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The Defense of Epicureanism in Erasmus' Colloquies: from the 'Banquet' Colloquies to *Epicureus*¹

The Renaissance saw the beginning of a positive re-evaluation in Western thought of the philosophy of Epicurus and his later followers in the ancient world.² The derision Epicureanism had been subjected to already in Greco-Roman antiquity for its alleged atheism, its strictly materialist physics, and its hedonistic psychology and ethics had been compounded by the almost complete ignorance of Epicurus' surviving written works during the Middle Ages. The Renaissance rethinking, which produced a veritable rehabilitation of Epicurus, left aside the physics and theology and concentrated on the psychology and ethics. It started with the Italian humanists, notably Lorenzo Valla, who in 1431 published the first version of his *De Voluptate* ("On Pleasure"), later retitled as *De Vero Bono* ("On the True Good") or *De Vero Falsoque Bono* ("On the True and False Good"). It is likely that Erasmus, who was substantially indebted to Valla's pioneering philological labours, was acquainted with some version of *De Voluptate*, although his own major defense of Epicurean ethics in *Epicureus* is an independent statement and in its conception and argument shows no close indebtedness to Valla's work. However, since Valla had set a notable precedent already a century earlier for Erasmus' defense of Epicureanism, a brief sketch of the ideas set forth in *De Voluptate* is in order; reference will be to the first version since the main line of the argument was left untouched in the later revisions.³

De Voluptate takes the form of a dialogue, with three spokesmen for three different views on the fundamental question of what constitutes the

true good for the individual. The first character, Leonardus, holds to a rather idiosyncratic Stoic position. In true Stoic fashion, he identifies the highest good with moral virtue; however, he is decidedly un-Stoic in his denigration of nature. Nature is cruel and unjust in his view, and has made virtue so difficult to attain that humans are constantly frustrated in their striving for the good, and are therefore more wretched than the animals. The second and far the longest speech is made by Antonius, who offers in turn a rather idiosyncratic brand of Epicureanism which has strong touches of what one might call vulgar Epicureanism and is thoroughly anti-Christian. In orthodox Epicurean fashion, he identifies the human good with pleasure: pleasure alone is in accordance with nature and should in fact be regarded as the ruler of the virtues. However, unlike Epicurus and his disciples, Antonius stresses physical pleasure, including and especially erotic pleasure, which he defends to the extent of advocating adultery and the common sharing by men of women. The monastic ideal of celibacy he rejects, of course, utterly. In concluding his lengthy speech, Antonius insists that the human person is nothing but an animal; hence, any belief in an afterlife with rewards and punishments must be rejected.

Because of the eloquence with which Antonius argues his position, and because of the great length accorded by the author to his speech, it is tempting to regard his argument as the real core of the work as a whole, expressing Valla's own convictions. However, another well-known dialogue by Valla,

De Libero Arbitrio ("On Free Will"), which takes a reasonably orthodox (if not altogether convincing, philosophically or theologically) Christian position on the much-debated question of the freedom of the human will, makes it virtually certain that this interpretation of *De Voluptate* is not tenable, and that in all probability the position taken by the third speaker in the dialogue, Nicolaus, comes closest to stating Valla's own views.⁴ Indeed, Nicolaus claims that Antonius has not been expressing his real opinions but was only speaking in jest—playing the devil's advocate, we might say. Nicolaus himself, too, opts for the Epicurean identification of the truly good with pleasure, inasmuch as the future happiness at which the Christian aims is a kind of pleasure. However, it is this future pleasure alone, the supreme pleasure, which the Christian must strive for; and this goal is achieved only through the practice of the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love. When our mind is undividedly set on this course, towards what is the real happiness, then already in this life it experiences a foretaste of the supreme felicity. Nicolaus rejects the moral-ethical stance of the Stoics; they, according to him, put nature in the place of Christ and desire virtue for its own sake, rather than seeing its connection with God. Nicolaus, then, establishes a strong point of contact between Christian teaching and Epicurean ethics, even though the Epicurean philosophy as a whole is judged by him to be wanting in assuring the human person of true happiness. In its general thrust, his positive, albeit highly selective use of Epicureanism anticipates that of Erasmus a century later.

Erasmus' defense of Epicureanism takes up the entire length of one of his latest *Colloquies*, entitled

Epicureus, but it is already anticipated, albeit only in passing, in two of his so-called 'Banquet' *Colloquies*. The *Colloquies*, appearing in successive revised and expanded editions (the first published in November 1518, the final one, in which *Epicureus* appeared, in March 1533), were among the most popular of Erasmus' works. Erasmus intended that his *Familiarium Colloquiorum Formulae* ("Models for Everyday Conversation") should offer to his readers attractive models for the everyday use of the Latin language, especially one in keeping with his desideratum of polished Latin conversation and writing based on the best classical models. Today, the *Colloquies* are still appreciated for their vivid panorama of men and women of all stations of life in Western Europe of the first three decades of the 16th century and for the cultured and witty dialogues they are made to engage in on a wide variety of social, intellectual, and religious topics. The 'Banquet' *Colloquies*, of which there are six, are thus named because they have a meal as the setting for their dialogues; *convivium* ("banquet" or "feast") indeed occurs in the title of five, and the Greek *poludaitia* (of the same meaning) in that of the sixth.

In the lengthiest two of the 'Banquet' *Colloquies*, *Convivium Religiosum*, "The Godly Feast" (published in 1522), and *Convivium Profanum*, "The Profane Feast," (the final version of which was published in 1522), there are positive references to Epicureanism, often by speakers who espouse Erasmus' positions on other controversial subjects. In Erasmus' earlier works, by contrast, the mentions Epicureanism receives are quite negative.⁵ Thus, in his manual on Christian spirituality, *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, "The Handbook of

the Christian Soldier,” (1503), and even in his far more recent *Antibarbari* (1520), which contains his most passionate defense of the great cultural legacy of Greco-Roman antiquity,⁶ “Epicurean” is a by-word for the vulgar hedonist. It is likely that Erasmus’ editorial work on Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of the Philosophers* in the early 1520’s, leading to the publication in 1523 of the first printed edition, helped him to arrive at a far more favourable interpretation of Epicureanism as a philosophy of ethics.

In *Convivium Religiosum*, there is only one reference to Epicureanism, but its position in this, by far the lengthiest of the ‘Banquet’ *Colloquies*, is significant. As the interlocutors gather in the garden of the house of Eusebius where the banquet is to be held, one of the speakers, Timothy, delightfully surprised, exclaims, “These must be the Epicurean gardens I see.” (*CWE* 39, 178) To which the host Eusebius replies, “This entire place is intended for pleasure—honest pleasure, that is: to feast the eyes, refresh the nostrils, restore the soul.” (178) These remarks, suggestive of the *hêdonê* (pleasure) and *ataraxia* (tranquility of mind) enjoyed by a community of friends who take the Garden of Epicurus in Athens as their model, comes in the early part of the dialogue, after the serious discussion of Christian faith and teaching that dominates much of this *Colloquy* has already started.

In *Convivium Profanum* Epicureanism is given a more persistent voice. This *Colloquy* contains a great deal of debate as to what extent the Church

should regulate its members’ habits of food and eating, but it also has light-hearted banter that offsets the seriousness.⁷ At the beginning, Christian, the host, says that he will serve a meal that is elegant but not luxurious. A bit later on, one of the principal interlocutors, Augustine, exhorts his fellow-guests, saying, “Let’s live now and make ourselves sleek. Let’s be Epicureans now. We’ve no use for Stoic sternness. Farewell, cares! Away with all spite, off with detraction, on with the carefree mind, merry countenance, witty talk.” (*CWE* 39, 135) Christian asks: “Who are these Stoics and Epicureans, Augustine?” (135) To which Augustine replies: “The Stoics are a certain morose, stern, sour set of philosophers who measure man’s highest good by some sort of moral virtue or other. The Epicureans, far different from them, define human happiness by pleasure.” (135) Christian next asks: “Then which are you, Stoic or Epicurean?” (135), and Augustine replies, “I praise Zeno but I follow Epicurus.” (135) The banter continues. Christian tells Augustine: “What you say as a joke, Augustine, not a few practise seriously nowadays, being philosophers only with respect to cloak and beard,” (135) with Christian adding, “What’s more, they surpass even the dissolute in luxury.” (135) Here, in a spirit of jest, the stereotype of vulgar Epicureanism has been permitted to surface, as also happens later on when Augustine, again jokingly, equates an appreciation of gourmet cooking with listening to Epicurus. (138) Still, the voice of authentic Epicureanism has been heard, while those Stoics who carry their philosophy of life to an extreme of ascetic rigour have been disapproved of as most unsuitable models for the Christian way of life. In that spirit, Augustine says further on: “As for me. I scorn the Stoics and their fasts. Epicurus I

praise and esteem above the Cynic Diogenes, who lived on raw vegetables and plain water.” (139) Later on, it is the ‘Epicurean’ Augustine, not the more cautious and conservative Christian, who voices clearly Erasmian views on the fasting and the dietary restrictions imposed by the Church.

By the time Erasmus published *Epicureus* in 1533 in his final edition of the *Colloquies*, he had been engaged for many years in a theological controversy with Luther, which had grown into an increasingly acrimonious confrontation between these two men so diametrically different in worldview and temperament. Erasmus had taken a clear stand in his treatise of 1524, *De Libero Arbitrio* (“On Free Will”), against Luther’s radically pessimistic view of human nature and humankind’s fall into sin.⁸ For Erasmus, the human person, despite the fall into sin, still possesses a real capacity to make a free choice to do what is good, even though the exact operation of this faculty in relation to God’s grace must remain veiled in mystery. In his reply, fittingly entitled, *De Servo Arbitrio* (“On the Enslaved Will”), Luther restated in the most uncompromising terms his position regarding the human person’s total bondage in sin and his or her utter incapacity to will the good, and consequently, his conviction of the absolute sovereignty of God’s grace.

Luther’s response to Erasmus’ *De Libero Arbitrio* is both rhetorically and theologically impressive. Contrary to what one might expect, it is Luther who makes the far greater number of classical references, whereas Erasmus quotes but rarely, and even then from obscure authors; and his mythological allusions are very obscure.⁹ Only a

few pages into his treatise, Luther already chides Erasmus for his irenic style of argumentation, as though the Christian faith is not sustained by fundamental convictions and “assertions.” “For it is not the mark of a Christian mind to take no delight in assertions: on the contrary, a man must delight in assertions or he will be no Christian.”¹⁰ Both men, of course, draw continually on their intimate knowledge of the Scriptures, from which they quote liberally, but it is Luther’s use of Scripture, for instance in his penetrating exegeses of key-passages in the Pauline Epistles, which supports the stronger theological argument; Erasmus’ almost interminable citation from Scripture, on the other hand, strikes one as being based on a weak hermeneutic of a too frequently de-contextualized proof-texting. Most strikingly perhaps, as has been noted by Watson and Drewery, Erasmus, despite his well-known distaste for Scholastic subtleties, thinks essentially along traditional Scholastic lines in his dualistic distinction between the realm of ‘nature’ and that of ‘supernature’, “in terms of which the relation between man and God, human nature and divine grace, is construed. Luther, on the other hand, takes much more seriously a quite different dualism, namely, that of God and the devil.”¹¹

However, Luther did more than take a strong stand on a complex theological question; he also launched a bitter invective against Erasmus’ Christian humanist convictions, which, according to Luther, fatally compromised the Christian gospel. In this spirit, Luther brands Erasmus with the stigma of Epicureanism and all this stood for according to the hostile stereotype, which regarded it as the quintessence of anti-Christian paganism. As Luther puts it at one point to Erasmus, “You breathe the

vast drunken folly of Epicurus.”¹² This slur comes in the most intense passage of the treatise, where at one point Luther even excitedly lapses into German.¹³ In his reply to Luther, the *Hyperaspistis*, Erasmus showed that he had been really stung: he cites the insult, “Epicurean,” a dozen times in the first book as an incredible defamation on Luther’s part, and he also wrote Luther a letter, asking why he had lied so scandalously.¹⁴

But Luther would not relent.¹⁵ “Epicurean” became increasingly his epithet for those who refused to accept the gospel he preached. Epicureans are really atheists, he claims; Erasmus is the successor of the ancient Epicureans, and like them, *atheos*, “godless.” An Epicurean has no need for faith in God because he lives like an animal; he denies life after death and therefore lives only for the pleasures of the day. Even after Erasmus’ death, Luther would call him *Epicurismus* (“The Supreme Epicurean”), who lived without God and died in the same way. Indeed, Luther began to see what he regarded as the pestilential spread of Epicureanism as an apocalyptic sign pointing to the end of the world. The Roman Catholic Church was, for him, infected with Epicureanism. In typically unrestrained imagery, he calls the pope, who is also the Antichrist, an Epicurean sow, and his court his litter. However, as Marjorie Boyle notes significantly, in the rash of Luther’s texts which inveigh against Epicureanism during Erasmus’ life-time, Luther brands only one contemporary by name: Erasmus.¹⁶

For Erasmus, therefore, there were deeply personal issues at stake in the writing and publication of *Epicureus*. *Epicureus* takes the form of a dialogue

between Hedonius (literally, “The Man Concerned With Pleasure”), who represents Erasmus’ point of view, and Spudaeus (“The Serious Man”), who represents a loosely Stoic point of view, much as Leonardus does in Valla’s *De Voluptate*. Quite tellingly and very much in line with Erasmus’ thoroughly Christian humanism, there is no third interlocutor, as in Valla’s *De Voluptate*, who represents vulgar Epicureanism.

Spudaeus stands for an extremely ascetic form of Christianity always ready to put great stress on suffering, self-denial, and self-sacrifice. As he puts it, “Christians are closer to Cynics because they wear themselves thin with fasting and lamenting their sins. Either they are poor or their kindness towards the needy brings them to poverty; they’re oppressed by the stronger and scorned by the multitude. If pleasure brings happiness, this sort of life seems as far as possible from pleasure.” (*CWE* 40, 1075)¹⁷ This claim by Spudaeus regarding the spiritual tenor of the Christian life comes right after Hedonius has stated that Epicurus was perfectly right in holding that human happiness is the product of pleasure and in judging that life to be most blessed which has the most pleasure. In fact, Hedonius asserts, in the strongest possible terms, that “there are no people more Epicurean than Christians living a godly life” [*nulli magis sunt Epicurei quam Christiani pie viventes*] (1075). After Spudaeus’ sombre characterization of the Christian life, Hedonius gets him to agree with the saying in the Roman playwright Plautus that “[n]othing is more wretched than a bad conscience”—and its corollary that “nothing is more blessed than a good one.” (1075-1076) Christians, Hedonius reminds Spudaeus, have their sins washed away and

therefore enjoy a clean conscience. When Spudaeus interjects, "Really, you present us with a paradox topping all the paradoxes of the Stoics. Do those whom Christ called "blessed" because they mourn live a life of pleasure?" (1076) To which Hedonius replies, "To the world they appear to mourn, but in fact they are filled with pleasure and live enjoyably, smeared all over with honey." (1086)

Hedonius continues by making and defending a distinction between true and false pleasures, saying that Epicurus would not embrace pleasures which left pains in their wake that were greater and more lasting. The highest pleasures, he underlines with Spudaeus agreeing, are of the mind. In fact, the mind has the power of removing the feeling of physical pain and rendering pleasurable what is in itself bitter. Hedonius points to the inconveniences and pains lovers are willing, even eager, to suffer for the sake of being close to their beloveds. If then, he goes on to say, there is so much power in human love (by which, of course, he means erotic love), how much stronger must be that heavenly love which proceeds from the spirit of Christ? Later, he reiterates his claim that the righteous are Epicurean in the true sense of the word: "But if people who live enjoyably are Epicurean, none are more Epicurean than the righteous and the godly." (1086) In fact, Hedonius audaciously suggests that the name of "Epicurus," "Helper," is supremely applicable to Christ himself. (1086)

The lengthy discussion of what has sometimes been called Epicurus' hedonistic calculus, i.e., the measuring of the different pleasures (whether physical or mental or both) in relation to one another, in terms of their healthful or non-healthful

effects on body and /or soul, is inadequate by modern critical-exegetical standards. Thus, the rather technically phrased but fundamental distinction made by Epicurus between *katastematic* (restful, stable) and *kinematic* (restless, unstable) pleasures—with only the former being productive of *ataraxia* (tranquility of mind), the ultimate desideratum in Epicurus' psychology and ethics—is not made by Hedonius, although he works with an approximation of such a distinction in his talk of "true" or "real" pleasure(s). More troublesome for a Christianized Epicurean ethics is that Epicurus understood pleasure, both physical and mental, simply as the absence of pain—again, both physical and mental. As John Rist puts it, "All the ancient sources agree that Epicurus identified unsurpassable pleasure, the fullness of pleasure, which he called a stable condition of the flesh and a confident expectation for the future on this score, with a complete absence of pain and anxiety."¹⁸ Epicurus' materialist psychology, with its distinction between *katastematic* and *kinematic* pleasures, impacts in a fundamental way on his ethics, and it is difficult to see how his basic understanding of pleasure could be reconciled with Christian teaching. Thus again, it is not surprising that this minimalist, distinctly Epicurean conception of pleasure is not touched upon in *Epicureus*. (It will be recalled that in Valla's *De Voluptate*, Nicolaus, the 'Christian Epicurean' there, had judged that the Epicurean philosophy as a whole is wanting in assuring the human person of true happiness.)

In the conclusion of *Epicureus*, Hedonius offers his own version and interpretation of one of the many versions of the ancient myth of Tantalus in order to point to the inevitable lot of someone who

lives a life of pursuit of false pleasures. Tantalus was granted by Jupiter to seat himself at a banquet that proffered all the physical and sensual pleasures imaginable. However, Hedonius says, "in the midst of all these [pleasures] he sits sad, depressed, and anxious, neither merry nor touching anything set before him." (1086). The reason is that "above his head, as he reclines at the table, a huge stone hangs by a hair and seems about to fall." (1086) Still, the traditional Epicurean or, for that matter, the Stoic allegorizing of the myth does not have the final word for Hedonius. The Gospel, unlike the Greek myth, offers the assurance of salvation to all those who repent of their sins. Even the worst sinner, at the end of a wasted life, will thus receive God's mercy. As Hedonius puts it in the concluding sentence of *Epicureus*, "If he cries with his whole heart, 'have mercy on me, God, according to the multitude of thy tender mercies,' the Lord will still take away the Tantalean stone, will grant him the sound of joy and gladness, and his bones broken by contrition shall rejoice for sins forgiven." (1088) Although Luther does not appear to have been mollified by the strongly evangelical note on which the *Epicureus* ends,¹⁹ these closing words, in my judgment, more than anything else, make the *Epicureus* one of the finest statements of Erasmus' Christian humanism.

Erasmus' extrapolation of the ethics from Epicurus' full philosophical system, with its strictly materialist atomism and its denial of divine providence, does not commend itself to our modern style of exegesis and commentary.²⁰ Epicurus, after all, held that true happiness, i.e. *ataraxia* or tranquility of mind, was possible only if the individual was assured, as he or she ideally would be by Epicurus' physics

and cosmology, that the universe was governed by immutable physical laws, that there were no gods (or God) capable of directing, or even periodically intervening in, the workings of the cosmos, and that the human soul, being entirely of physical substance and therefore mortal, did not need to fear any afterlife with its possible terrors of punishment after death. However, Erasmus' highly selective appropriation of Epicurus' ethics was perfectly in keeping with his professed desire to accentuate and even to eulogize the aesthetically, morally and intellectually edifying elements in the West's Greco-Roman heritage wherever he could find them. Thus, in the bold words of Eusebius in the *Convivium Religiosum*, he was able to express his fundamental conviction that whatever is good, even if its provenance is non-Christian, merits the deepest respect from Christians: "[P]erhaps the spirit of Christ is more widespread than we understand, and the company of saints includes many not in our calendar." (*CWE* 39, 192).²¹

NOTES

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the annual meetings of the Atlantic Classical Association (October 2006) and the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies (May 2007). Except for two minor alterations, I have quoted from the translations of Erasmus' *Colloquies* in the *Collected Works of Erasmus* [henceforth cited in the text as *CWE*], volumes 39 and 40, translated and annotated by Craig R. Thompson, Toronto / Buffalo / London: University of Toronto Press, 1997. Thompson's general introduction as well as his introductions to

the individual *Colloquies* are invaluable. A good overview of all six so-called 'Banquet' *Colloquies* is provided by Ryan V. Lawrence, "Erasmii Convivia: The Banquet Colloquies of Erasmus," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, N.S. 8 (1977), 201-215.

² Useful introductions to this subject are the articles by D.C. Allen, 'The Rehabilitation of Epicurus and His Theory of Pleasure in the Early Renaissance,' *Studies in Philology* 41 (1944), 1-15, and Marie Delcourt and Marcelle Derwa, "Trois Aspects Humanistes De L'Épicurisme Chrétien," *Colloquium Erasmianum*, Mons: Centre Universitaire de l'État, 1968, 119-133; this article discusses Valla's *De Voluptate*, Thomas More's *Utopia*, and Erasmus' *Epicureus*. For those interested in the reception of Lucretius, Epicurus' great Roman disciple of the first century B.C. and the author of the magnificent didactic-epic poem, *De Rerum Natura* ("On the Nature of Things")—and far better known actually even during the Renaissance than Epicurus, who, of course, wrote in Greek and most of whose works survived only in fragments—much detail is provided in the recent book by Valentina Proserpi, "*Di soavi licor gli orli del vaso*": *La fortuna di Lucrezio dall'Umanesimo alla Controriforma*. Torino: Nino Aragno Editore, 2004.

³ A detailed overview of Valla's *De Voluptate* is provided by Paul Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Italian Renaissance*, Stanford, CA : Stanford University Press, 1964, 27-33. Also recommended is the concise but subtle analysis of *De Voluptate* in the article by Delcourt and Derwa, 120-123, mentioned in n. 2.

⁴ This is the interpretation of Kristeller, 30-31, which I think is correct.

⁵ On Erasmus' negativity towards Epicureanism in his earlier works, see Margaret O'Rourke Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries. Erasmus on Pursuit of Wisdom*. Toronto / Buffalo / London: University of Toronto Press, 1981, 72. This, I should add, is one of the very best works that has appeared over the past few decades on Erasmus' complex relationship with the Greco-Roman classics, which, as will become clear in this paper, was a major contributing factor to his bitter controversy with Luther.

⁶ Erasmus' defense, in *Antibarbari* and other works, of the classical heritage of the West is a major theme of my article, "Erasmus' Christian Humanist Appreciation and Use of the Classics," *Christianity and the Classics, The Acceptance of a Heritage*, edited by Wendy Helleman, Lanham-London: University Press of America, 1990, 91-107. Again highly recommended is the study by Marjorie Boyle mentioned in the previous note.

⁷ On the growing liveliness and literary sophistication of the discussion and the increasingly sharper delineation of the interlocutors in *Convivium Profanum* as it went through its successive editions, see the article by Lawrence V. Ryan, "Art and Artifice in Erasmus' *Convivium Profanum*," *Renaissance Quarterly* 31 (1978), 1-16.

⁸ *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, The Library of Christian Classics, Volume XVII, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969, offers excellent annotated translations, which I have used, of Erasmus' *De Libero Arbitrio* (translated by E. Gordon Rupp and A.N. Marlow) and Luther's response to it, *De Servo Arbitrio* (translated by Philip S. Watson and B. Drewery). It will be cited as *Luther / Erasmus*. The lengthy "Introduction" by Marlow and Drewery is also greatly recommended.

⁹ As noted by Marlow and Drewery in the "Introduction," *Luther / Erasmus*, 30.

¹⁰ *Luther / Erasmus*, 105.

¹¹ *Luther / Erasmus*, 14.

¹² *Luther / Erasmus*, 113.

¹³ "Das ist zu viel." *Luther / Erasmus*, 113, n. 17.

¹⁴ On Erasmus' response to *De Servo Arbitrio*, see Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle (see note 5), 69.

¹⁵ For all the details on Luther's continued attacks on Erasmus, see Boyle, 69-71.

¹⁶ Boyle, 71.

¹⁷ Spudaeus' impression of the ancient Cynic philosophers is quite wrong. The life-style of the Cynics was indeed, in many respects, very austere, satisfied as they were with the minimum in food, clothing, and shelter needed to sustain life. However, this was the consequence of their interpretation of the ideal of living in accordance with nature (an ideal which they shared with the Stoics and even, for that matter, with the Epicureans.) However, the Cynics were what we might call counterculturists who deliberately flouted any conventions they judged went beyond the requirements of nature. Numerous anecdotes about them (above all, Diogenes the Cynic) circulated in antiquity showing how their behaviour defied, for instance, deference to authority and the proprieties pertaining to gender and sex .

¹⁸ John Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972, 106 (in chapter 6, "Pleasure"). For additional discussion of Epicurus' understanding of pleasure and of its central position in his ethics, see Philip Mitsis, *Epicurus' Ethical Theory: The Pleasures of Invulnerability*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

¹⁹ For the details, see Boyle, 89: "Epicureus' settled nothing. In the year following its publication, Luther only accelerated his campaign against Epicureanism."

²⁰ If I may permit myself somewhat of an excursus here, it is worth emphasizing that Erasmus' frequently de-contextualized appropriation of

the classics can be heuristically fruitful. I discuss a striking example in my aforementioned paper (see n. 6), 102-103. In his treatise on the ideal curriculum of study for children, *De Ratione Studii* ("On The Method of Study"), published in 1511, Erasmus raises the question whether certain texts which contain morally unsuitable material for young, immature minds may still have pedagogical value. (*CWE*, 24, 683-687) His answer is that, with skillful and carefully pitched commentary from the teacher, important moral lessons can be imparted, and he offers Vergil's *Second Eclogue* as an example. This pastoral poem's erotic (i.e. homoerotic) theme need not be brought into focus; instead, the *Second Eclogue* can be studied and appreciated by the young pupil as a telling demonstration of how two persons, with sharply opposed backgrounds, tastes, and values, represented in *Eclogues* II by the rustic Corydon and the sophisticated Alexis, can never form a genuine and lasting friendship. This, in fact, is also the primary message this pastoral poem would have carried for the ancients, the homoerotic motif being only secondary, for Virgil's pastoral is an adaptation of *Idyll* XI of the Hellenistic poet Theocritus, where the erotic motif is heterosexual but where the hopeless prospect of a reciprocated love for the two ill-matched central figures, the giant Cyclops and the sea-nymph Galatea, is basically the same, except that in Vergil's poem Corydon's fruitless courting in his monologue addressed to his beloved Alexis has little of the almost farcical incongruity which characterizes the Cyclops' wooing of Galatea and is, instead, infused with typically Vergilian pathos: it is these similarities and contrasts between Vergil and Theocritus (some of whose pastorals are, in fact, homoerotic) that would have impressed themselves on ancient readers, not the homo /hetero divergence.

²¹ The valorization of the ancients is raised to virtual hyperbole a bit further on in *Convivium Religiosum* (194), when the interlocutor Nephalius, after the discussion has dwelt on the piety and righteousness of Socrates, exclaims: "An admirable spirit, surely in one who had not known Christ and the Sacred Scriptures. And so, when I read such things of such men, I can hardly help exclaiming, 'Saint Socrates, pray for us.'"