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Poverty and Richness of Arguments in Lorenzo Valla

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Abstract

At first glance, in Valla’s thinking, his ‘poor’ conception of metaphysics seems to contrast with his appreciation of the ‘richness’ of rhetoric, as opposed to the indigence of dialectic. However, poverty can be understood in two senses: on the one hand, it designates a lack, even an insufficiency; on the other, it expresses the search for something simple, even essential. So, poverty, like nakedness (Séris 2021)¹, is a concept with an opposite polarity. What is elementary can therefore be fundamental. Consequently, how can we understand, in Valla’s thought, the link between the ontological reduction of all transcendentals to the *res* and the opulence of rhetoric? To try to answer this question, this paper seeks to analyze the ambivalent nature of the opposition between poverty and wealth in order to reinterpret it in the opposition between simplicity and complexity. It is not certain that gain will be found on the side that we would expect to find it.

Keywords: Dialectic; rhetoric; inventio; belief; consuetudo; being

Poor things

In his *Repastinatio totius dialectice cum fundamentis universe philosophie*², Valla adopts the agenda of the medieval treatises on logic, dealing in the first book with the properties of terms, categories and transcendentals which are the most common notions

¹ See also Séris (2024) in this same issue.

² According to Zippel (Valla 1982: ix–lxvii) there are three versions of Valla’s *Repastinatio* and consequently three titles, meaning a new treatment of dialectic, i.e., logic (*reconcinnatio*, repair; *retractatio*, new treatment) and *repastinatio*, re-ploughing). Valla follows the model of Peter of Spain, *Summaries of Logic*, because the first book concerns categories, transcendental terms, predictables; the second book deals with propositions and arguments; the third book analyzes syllogisms and different kinds of arguments as dilemmas, sorites. But Valla introduces unusual topics about theology, natural philosophy, ethics. His critical remarks against scholastic logic manifest an indigent knowledge and limited interest. See Copenhaver & Lauta in Valla (2012: vii–l).

that transcend categories. In the medieval tradition, the transcendentals (*ens, unum, res, aliquid, verum, bonum*) express the different meanings of *ens*, but they have the same extension as *ens* (Nauta 2009: 15-48; Leinkauf 2017: 345-363). As the most universal concepts, the transcendentals have a close relationship with transcendence, since they can also be used to refer to divinity, although in a different way (Aertsen 2012: 657-705).

The concept of transcendentals is therefore a fundamental metaphysical and theological topic. In this respect, Valla reduces the six transcendentals to a *res*, which designates not only his conceptual priority, but also his sovereignty in the domains of universal and primitive notions on which the entire metaphysical network is built, in close connection with the cognitive conditions of the human being (Mariani Zini 2001: 275-291). However, as historiography often points out, Valla's conception does not depend on a metaphysical framework, but on a grammatical and linguistic approach (Nauta 2009: 48-81; Aertsen 2012: 569-576). According to Valla, *ens* is a participle that can be resolved into 'that thing which is' (*id quod est*), by presupposing the noun *id*. Moreover, 'that which is' can be resolved into 'that thing which is' (*ea res que est*) because *id* means 'this thing' or 'that thing' (Valla 2012: I.1.2, 19-27).

So, *res* is the most universal transcendental. In fact, from a theological point of view, Valla considers that only God *is*, while all things are not *esse* in their own right (I.1.2, 24-25). Valla's conception is therefore the result of a semantic analysis based on the rules of language in common usage because he was convinced that ignorance of language led to the invention of unintelligible philosophical concepts (Tavoni 1984; Monfasani 1994; Laffranchi 1999; Nauta 2009). The philosophical use of language must therefore be reduced and corrected assuming the principle of a virtuous poverty.

However, *res* involves two other features. First, *res*, from a legal point of view, designates the legal quarrel and, in a specific sense, it defines the first *status causae*, namely the doubt about the very existence of an *x*, which is the object of the legal dispute. The other two questions concern the definition and qualification of the *res*. A clear example is the following: is there a corpse (thing)? Is it murder (definition)? Is it self-defence? (qualification). For Valla as well as for Cicero and Quintilian, the doubt about *res* is very important, since before any controversy can take place, it is necessary to determine whether there is anything that can be discussed. So, *res* refers not only to the most general term, but also to any event, state, fact, or action, which is why Valla prefers to use Aristotle's term *pragmata* instead of *onta* (Valla 2012: I.1.3, 20-21).

Then, Valla proposes the following etymological derivation: *ratio* derives from *reor* (to have opinions), which arises from *res*. In fact, our cognitive and linguistic power can invent credible opinions about things, given precisely the things themselves, as they present themselves to our rational nature. Such a distinction, which Valla takes in part from Cicero, may also recall the conception of transcendental *res* in Henry of Ghent's thought. Henry drew a distinction between *res*, derived from *reor*, meaning the most universal term in a pre-scientific state of knowledge, where the question of the essence and existence of the thing had not yet arisen, and a sense of *res* as *res ratificata*, which is equivalent to *ens*, as the object of essential knowledge (Henry of Ghent 1981: 174-175 [a.34, q.2]).

Valla's thinking is obviously different, and undoubtedly more superficial, but the link *res/reor* from *res* itself expresses, it seems to me, two epistemological and metaphysical features. Valla's intention is to avoid any form of radical skepticism according to which we would have mere opinions. On the contrary, he would legitimate the guaranteed nature of our beliefs about things. Their knowledge depends on our cognitive and linguistic structures, but this does not mean that it is merely arbitrary or conventional. Thus, if we were to point to a skeptical influence in Valla's thought, it would be rather dependent on the academic philosophy of Cicero, which provides instruments for submitting our beliefs to procedures of proof. So, the analysis of Valla's *res* is not only linguistic and grammatical but involves epistemological and metaphysical features that may indeed seem at first glance poor, reductive and simplistic, but which reflects a coherent conception.

Richness of rhetoric

However, historiography has emphasized the opulent nature of rhetoric in Valla's thought, which is seen as a 'rhetorization' of dialectic. There are good arguments for this reading. Firstly, Valla often praises the orator, while scorning the philosopher: the former is more learned than the latter. Secondly, the comparison of rhetoric and dialectic seems to denigrate the latter. In the proem to the second book of the *Repastinatio*, Valla writes:

The dialectician uses the syllogism 'nude' (so to speak), while the orator's is clothed, armed and decked out with gold, purple and jewels, so that a wealth of rules – many and great – must be acquired by him if he wants to be viewed as an orator. I should almost say that *poverty befits the dialectician* since the orator wants not just to teach, as the dialectician does, but also to entertain and excite, and, for the purpose of winning, these are sometimes more important than the proof itself. And yet the orator's goal is not always simply to win, nor is he always involved in litigation; he also gives counsel in favour of what is honourable and what contributes to a good and happy life, as he counsels against what it is disgraceful and harmful – praising or blaming what deserves praise or blame³. (Valla 2012: II.2, proem, 2-5)

Poverty and wealth, as well as nudity and elegance, distinguish the dialectic from rhetoric. The *douitia* of rhetoric does not mean luxury, but its threefold purpose: to teach, to move, and to please. The orator therefore has a public and political function, whereas the dialectician confines himself to teaching or conducting dialogues *inter pares*. Their discourse takes place in a small, familiar circle, with friends or fellow students:

³*Dialecticus utitur nudo (ut sic loquar) syllogismo, orator autem vestito armatoque, auro et purpura ac gemmis ornato, ut multae sint ei et magnae praeceptorum comparandae divitiae si videri volet orator. Dialecticum, prope dixerim, paupertas decet quoniam non tantum vult docere orator, ut dialecticus facit, sed delectare etiam ac movere, quae nonnunquam ad victoriam plus valent quam ipsa probatio. Tametsi non ad solam semper victoriam tendit, neque semper versatur in litibus, sed in suadendis honestis et ad bene beateque vivendum pertinentibus dissuadendisque turpibus atque inutilibus - in laudandis vituperandisque quae laudem mereantur aut vituperationem.*

And just as we dress one way to go out in public, another way when doing something at home, one costume for the magistrate, another for the private person – *the reason being that one must respect the public gaze* – so also the dialectician, whose speech is domestic and private, will not try for that elegance and grandeur of expression sought by the orator, who must speak before the whole community and whose public audience is much to reckon with, requiring much skill besides in matters of great import and needing that most difficult science of managing emotions, as well as experience in all sort of business, knowledge of every people and every record of events and – above all – living with integrity, with a certain exceptional dignity of mind and excellence of body and voice, the reason being that the orator is like the public's guide and leader⁴. (Valla 2012: II.2, proem, 4-5)

However, although the speaker shines in his oratory, Valla points out that it is more a question of behavior according to the circumstances than of an essential difference. Therefore, in an *inter pares* dialectic dispute or in teaching, rhetorical volubility would be inappropriate. Indeed, the richness of rhetoric and the poverty of dialectic can also have a somewhat different meaning. Moreover, there is an obvious contradiction between the project of the *Repastinatio*, which aims precisely at the simplification of dialectic, and the praise of the opulence of rhetoric, especially as Valla criticizes the language of contemporary philosophers, reproaching them for using the abstruse and superfluous language. There is an alternative: either the theory and practice of argumentation aims to produce precise arguments, according to a principle of economy, and in a simple language devoid of ambiguity; or it aims to elaborate ambivalent arguments in an equivocal language, according to the criterion of variety.

Although Valla acknowledges the pugnacious nature and persuasive purpose of rhetoric, he stresses, like Quintilian, that the orator must be an honest man. Thus, the real tension lies in the relationship between things and words: what we know is a *res* which is something indeterminate. Words, especially our descriptions and concepts, must serve to give a credible determination of the thing itself. That is why we need to appreciate the weight of terms: *Magnopere verborum consideranda pondera* (Valla 2012: II.3.14, 352-353), otherwise we do not know what we are saying, and we cannot really express what we are thinking. So, the superficial richness of scholastic language is a source of ineptitude and childishness. As Valla highlights:

There are many problems like this (i.e. cosmic time's conception), in every part of philosophy, that philosophers concern themselves with, where words are generally their worry, so that sometimes philosophers may be seen to have come down to my level and the art of grammar – operating right in the middle of grammar,

⁴*Atque sicuti nos alio vestitu utimur cum prodimus in publicum, alio cum agimus aliquid intra domum, itemque alio cum magistratus, alio cum privati sumus – propterea quod serviendum est oculis populi – ita dialecticus, cuius domesticus et privatus est sermo, non eum captabit dicendi nitorem eamque maiestatem quam captabit orator, cui apud universam civitatem dicendum et multum publicis auribus dandum est, cui, insuper, adesse debet multa magnarum rerum peritia, perdifficilis quaedam tractandorum animorum scientia, usus complurium negotiorum, omnium populorum omnisque memoriae gestorum notitia et – ante omnia – sanctitas vitae, ac eximia quaedam animi dignitas et corporis vocisque praestantia, siquidem orator est velut recto ac dux populi.*

in fact, and seeming to prop up their constructions with words, as if they were pillars⁵. (Valla 2012: II.3.14, 360-362)

Therefore, the *doutitia* of rhetoric seems to contradict the project of *Repastinatio*, which asserts a strong critique of the *ineptia*, *cavillationes*, and *stultitiae* of scholastic language. Moreover, another objection concerns the nature of dialectic, which Valla reduces here to friendly conversation, or the transmission of knowledge from master to pupil. Dialectic thus seems to be limited to dialogue, far removed from the public engagement of city assemblies. Nevertheless, the Aristotelian dialectic did not overlook the public function of dialectic, since any problem could be debated dialectically. A peaceful and friendly relationship with the teacher was a decisive pedagogical condition for removing the pupil from the circle of childhood and educating him for civil life.

Thus, dialogue is initially a *sermo privatus*, but its function is to create a public space for discussion where all the objects of controversy can be debated dialectically. Valla uses dialogue in one of his important works, *De vero et falso bono* (Valla 2004), which concerns the controversial definition of the true good. It is therefore a text of moral philosophy and takes the form of a friendly dialectical dialogue between several antagonistic points of view. Consequently, the devaluation of private dialectical discourse would contradict Valla's own practice. Moreover, philological work, such as his critique of falsity of *Donation of Constantine* (Valla 2007), can play an important political role.

So, the praise of richness rhetoric is ambiguous. All in all, is it not then incongruous to write a work on dialectics by criticizing its tasks so radically? In fact, if we read the preface to the second book to the end, we will see that Valla relativizes the previous critical remarks, and even proposes a positive appreciation:

But I say this not to take anything away from the art that I am discussing, which I should and can commend: to do otherwise would be thoughtless or spiteful and would serve one's own task badly. Yet how can I hide what I feel and lie in the face of those I have undertaken to instruct with love of a fatherly kind? Can I behave like someone false and treacherous? So the first reason for what I have done is my wish to tell the honest truth, and the second is to give those people themselves hope of grasping this science quickly and easily – hope that I truly can give because *I find no study quicker or easier than dialectic, a science that serves other, greater science, a science that anyone may learn well in scarcely more months of study than the years that grammar requires....Therefore, let us discuss dialectic as the pure and modest maiden who prizes not her poverty (for she lacks nothing) but her chaste and holy simplicity above those shadowy riches and the pleasure of the piazza – not to say the bordello*⁶. (Valla 2012: II.2, proem, 6-7)

⁵Plurima sunt huiusmodi quibus se passim philosophi exercent in omni philosophiae parte, plerunque in vocabulis occupati, ut nonnumquam ad grammaticam mihi descendisse – immo in media grammatica versari, et aedificia sua verbis, tanquam columnis, fulcire videantur.

⁶Neque vero hoc dico ut arti de qua loquor, quam commendare et possum et debeo, derogem; quod foret vel imprudentis vel maligni et de opere suo male merentis. Verum qui possim dissimulare quod sentio et apud eos quos erudiendos patria quadam caritate suscepi mentiri? Res et vani hominis et perfidi? Itaque hoc feci primum quia loqui

The end of this passage therefore relativizes the negative assessment of dialectic. Firstly, Valla acknowledges that there is no point in writing about dialectic by castigating it, since his book is about reforming dialectic, which he can and should recommend: *quam commendare possum et debeo*. He admits to having used a strategy to give confidence: dialectic is simple and easy to learn, useful for other disciplines: *ut quae aliis maioribus servit*. Grammar is the most difficult discipline to learn: the *peritia* of the language requires long years of learning, since the language itself, in its grammar and historical nature, is plentiful. Dialectic, on the other hand, is not poor, because it lacks nothing, but it is characterized by sobriety, simplicity – its modest stripping down, which makes it easy to learn. There are few rules for forming coherent arguments. Such poverty signifies a chaste and essential simplicity.

Valla thus attributes different functions to dialectic and rhetoric, where the opposition between poverty and richness can be understood as an opposition between the simple and the complex. In so doing, Valla breaks down and recomposes the traditional functions of dialectic and rhetoric (Mariani Zini 2008), developing the thinking of Cicero and Quintilian (Cicero 1949; Quintilian 2001).

The simplicity of ‘*inventio*’

Dialectics and rhetoric are different, but for Aristotle they both use *topoi/loci*, i.e., argumentation schemes that enable a thesis to be asserted by finding the premises that can deduce this thesis as a legitimate conclusion. The art of finding the right arguments belongs in principle to rhetoric, but Cicero, echoed by Severinus Boethius, telescopes Aristotle’s dialectical topics with certain commonplaces in his rhetoric (Mariani Zini 2009). In this way, the *inventio* of arguments characterizes both dialectic and rhetoric. In fact, following in the footsteps of Cicero and Quintilian, Valla is trying to think up the rules of ‘natural’ argumentation. This is not spontaneous, arbitrary argumentation, but argumentation that conforms to the ordinary human way of reasoning and debating. Such argumentation includes value judgments and not just logical theses and objections. It is also aware that all argumentation is given in a historically determined language that forms a framework of common beliefs and opinions. Consequently, the notion of plausibility is not so much a weak form of truth or logical plausibility, but the very nature of any debate, which introduces value judgments that must be legitimized in a context of comparison with other value judgments.

Therefore, Valla takes up the notion of rhetorical invention from Quintilian, but transforms it, attributing dialectical functions to it as well. In fact, Valla affirms that *inventio* belongs as much to logic or dialectic (Valla 2012: II.3.1, 212–215) and that on this point he follows Quintilian who, in the fifth book of his *Institutio oratoriae*, has learned how all kinds of proof are developed from the topical schemata or seats of arguments (*loci*) (II.2.21–23, 145–207)⁷. The fifth book has a special status. It is the

verum ingenue placet, deinde ut hos ipsos in spem adducerem ad hanc scientiam brevi facileque percipiendam – ut vere possum adducere quia nulla mihi doctrina brevior faciliorque quam dialectica videtur, ut quae aliis maioribus servit, quam vix intra plures quis menses quam grammaticam intra annos perdiscet. ...Nos igitur de dialectica veluti de pudica et verecunda virgine loquamur quae suam non paupertatem (nihil enim indiget) sed tenuitatem castam et sanctam praeponat illis umbraticis opibus atque illi circumforaneae – ne dicam meretriciae – voluptati.

⁷Valla quotes until the end of Book 2 the text of Quintilian (2001: V, 8.1–X, 125).

most philosophical book because it focuses on the theory and practice of argumentation, especially on credible proofs. But both theory and practice are drawn explicitly by Quintilian from his reading of Cicero. In other words, the fifth book is largely a commentary on Cicero's legal speeches. In the dialectical dispute (pro and contra) Quintilian develops Cicero's *facere fidem* into a consistent reflection on proof, since he states: 'For all of these their general term of *pisteis*, and even though it is still a correct translation if I say 'assurances,' it will be clearer if I translate it as 'proof'⁸ (Quintilian 2001: V, 10.8; Valla 2012: II.2.23, 158-159).

Moreover, Boethius takes up Cicero's topical theory as a dialectical theory that seeks to link the believable conclusions of arguments with procedures of proof in a coherent way.

However, Quintilian is the most important author for Valla. Indeed, Quintilian tries to give a quasi-objective status to the relationship between belief and proof, because belief is not a psychological state, but a cognitive one. So, Quintilian's classification of *credibilia* allows Valla to consider natural logic as a logic that today we could call deontic. Deontic logic does not aim so much to define true and false sentences as to determine what is preferable to believe, and it is developed by legal logical tools. For Quintilian there are three degrees of *credibilia*: the strongest, the more uncertain, but plausible and the non-contradictory believable. Following Quintilian, Valla distinguished two kinds of conclusions⁹, after having designated three kinds of modality: possible, impossible, and true: 'When this has a great deal of force, it will be called 'plausible' or 'credible,' meaning 'very possible,' and when it has little force, it will be called 'possible,' meaning 'somewhat plausible' and 'somewhat credible'¹⁰ (Valla 2012: II.2.19, 130-131).

To be credible, a conclusion must be *certa et confessa* (McNamara 2018; Mori 2023). This does not just mean pragmatic verification because it is not just a question of finding a fact or a witness that tests the credibility of the evidence. *Certum* and *confessum* are the features of a rational assent given by a credible proof. For Valla, as for Cicero, the *status causae* are an important element of such a credible proof:

But to return to the topic and give a brief summary of everything that has been discussed, every proof is produced through truths that are certain, and, through them, that very truth causes some other truth, which was uncertain, to be seen as certain, and this happens either necessarily or plausibly. However, there are three ways for a truth to be uncertain since, according to some of the

⁸'Haec omnia generaliter *pisteis* appellant, quod, et si propria interpretatione dicere fidem possumus, apertius tamen probationem interpretabimur' (Quintilian 2001: V, 10.8; Valla 2012: II.2.23, 158-159).

⁹Valla (2012: II.2.19, 128-129) sometimes distinguishes several kinds of conclusion according to the temporal modalities: always, often, occasionally, rarely, usually, frequent. Indeed, according to Valla (2012: II.2.19, 136-137): 'Everything is more or less plausible than something else, in fact; but one thing is not, strictly speaking, more or less necessary than another, though perhaps it may be in ordinary usage' ('Nam omne verisimile est alio aut maius aut minus; necessarium non est aliud alio maius minusve, ad legem veritatis, sed ad vulgarem forte consuetudinem').

¹⁰Quae cum multum habuerit virium, vocabitur verisimilis sive credibilis, hoc est valde possibilis, cum paulum, vocabitur possibilis, idest aliquantum verisimilis atque credibilis.

greatest authorities, our doubts are of three kinds: whether something is, what that something or anything is, what it is like¹¹. (Valla 2012: II.2.19, 140-141)

In this deontic framework, where we determine what is preferable to believe, credibility can take on new forms (such as useful, suitable, or pleasant):

For what reason is there for us to retain these few words and reject others that we use and need to use in every conversation, whether you look to utility or to suitability – words like *easy, difficult, sure, unsure, usual, unusual, useful, useless, agreeable, disagreeable, seemly, unseemly* and others of this kind? Is it not unjust and cruel to condemn so many words, and such noble ones to the death penalty, as it were, or surely to send them into exile and to disgrace nearly the whole community?¹² (Valla 2012: II.2.19, 128-129)

So, Valla considers that Quintilian's *loci* are sufficient to construct arguments that are plausible but not arbitrary. Consequently, the forms of the arguments can be reduced. Since for Valla, once again drawing inspiration from Quintilian, every argument is an enthymeme (Mariani Zini 2021, 2023), i.e., an argument that 'is content simply to be understood' (*tantum intelligi contentum est*), Aristotle's syllogistic theory must be radically criticized (Nauta 2009: 265-268).

Certainly, Valla's critique of the syllogistic tradition may seem largely superficial and hasty. However, Valla considers that natural logic can be taught simply and quickly because it is in line with our ordinary way of reasoning and debating controversial issues. It is a matter of exercising a form of discipline over the skills that are proper to our discursive and rational capacities¹³.

Moreover, we exchange our arguments in a language that includes several levels of meaning and is the result of a complex cultural history. To ensure that this wealth does not become a chaotic, luxurious, and useless form of abundance, we must adhere to the principle of *consuetudo*.

The complexity of '*consuetudo*'

Valla was not only a philosopher, but also a historian and grammarian who aimed to transform the study of grammar into philology, i.e., the art of restoring the letter of past texts and understanding their meaning. Valla worked as a philologist on Quintilian's manuscripts (Valla 1996), as well as on the Vulgate of the Bible (Valla 1970). The grammarian is first and foremost the historian of language. Language therefore does not express neutral concepts or the timeless essences of things, but precise meanings, value judgments and common opinions, sedimented in a specific

¹¹*Sed ut ad propositum redeamus et omnia quae disputavimus breviter complectamur, probatio omnis fit per vera quae certa sunt, facitque per haec ipsa veritas aliud quoddam verum videri certum quod erat incertum, idque vel necessario vel verisimiliter. Est autem verum incertum triplici via quia, ut maximis quibusdam auctoribus placuit, tripliciter dubitamus: aut an quippiam sit; aut quid illud quippiam sive aliquid sit; aut quale sit ipsum aliquid.*

¹²*Nam quid causae est cur, his paucis dictionibus retentis, reiciamus ceteras quas in omni sermone usurpamus atque usurpare oportet, sive utilitatem spectes sive dignitatem – qualia sunt facile, difficile, certum, incertum, consuetum, insuetum, utile, inutile, iocundum, iniocundum, decorum, indecorum et alia huiuscemodi?*

¹³On the natural logic in the Middle Ages, see Brumberg-Chaumont (2023).

history. These meanings fluctuate and change over time according to the uses and the evolution of a particular historical community.

Therefore, Valla points out that we often do not know what we are saying, or to put it another way, we cannot express our thoughts properly because the mishandling of language can make the expression of our thoughts opaque. In fact, he classifies four modalities (Valla 2012: I.1.2, 32-35)¹⁴:

- we can say what is false by thinking what is false: *oratio potest esse falsa, animo errante*
- we can say what is true by thinking what is true: *oratio potest esse vera, animo non errante*
- we can say what is false by thinking what is true: *oratio potest esse falsa, animo non errante.*
- we can say what is true by thinking what is false: *oratio potest esse vera, animo errante.*

While the first two cases refer to ignorance or lies, the last two show that we can deceive ourselves or others through obscure use of language, without being aware of the fact. For example, it is enough to use confusing meanings, to be unaware of the lexical evolution of a language, to misuse its syntax. The result is that we speak differently than we think '*quis aliter loquitur ac sentit.*'

Therefore, rhetoric plays an important role here: it determines the appropriate use of the meanings of a language and thereby guarantees the communication, i.e., the possibility of mutual understanding. Then, Valla took the rhetorical notion of *consuetudo* from Quintilian. *Consuetudo* refers to the standard use of language that all scholars, doctors and philosophers, politicians, must use to make themselves understood (Regoliosi 2010b). It was not an oral, colloquial language, but the cultivated use of the Latin language, following the model of good authors. However, for Valla, this *ars loquendi* did not simply signify a social condition, but also a historical community that recognized itself in a particular historical language. Thus, only rhetoric teaches us, thanks to *consuetudo*, to use a cultivated but at the same time ordinary level of language:

As for us, we must speak according to a grammatical standard, speaking not so much grammatically as in Latin – following not so much the rules of an art, in other words, as the usage of educated and cultured people, which is the best art of all. *And who does not know that speaking is based mainly on usage and authority?* This is what Quintilian says about it: 'In speaking, usage is the most reliable teacher, and obviously language is to be used like money, sealed with a public stamp'. But there is actually a theory, those people reply, of why it is correct to

¹⁴Specifically, Valla (2012: I.1.2, 32-33) states that the truth is the inner light of the mind: 'The true or truth, strictly speaking, is knowledge of or acquaintance with a thing of some sort; it is the light of the mind, as it were, which also extends to the senses. This light I hold to belong to the mind itself, as sight and the power of seeing belong to the eyes; it is not something external like solar light, though God displays qualities of things to the mind as the Sun shows colours of bodies to the eyes' ('*Verum sive veritas est proprie scientia sive notitia cuiuscunque rei; et quasi lux animi quae ad sensus quoque se porrigit. Hanc lucem esse volo ipsius animi, quasi oculorum vim videndi et visum, non exteriorem quamdam velut solarem, quanquam ut Sol oculis colores corporum, ita Deus menti rerum qualitates ostendit et exhibet*').

speak this way if we wish. And would that it were within our means to approve rather than condemn them! In fact, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Punic, Dalmatian and other tongues differ not just in the words that are spoken, but in how speech is constructed, and this happens because of practice, not theory, except in a few cases¹⁵. (Valla 2012: II.2.11, 84-85)

The reference to Quintilian, according to whom language is a kind of money, underlines the fact that, for Valla, language does not possess an essential nature, but is fluctuating and changing, since it depends on how it is used over time. Language deals with fluctuating values, i.e., *axia*.

The richness of language is therefore due in part to its fluctuating values, which are not arbitrary because they depend on the history of a linguistic and cultural community. However, there is always the risk of misunderstanding or misusing the language. Rhetoric may seem bold and inventive, but the sober discipline of dialectic is the condition for the *securitas loquendi* of any speaker who wants to say what he thinks. As Valla writes:

Because of this, rhetoric is exceedingly difficult and demanding, not within everyone's grasp. For the orator delights to wander the wide sea with waves all around, soaring ahead with sails billowing and groaning, to rule the storms and never yield eloquence, perfect and paramount, is what I am talking about. *But dialectic – loving safety and hugging the beach – looks landward, not to the sea, rowing close to shore and the rocks*¹⁶. (Valla 2012: II.2, proem, 4-5)

In conclusion, these few remarks suggest that Valla's reform of logic seeks to establish a logic for the discussions of ordinary life where we communicate not only theses, but also judgments of values and convictions. This is why our arguments are only credible. However, belief is not only a psychological state, but a cognitive one, since it is possible to provide proof to test what it is preferable to believe. To do this, Valla states that dialectic is poor, in the sense of simple, because its arguments need a sober set of schemata while rhetoric is a field of richness, in the sense of complexity, because language is not a formal essence but a various multifaceted semantic reality.

¹⁵*Nobis quidem ad normam grammatices loquendum est, nec tam grammaticae quam Latine loquendum – hoc est non tam ad praecepta artis, quam ad consuetudinem eruditorum atque elegantium, quae optima ars est. Nam quis nescit maximam loquendi partem auctoritate niti et consuetudine? De qua ita ait Quintilianus: 'Consuetudo certissima est loquendi magistra, utendumque plane sermone ut nummo, cui publica forma est'. At enim ratio est, inquit, cur ita loqui liceat si velimus. Utinam esset ut eos probare potius quam improbare possemus! Nam quod Graecus, Hebraeus, Latinus, Afer, Dalmata ceteraeque linguae praeter ipsas voces figura loquendi discordant, usu fit, non ratione, nisi in paucis'. See Quintilian (2001: I, 6.3).*

¹⁶*Propter quod longe difficillima rhetorica est et ardua, nec omnibus capessenda. Nanque lato mari mediisque in undis vagari et tumidis ac sonantibus velis volitare gaudet, nec fluctibus cedit sed imperat: de summa et perfecta loquor eloquentia. Dialectica vero – amica securitatis, socia litorum – terras potius maria intuens, prope oras et scopulos remigat.*

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