ‘the inflection of nouns and verbs’ (‘inflexionem nominum ac verborum’) but, more broadly, as ‘the ways of speaking correctly and properly’ (‘rationes emendate proprieque loquendi’).²⁹ Rushing towards dialectic before grammatical knowledge has been consolidated will merely create quarrelsome sophists, since (as Erasmus insists) ‘dialectic is blind without grammar’.³⁰

By asserting the close connections between rhetoric and dialectic, Erasmus follows the two most significant proponents of humanist dialectic, Agricola and Philip Melanchthon.³¹ Melanchthon proved especially useful for Erasmus’ purposes in *Ecclesiastes*, since he was the principal early sixteenth-century theorist to mobilise the arts of discourse for religious exegesis, preaching, and controversy. His 1531 treatise *Elementa Rhetorices* was based on the foundational assumption that ‘the kinship between dialectic and rhetoric is so close that it is difficult to tell them apart’.³² There are other moments in *Ecclesiastes* where Erasmus’ argument closely echoes the language of the *Elementa*. In book 3 of *Ecclesiastes*, for instance, Erasmus explains that the same linguistic techniques can be used in different parts of a speech and for different purpose, noting, for instance, that ‘nothing prevents amplification or embellishment from being taken from the same loci from which the proof is taken’.³³ Melanchthon had stated, four years earlier, that ‘the loci can be used not only for proof but also for amplification’.³⁴ This example is significant because it is one of the relatively rare moments when Erasmus deviates from his principal source, Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria*. In book 8, chapters 4 and 5 of his handbook, Quintilian

29 CWE 68:473; ASD V-4:252, ll. 138–139, 141–142, 142–143.

30 CWE 68:474; ASD V-4:252, ll. 150–151: ‘Atqui dialectica caeca est absque grammatica.’

31 On the relationship between Erasmus and Melanchthon, see Carl S. Meyer, ‘Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Erasmus and Melanchthon’, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 61 (1970), 637–647. Günther Frank has described Agricola’s *De Inventione Dialectica* as an attempt to ‘rhetoricise logic’ and Melanchthon’s *Erotemata Dialectices* as an effort to ‘logicise rhetoric’; Günther Frank, ‘Melanchthons Dialektik und die Geschichte der Logik’, in *Melanchthon und das Lehrbuch des 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Jürgen Leonhardt (Rostock: Philosophische Fakultät, 1997), pp. 125–145 (pp. 132–133).

32 Philip Melanchthon, *Elementa Rhetorices*, in *Principal Writings on Dialectic and Rhetoric*, ed. by William P. Weaver, Stefan Strohm, and Volkhard Wels (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017): ‘Tanta est dialecticae et rhetoricae cognatio, vix ut discrimen deprehendi possit’ (p. 276, l. 20).

33 CWE 68:778; ASD V-5:54, ll. 994–995: ‘Nihil enim vetat ex iisdem locis peti amplificationem aut ornatum, ex quibus petitur probatio.’

34 Melanchthon, *Elementa*: ‘Adhibentur autem loci communes et ad probandum et ad amplificandum’ (p. 318, ll. 3–4).

keeps the resources of proof and amplification emphatically separate; the fact that Erasmus foregrounds the overlap between the two categories strongly suggests a debt to Melanchthon.

Erasmus insists that '[t]he ability to reason existed before the invention of dialectic';³⁵ nevertheless, '[t]he sensible study of dialectic aids natural ability', so 'being trained in dialectic from childhood will be of no small help'.³⁶ However, it is crucial to adapt its uses to the contexts of speaking and writing. While in the context of academic discussion, it would be perfectly appropriate to discuss the technical dimensions of 'syllogisms or enthymemes', or 'modal and mixed propositions', 'it would be ineffective to introduce the same concepts before a judge or before a congregation, though at the same time the preacher is employing all of them while concealing his art and clarifying the complexity of his thoughts in such a way that the congregation feels that his words are spoken truly rather than cleverly and the obscure becomes clear, the complex simple, the difficult easy'.³⁷ As the last part of this quotation makes clear, the main purpose of dialectic is teaching, and this didactic focus makes the discipline a powerful aid in the preacher's mission.³⁸ As Erasmus remarks in book 2 of *Ecclesiastes*, while the preacher is occupied with 'teaching, with persuading, with exhorting, consoling, advising, and admonishing',³⁹ teaching 'is common to all cases'; it is therefore always already implicated in the work of persua-

35 CWE 68:611; ASD V-4:368, ll. 60–61: 'Facultas ratiocinandi fuit ante proditam artem dialecticam.'

36 CWE 68:614; ASD V-4:370, ll. 100–101: 'Sobrium dialectices studium adiuuat naturae vim'. CWE 68: 611; ASD V-4:368, l. 64: 'Non parum tamen conducet in dialecticis a puero fuisse institutum'.

37 CWE 68:472–473; ASD V-4:252, ll. 124–128: 'ita frigidum fuerit eadem apud iudicem aut populum inculcare, quum tamen interim his omnibus vtatur ecclesiastes, sed occultans artem et ratiocinationum argutias sic explanans vt multitudo sentiat vere dici potius quam ingeniose vtque obscura fiant dilucida, inuoluta explanatoria, molesta facilia.'

38 This clearly recalls the work of Agricola and Melanchthon. In the opening chapter of his treatise on dialectic, Agricola had maintained that 'Every speech on any given subject, and indeed every common utterance we use to share our thoughts, seems to have this as its aim and as its primary and essential objective: to teach something to the listener' ('Oratio quaecunque de re quaque instituitur, omnisque adeo sermo, quo cogitata mentis nostri proferimus, id agere, hocque primum et proprium habere videtur officium, ut doceat aliquid eum, qui audit' [*De Inventione Dialectica*, p. 1]). Melanchthon's 1528 encomium on dialectic, meanwhile, argues that dialectic offers 'the way of correctly acquiring knowledge and clearly teaching so that without this instrument no art can be thoroughly known or perceived' ('viam et recte discendi et perspicue docendi, nulla sine hoc instrumento ars penitus cognosci aut percipi potest' [*Corpus Reformatorum* 11:160–161]).

39 CWE 68:500; ASD V-4:272, ll. 536–537: 'Attamen ecclesiastes potissimum versatur in docendo, in suadendo, in exhortando, consolando, consulendo et admonendo.'

sion.⁴⁰ For Erasmus, ‘the word “teaching” has two meanings, for someone who proves by arguments—which is an orator’s chief power—is teaching, and so is someone who imparts a complete knowledge of an art or anything at all.’⁴¹ In this discussion of teaching, we also encounter the crucial role of definition for the first time. Erasmus says that definition ‘holds first place, together with its relatives, description, etymology and glossing’ in the process of teaching.⁴² Like Melancthon’s, Erasmus’ approach to the concept of religious teaching is capacious and inclusive: addressing the understanding requires the work of emotional conviction as well as the resources of reasoning.

Before we proceed any further, it is important to describe the different ways in which Erasmus uses the term ‘definition’ in *Ecclesiastes*. There are four distinct meanings, although these are often combined in practice. The first relates to the ancient rhetorical concept of *status*. This is the main issue in any speech, ‘the point’, Quintilian says, ‘which the orator sees as the most important for him to make and on which the judge sees that he must fix all his attention. ... [O]n this ... the cause will stand or fall.’⁴³ One of these status is the *status definitionis*, when the main issue in a speech or sermon concerns the nature of a thing or idea: if we ask what grace is, for instance, or what characterises repentance.⁴⁴ Secondly, Erasmus considers definition through his discussion of Aristotle’s predicables and predicaments—that is, of the logical categories that allow us to define objects according to certain criteria. It is through the predicables and predicaments, Erasmus says, that ‘whatever pertains to the nature and quality of each thing is made evident.’⁴⁵ Thirdly, definition can be used for amplification when it is combined with other linguistic strategies such as metaphor (Erasmus gives the phrase ‘Adolescence is the bloom of life’ as an example).⁴⁶ Lastly and most importantly, however, definition receives top billing in Erasmus’ extensive discussion of the dialectical *loci* or places of argument, which

40 CWE 68:500; ASD V-4:272, ll. 537–538: ‘docere esse omnium causarum et statuum commune’.

41 CWE 68:675–676; ASD V-4:427, ll. 493–495: ‘Porro docendi verbum bifariam accipitur[.] ... Nam docet qui probat argumentis, quae prima est oratoris virtus, et docet qui tradit artis aut rei cuiuspiam absolutam cognitionem’.

42 CWE 68:676; ASD V-4:427, ll. 500–501: ‘primas tenet definitio cum iis quae illi sunt affinia, descriptione, etymologia et notatione’.

43 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, ed. by H.E. Butler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 3.6.9 ‘orator praecipue sibi obtinendum et iudex spectandum maxime intelligit; in hoc enim causa consistet’.

44 See CWE 68:498–499.

45 CWE 68:591; ASD V-4:350, ll. 616–617: ‘per haec sub oculos venit quicquid ad cuiusque rei naturam et qualitatem attinet’.

46 CWE 68:858; ASD V-5:142, ll. 754–755: ‘“Adolescentia est flos aetatis”, metaphora est’.

are used both for the analysis of Scripture and to generate material for sermons. These are different from the rhetorical places of argument, which derive material from common themes: a sermon in praise of someone could refer, for instance, to their achievements and virtues (attending church regularly, for example, or performing works of charity). The dialectical places, by contrast, address the deeper structures of discourse: how concepts can be classified, and what attributes and properties are connected with them.⁴⁷ Whenever we have to analyse a text or compose a speech, we can run through the list of places for inspiration on how to read or what to say.

In *Ecclesiastes*, Erasmus commends Agricola's treatment of the dialectical places in the *De Inventione Dialectica*, but deems his presentation slightly too complicated for the purpose of training a preacher.⁴⁸ To meet the specific needs of his intended audience, Erasmus compiles a list of *loci* that includes material from Agricola, but also incorporates some of the Aristotelian places as mediated by Cicero and Themistius (see Illustration 1, below).

In Erasmus' list of *loci*, definition occupies first place, and even a brief look at the list illustrates how the places of dialectic can serve as an aid to composition. Let's say I have been tasked with writing an oration on the importance of humility and I am unsure where to start. In this case I could draw, for instance, on the place of 'Etymologia' and begin by noting that 'humility' is related to the Latin word *humus*, or 'ground'. Then I could move on to 'Definition' and say that a humble person keeps their feet on the ground. Then, using the place of 'Contraria', I could argue that a proud person is someone who sits on a high horse. As an 'Exemplum', I might provide the anecdote of a friend who decided to participate in the Kentucky Derby after taking his first two riding lessons. And I might conclude by noting the 'Effecta' of this unfortunate undertaking: a leg shattered in three places that prevented my friend from walking for months.

To return to the definition. The classic Aristotelian method of defining proceeds *per genus et differentiam*, that is, by analysing classes of things and their distinguishing characteristics. In the *Posterior Analytics*, Aristotle argues that 'a word is defined by locating the thing to which it refers in a class of things ... sharing some common features, and then by indicating those features which distin-

47 For a much fuller account of the use of the *loci* in rhetoric and dialectic, see Philip, *The Dialectical Questions—Erotemata Dialectices*, ed. by Jeanne Fahnestock (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 'Introduction', pp. 69–70.

48 '[W]e are training a preacher here, not a rhetorician or dialectician'. CWE 68: 647; ASD V-4:402, ll. 888–889: 'neque enim hic rhetorem aut dialecticum instituimus, sed concionatorem'.

Sunt hi,

Definitio	Exempla
Descriptio	Diffimilia
Etymologia	Pugnantia
Coniugata	Opposita
Genus	Contraria
Species	Privatiua
Differentia	Relatiua
Proprium	Contradictoria
Diuisio	Repugnantia
Partitio	Consequentia
Inductio	Casus siue Euentus
Fictio	Causæ
Exordium	Effecta
Incrementum	Generatio
Summa	Corruptio
Similia	Comparatio

FIGURE 1
 Erasmus, *Ecclesiastes* (Basel: Froben, 1535),
 p. 220
 BAYERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK
 MÜNCHEN, 2 A.GR.B. 376#BEIBD.1, P. 220,
 URN:NBN:DE:BVB:12-BSB10139342-9

guish that thing from others in that class'.⁴⁹ In the famous Aristotelian example, 'man is a rational animal', 'animal' is the 'class of things'—or the genus—and 'rational' is the *differentia* or distinguishing characteristic, since rationality is the attribute that distinguishes man from every other kind of animal. 'Man' is the species. In this example, the *differentia* describes a fundamental quality of man and according to Aristotle, a definition only works if it includes such essential or necessary qualities.⁵⁰

Erasmus is happy to work with the assumption that 'a true definition consists of a genus and a difference constituting a species', but he deliberately dilutes Aristotle's idea that definitions capture the essence of an object with certainty.⁵¹ Erasmus' account of definition is, in fact, much closer to Agricola's in *De Inventione Dialectica*, although as with his use of Melanchthon's observations on proof and amplification, his debt to Agricola remains unacknowledged. Erasmus begins by noting that while 'there is no doubt that each thing has an internal form through which it is what it is and not something else', because 'this generally lacks its own name, we misapply those that come nearest to the nature of the difference; for it is not difficult to find the genus of each

49 *The Routledge History of Philosophy*, vol. 7, ed. by C.L. Ten (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 382 (glossary: 'definition per genus et differentiam').

50 See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I.4.

51 CWE 68:649; ASD V-4:404, ll. 919–920: 'Et verum est quod tradunt dialectici, veram definitionem constare ex genere et differentia speciem constituyente'.

thing.⁵² Revisiting Aristotle's definition of man and finding it deficient, he continues: 'When a true difference fails us, then we have resort to what is closest to it, say to some accidental quality that is present in man alone and absent in no man in so far as he is a man. But if this too fails us, we use the accumulation of many circumstances to accomplish what it was not possible to do with few but effective words.'⁵³ We can't always pin down the key characteristics of an object or idea, Erasmus says, and in these cases we need to resort to alternative methods of definition.

Erasmus' argument clearly recalls Agricola's assertion, in book 1 chapter 5 of *De Inventione Dialectica*, that 'many writers believe that it is impossible to discern the proper and true *differentia* in relation to anything; all we can do is to regard as true the *differentia* that comes closest to the nature of the thing. ... Through a kind of circumlocution or, as it were, by walking around the thing, we produce something that can take the place of the *differentia*; often this involves accumulating many different attributes, all of which have a wider circumference than the object of our definition, but when you put them together they align with each other and create something approximating the essential property of the thing.'⁵⁴ Both Erasmus and Agricola will go on to characterise this roundabout form of definition as a kind of *descriptio*—the term for a rhetorical description that uses circumstantial detail to sketch a subject or person in outline.

52 CWE 68:649; ASD V-4:404, ll. 933–936: 'Nec dubium est quin vnaquaeque res habeat formam internam, per quam est id quod est, et non aliud. Verum ea quoniam fere proprio nomine caret, abutimur iis quae proxime ad differentiae naturam accedunt. Nam cuiusque genus inuenire non est difficile.'

53 CWE 68:650; ASD V-4:406, ll. 954–959: 'Vbi igitur vera differentia nos destituit, ad ea quae sunt illi proxima confugimus, puta ad accidens aliquod, quod soli adest homini et nulli hominum non adest, quatenus est homo.'

Quod si his quoque destituimur, multarum circumstantiarum congerie idem efficimus, quod paucis, sed efficacibus verbis facere non licet.'

54 Agricola, *De Inventione Dialectica* (Cologne: Johann Gymnich, 1539), p. 26: 'putant nonnulli, non cognosci ullius à nobis rei propriam ueramque differentiam: habere autem nos ... pro uera, quae proxima uerae uidetur accedere. ... ambitu quodam & loquendi circuitu aliquid quod locum eius teneat, effingimus, multaque persaepe colligimus, quorum quodque latius pateat, quàm hoc ipsum quod definitur: iuncta tamen aequantur, & proprium quiddam ipsius efficiunt.' (Contractions have been silently expanded.) According to van Gulik, Erasmus 'must have acquired and read' the editio princeps of *De Inventione Dialectica*, though the copy referred to in the Versandliste is probably a quarto edition from 1523 or 1528; Egbertus van Gulik, *Erasmus and His Books*, trans. by J.C. Grayson, ed. by James K. McConica and Johannes Trapman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), p. 220.

This is the point, however, at which Erasmus parts company with Agricola, and with more strictly technical discussions of the definition. Having raised the possibility of an overlap between definition and description, Agricola immediately reinstates the distinction between the two terms: 'description, after all, which is often used by poets and sometimes by orators, is rather prolix, and its task is not to show us what a thing is but, as it were, to put it before our eyes so that we can examine what its qualities are'.⁵⁵ Agricola uses the slightly derogatory Latin term *verbosius* to describe this prolixity; Erasmus, by contrast, embraces the prospect of such verbosity with gusto. That Agricola's distinction between 'what a thing is' and 'what its qualities are' was on Erasmus' mind is apparent from his very first comment on definition, which declares that the preacher is not interested 'in the question "what is it"', but considers things 'from the point of view of quality'.⁵⁶ And he is perfectly clear why this should be so: a good definition 'will lay its whole appearance before the eyes in a sort of portrait in order to impel the spectator either towards love, if an image of virtue is being described, or towards hate, if a vice is being depicted'.⁵⁷ Erasmus has taken Agricola's point and deliberately turned it on its head: he *wants* to set ideas before the audience's eyes and positively demands their emotional and cognitive engagement. This is not an admission of defeat but a deliberate choice: Erasmus regards this softer version of definition, which joins dialectical technique with rhetorical skill, as a more effective instrument of Christian teaching. This means, amongst other things, that he has absolutely no appetite for policing the boundary between definition and description.

Erasmus, then, conceives of definition not as a single, pithy moment of absolute semantic and conceptual clarification. Rather, definition operates in combination with a group of cognate *loci* that can be combined in different configurations.⁵⁸ He summarises this group of persuasive strategies as follows: '[O]ne knows the rationale of the name [of a thing] through etymology, glossing, description, and definition: what it properly signifies in a given case, and

55 Agricola, *De Inventione Dialectica* (1539), p. 27: 'Descriptio enim, quae poëtis crebro, nonnunquam oratoribus in usu est, ea uerbosius rem exprimit, nec in id adhibetur, ut quid sit res, indicet: sed qualis sit, uelut inspiciendam ante oculos ponat.'

56 CWE 68:648; ASD V-4:404, ll. 914–915: 'non in eo quod quid est, sed sub ratione qualitatis'.

57 CWE 68:694; ASD V-4:444, ll. 913–915: 'totam rei speciem velut in tabula depictam ponet ob oculos, ut spectatorem vel in amorem rapiat, si virtutis imago describitur, vel in odium, si vitium depingitur'.

58 '[A]bundant resources of speaking are provided by definition together with its related loci.' CWE 68:696; ASD V-4:446, ll. 958–959: 'non parcam dicendi copiam suggerat definitio cum locis affinis.'

how it differs from kindred terms, and what genus it belongs to, and what form it has by which it is narrowed down from a genus to a particular species, and what property it has.⁵⁹ To these primary definitional resources are added metaphor, simile, and comparison. This rich repertoire of techniques create a vivid, embodied image of an object's properties, which steers the audience's cognitive and affective responses and ultimately aims to guide them towards virtuous action. Erasmus gives an example through a tissue of quotations from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark:

Let the definition be: 'A hypocrite is someone who feigns holiness.' The description is when the Lord paints them with his own colours: 'They spread out their phylacteries,' 'they pray in the corners of the squares' profusely and, by this sham 'they devour the houses of widows, they disfigure their faces,' they give alms announced by a trumpet, then they wash not only their bodies but also their plates, chairs, and vessels.⁶⁰

This is nothing if not 'rather prolix', but of course Erasmus' linguistic expansiveness has a point. The Scripture quotations amplify the base definition in highly evocative detail, creating in the minds of his readers an ever-widening chasm between pious appearance and immoral reality. By the end of the passage, the evils of hypocrisy have indeed been laid before the eyes 'in a sort of portrait' and impelled the reader 'towards hate' of this vice, as knowledge meets emotion in the act of persuasion. But this requires a modification of dialectical techniques of definition as Agricola had described them—a broadening out towards a more holistic understanding of how the *loci* of dialectic and rhetoric cooperate and reinforce each other in the service of homiletic teaching. Erasmus therefore explicitly advises the preacher 'to accommodate these loci to a broader use than do the dialecticians, whose examples are generally quite pedantic. For it is no great matter if we convince someone that what is not an animal is not a man; but he [the preacher] will use the opportunity of this locus [of definition] to remove from the designation "man" all those who are

59 CWE 68:677; ASD V-4:428, ll. 541–544: 'Ergo per etymologiam, notationem, descriptionem ac definitionem cognoscitur ratio nominis, quid proprie declaret in praesenti argumento et quomodo differat a finitimis et cui generi subsit et quam habeat formam qua a genere ad certam speciem arctatur et quid habeat proprium.'

60 CWE 68:696; ASD V-4:446, ll. 942–946: 'Definitio fuerit: Hypocrita est sanctimoniae simulator. Descriptio est quum Dominus illos depingit suis coloribus: *'Dilatant phylacteria sua'*, prolixè *'orant in angulis platearum'*, et hoc fuco *'deuorant domos viduarum, exterminant facies suas'*, dant eleemosynam praecinente tuba, subinde lauant non solum corpora, verum etiam discos, sellas et aeramenta.'

driven by base desires into every kind of crime instead of being governed by right reason. He will say that they are more brutish than the dumb beasts themselves.⁶¹

Erasmus' definitions, then, are not simply tests of truth value: they are miniature dramas of moral deliberation that draw on the processes of formal reasoning and the powerful tools of *enargeia* to strengthen the spiritual judgement of the audience. This, as we have seen, involves the integrated application of dialectic and rhetoric. While Erasmus keeps reminding his readers 'how much material for speaking definition provides,'⁶² he also pushes against a narrow conception of its operations. 'The dialectician adduces but one idea,' he insists, 'but the preacher will find numerous ideas around each locus', in a seamless integration of intellectual and affective elements.⁶³ A skilled preacher, in other words, recalibrates the cognitive instruments of dialectic to make them suitable for the twin task of teaching and persuasion.

What does all of this mean for Erasmus' theory of linguistic representation and communication? In some ways, I think, it is no exaggeration to say that *Ecclesiastes* codifies a new approach to *copia*. This new approach to the 'abundant resources of speaking' serves the needs of theology—a discipline in which the integration of *res* and *verba* is a far more pressing undertaking than it had been in the grammar school setting of his earlier writings. *Ecclesiastes*, I suggest, attempts to consolidate the connection between words and things by combining the elements of dialectic and rhetoric. As Ann Moss has noted, in the original *De Copia* of 1512 and in the 1511 *De Ratione Studii*, the dialectical *loci* play only a minor role. In *De Ratione Studii*, Erasmus confines himself to the perfunctory remark that 'if someone should decide that dialectic be added to the above [course of study], I shall not gainsay him much, provided that he learn his dialectic from Aristotle and not from that prolix breed, the sophists.'⁶⁴

61 CWE 68:693; ASD V-4:443, ll. 875–880: 'Illud in genere admonendum est, ecclesiasten hos locos ad vsum latiore accommodare quam faciunt dialectici, quorum exempla fere suffrigida sunt; non enim magnum est, si persuadeamus non esse hominem quod non est animal, sed huius occasione loci submouebit ab hominis cognomine, quicumque non gubernantur recta ratione, sed prauis cupiditatibus aguntur in omne flagitii genus. Hos dicet ipsis mutis pecudibus esse magis brutos.'

62 CWE 68:694; ASD V-4:444, ll. 908–909: 'Ex his tamen colliget concionator quantam dicendi materiam suppeditet definitio.'

63 CWE 68:694; ASD V-4:444, ll. 909–911: 'Dialecticus vnam modo sententiam adducit ... at ecclesiastes circa quemque locum plurimas inueniet sententias'.

64 CWE 24:670; ASD I-2:118, ll. 2–4: 'Ad haec si quis dialecticem addendam statuet, non admodum refragabor, modo ab Aristotele eam discat, non ab isto loquacissimo sophistarum genere'.

But he would do quite a bit of gainsaying in *De Copia* which, as Moss explains, reserves any consideration of dialectical method until the end of book 2 and then confines discussion to a very brief list of ‘general inferential procedures.’⁶⁵ No examples are given in this, the least copious, section of Erasmus’ work. It is not until the 1534 edition of *De Copia*, as Moss also observes, that Erasmus includes one paragraph of instruction, at least, on how to use the dialectical places of argument: ‘Anyone training with a view to acquiring eloquence will have to look at all the possible topics in turn, go knocking from door to door so to speak, to see if anything can be induced to emerge; but with practice the right ones will come to suggest themselves naturally, without this process being necessary.’⁶⁶

It is no accident, I think, that this dialectically enhanced edition of *De Copia* appeared around the same time that Erasmus was completing his mammoth treatise on preaching. By 1534, the world of liberal arts education looked very different from the disciplinary landscape Erasmus had encountered at the beginning of the century. The biggest change was a growing familiarity among Erasmus’ readers with the manuals of Melancthon and Agricola, who had radically reconfigured the understanding of dialectic and its relationship with rhetoric and grammar. Unlike in 1511 or 1512, by the 1530s, dialectic could no longer be ignored.⁶⁷ This is clear not only from Erasmus’ own writings, but from the works of his interpreters and commentators. In 1539, for instance, Johannes Weltkirchius’ gloss on *De Copia* significantly expanded Erasmus’ discussion of the dialectical *loci* with surveys of their treatment in Aristotle, Agricola, and Caesarius, adding both substance and detail to Erasmus’ account.⁶⁸

65 Ann Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 108.

66 CWE 24:606 [*De Copia*, book 2]; ASD I-6:230, ll. 833–835: ‘Oportebit autem eum qui semet exercet ad eloquentiam singulos excutere locos ac velut ostiatim pulsare, si quid possit elici; vsus efficiet, vt deinceps sponte occurrant.’

67 According to Wilhelm Risse, *Bibliographica Logica* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965), in the 1530s the humanist manuals of Agricola, Melancthon, and Caesarius outsold the scholastic works of Peter of Spain and Paul of Venice for the first time. For more detailed information on these shifting patterns of publication see Katrin Ettenhuber, *The Logical Renaissance: Literature, Argument, and Cognition, 1479–1630* (forthcoming, Oxford University Press, 2023), chapter 1.

68 Johannes Weltkirchius, *Des. Erasmi Roterodami De duplici copia verborum ac rerum commentarii* (Augsburg: Alexander Weissenhorn, 1539), fos. 133r–138r and 164v–169v. Weltkirchius’ commentary suggests that the combined application of rhetorical and dialectical *topoi* was now the norm.

The *Ecclesiastes* of 1535, then, demonstrates a different understanding of how the arts of discourse cooperate and, to some extent, reformulates the relationship between *res* and *verba*. The definition—rooted in dialectic and enhanced by the strategies of rhetorical description—secures doctrinal truth with precision, but also presents an expressively emotive picture of the word made flesh. Both elements are equally necessary for effective religious teaching, as Melancthon had made abundantly clear in the *Elementa Rhetorices* four years earlier.⁶⁹ To illustrate this shift in method, I want to return to the definition of hypocrisy I quoted earlier. In his condemnation of the hypocrites, Erasmus says, Christ ‘paints’ with rhetorical ‘colours’: abstract definitions are enriched with metaphors, examples, and descriptive detail, adding vividness and particularity to make his ideas present to the audience. This is ultimately an act of accommodation: as God walks among us in embodied form, his words meet the capacities of fallen human understanding—he paints a world that we can recognise. But conveying the humanity of Christ in the language of lived historical experience is only one half of the preacher’s task. The other affirms Christ’s transcendent divinity; it returns us from rhetoric to dialectic in order to bring, in Erasmus’ words, ‘the contemplation of individual things’ back into dialogue with the timeless truths of immortal reason and providence. In this endeavour, the definition plays a crucial part once more:

The genus and the whole will remind him to exhort in such a way that we lift our minds from these well-grounded and individual things that are exposed to the senses, to those things that are always the same way and are perceived by reason, not by sense, all the way up to that immense source and author of everything in whom are the eternal exemplars of all things. This procedure will expand the narrowness of our mind, which is contracted and cast down by the contemplation of individual things. It is quite sublime to contemplate this entire world as though it were a single city over which God presides as monarch, that the whole church is a single body or single family, which does not know how to perish.⁷⁰

69 Melancthon makes it clear that his educational reforms, and specifically the strategic combination of dialectic and rhetoric, were designed to address ‘great and challenging questions about civic and ecclesiastical governance’ (‘magnarum et difficilium causarum ... in ecclesia, et in re publica’); *Elementa Rhetorices*, p. 273.

70 CWE 68:697–698; ASD V-4:448, ll. 964–972: ‘A genere ac toto admonebitur ad exhortandum, vt animos nostros ab his munitis ac singularibus, quae sensibus exposita sunt, attollamus ad ea quae semper eodem modo sunt et ratione, non sensu, percipiuntur, vsque ad immensum illum omnium rerum fontem et autorem, in quo sunt aeterna cunctorum exemplaria. Ea res dilatabit angustias animi nostri, qui contemplatione singularium contrahitur ac dei-

The logical category of genus necessarily involves reflections on the abstract and transcendental, on ‘the source and author of everything’ and the eternal idea of which human beings are merely timebound instantiations. We need the dialectical language of definition, of genus and species, to remind us of what lies beyond the senses: an eternal providence whose will can be inferred with the instruments of human reason, at least insofar as it supplies the guiding principles of a virtuous Christian life:

And the preacher will not consider it enough to say that “being capable of reason” is the difference of a man, or that “capable of laughing” is a property of a man, and that someone who is incapable of reason or who is not able to laugh is therefore not a man; rather he will look higher and say that true men are those who are governed, through faith in Christ Jesus, by the spirit of God rather than by reason, that it is proper for a man to recognize his creator and to be capable of being taught evangelical teaching.⁷¹

Erasmus urges caution when it comes to the strength of the analytical faculties; as he notes in *Ecclesiastes*, despite our best efforts to generate reliable definitions, the ‘true difference’ often eludes us. But his scepticism definitely does not rise to the levels of a thinker like Montaigne, who famously re-examined the nature of definitions 50 years or so after Erasmus’ death, in his essay ‘Of Experience’:

Our contestation is verbal. I demaund what Nature, voluptuousnesse, circle and substitution is? The question is of words, and with words it is answered. A stone is a body: but he that should insist and urge; And what is a body? A substance: And what a substance? And so goe-on: Should at last bring the respondent to his Calepine or wittes end. One word is changed for another word, and often more unknowen. ... Wee propose one question, and wee have a whole huddle of them made unto us againe.

icitur. Sublimius est mundum hunc vniuersum tanquam vnam ciuitatem contemplari, cui praesidet monarcha Deus; totam Ecclesiam esse vnum corpus aut vnam familiam, quae nescit interire.’

71 CWE 68:698; ASD V-4:448, ll. 973–978: ‘Nec satis habebit concionator dicere ‘rationis esse compotem’ esse differentiam hominis, aut ‘risibile’ esse proprium hominis, eoque non esse hominem qui rationis sit expers aut qui non sit risibilis; sed altius spectans, dicet eos demum esse homines qui pro ratione gubernantur spiritu Dei, per fidem erga Christum Iesum; homini proprium esse conditorem suum agnoscere et euangelicae philosophiae docilem esse.’

As no event or forme doth wholly resemble another, so doth it not altogether differ one from another.⁷²

Montaigne conceives of definition as a world of infinite regress: as in a dictionary, each attempt to tie down the meaning of an individual word simply refers us to another, proliferating confusion as the sequence of interpretation unfolds. But it is also worth noting that Montaigne presents us with a less than perfect definition here, as of course he knew. 'A stone is a body' is a definition by *genus* alone; it omits the *differentia*. It is the *differentia*, however, that begins to narrow down the options—'a stone is an inanimate body', for instance—and therefore gives us a richer and more nuanced perception of the thing we are seeking to define. Without it, definition produces merely a 'huddle' or confused conglomeration of meanings, where objects appear in vague generic outline, looking neither wholly similar nor altogether different from each other. Erasmus, I have been suggesting, adopts a different perspective. He is realistic about definition's limitations: 'you could scarcely find any definition so carefully fortified', he notes, 'that it is not open to contradiction in some respect if it should meet a disagreeable and somewhat captious interpreter'.⁷³ Nevertheless, he insists that definition is 'especially necessary to theologians'.⁷⁴ This is because for Erasmus the Bible—the prime object of his attention in *Ecclesiastes*—is not simply a giant dictionary where one word hands over to another as in some never-ending hermeneutic relay race, but a map of faith which, for all the difficulties of the journey, allows his audience to keep the *telos* or goal of their efforts firmly in view.

In his instructions to preachers, Erasmus tells us that 'there is a relation' between speech and mental thought, 'between the terms for things and the things themselves'.⁷⁵ The doctrines of Christianity are not just *verba*, but the anchoring *res* in which a doubting mind can find stability; the dialectical *loci*, and above all the definition, articulate this desire for a cognitive and spiritual scaffolding that can support the believer. Here again we hear echoes of Melancthon, who warned that the *loci* of argument should not be deployed casually or arbitrarily: 'they are derived from the deep structures of nature,

72 *Essays written in French by Michael Lord of Montaigne*, trans. by John Florio (1613), sig. 3H1v.

73 CWE 68:651; ASD V-4:406, ll. 974–976: 'Porro vix reperias vllam descriptionem tam accurate communitam, vt non aliqua pateat contradictioni, si contingat parum commodus ac morosior interpres.'

74 CWE 68:684; ASD V-4:436, l. 674: '[De definitione], quae theologis cum primis est necessaria.'

75 CWE 68:711; ASD V-4:460, ll. 273–274: 'inter vocabula rerum et res ipsas est relatio.'

they are the sets and patterns to which all things correspond.⁷⁶ Erasmus is less willing to commit himself than Melanchthon to a precise definition of how ‘the terms for things’ might relate to ‘the things themselves’, but it is undeniable that the discussion about *res* and *verba* has moved on significantly since the original publication of *De Copia*.⁷⁷ Unsurprisingly, Erasmus’ new method is wholly dependent on the Bible’s central matter or *res*: any effort of definitional clarity relies, ultimately, on the dual nature of Christ, the embodied Word that participates in our world but, in doing so, also enables us to extend our being to eternity. Christ is both God and man, and this dual nature makes him available for definition in a way that God the Father is not: complete ontological simplicity and pure essence of being do not lend themselves to the application of a procedure based on identifying the relationships between parts and wholes. Christ, on the other hand, is the ideal object and example of Erasmus’ definitional method. He mediates the eternal truths of divinity, much as the dialectical definition does in Erasmus’ pastoral theology; but he also communicates in the ‘well-grounded’ idiom of human apprehension, stirring the audience’s devotion—like an effective preacher should—with the affective resources of rhetoric. In the conjunction of dialectical outline and rhetorical colour, a compelling portrait of Christ is brought to life, one which teaches and moves in equal measure and integrates understanding and emotion. There is more than a faint echo here of Erasmus’ most famous borrowing from Augustine in *Ecclesiastes*, his observation that ‘nothing is loved except in so far as it is known and ... nothing is known unless it is in some degree loved’.⁷⁸

Despite all these efforts, Erasmus insists, the true *differentia* of Christ remains inaccessible to fallen humanity, not least, as St Paul teaches at Corinthians 13:12, because we continue to see ‘through a glass, darkly’. But while the essence of divinity may be elusive in a metaphysical sense, a preacher equipped with the full resources of dialectic and rhetoric can still endeavour to take the audience, in Erasmus’ words, ‘to what is closest to it’, and inspire the devo-

76 Melanchthon, *De Rhetorica* (1519), p. 71; cited in Moss, *Renaissance Truth and the Latin Language Turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 160: ‘ex intimis naturae sedibus eruti, formae sunt seu regulae omnium rerum’.

77 See Moss, *Printed Commonplace-Books*, pp. 103–105.

78 CWE 68:723; V-4:470, ll. 531–532: ‘nihil amari nisi quadantenus cognitum, rursus nihil cognosci nisi aliqua ex parte amatum’ (for the connection between love and knowledge, see Augustine, *De Trinitate*, book 8). On Erasmus and Augustine, see Hilmar Pabel and Arnoud Visser’s entry for Erasmus in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, ed. by Karla Pollmann and Willemien Otten (Oxford: Oxford University, 2013).

tional commitment that will help them realise the moral dimensions of *imitatio Christi*. And to a man nearing the end of life, that probably seemed like no small thing.

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