

The “Folly” of Learning : On Hearing Erasmus Afresh (Handout)

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Praise of Folly is the most well-known work of Erasmus (1469-1536). It was published in a series of expanded editions from 1511 to 1515. Just 500 years ago it caused quite a stir in educational and religious circles in Western civilisation.

There are four parts to this short presentation:

Introduction and Background Remarks

Editorial Strategy of *Praise of Folly*

The “Folly” of Learning

Fertile Educational Insights in Erasmus

1. Introduction and Background Remarks

- The disfigurement of the concept of learning in recent policy discourse on education internationally (“Learnification”)
- Precursors of a technicist conception of learning in the dominance of scholasticism in an earlier era
- The boldness and significance of Erasmus’s attacks on scholastic learning

2. The Editorial Strategy of *Praise of Folly*

- *Stultitia loquitor!* Folly Speaks! – the playful masking of seriously subversive intent
- Seduction, Satire, Scorn, but with a constructive aim in view

3. The “Folly” of Learning

- “Folly” as a *practical ethical orientation* toward learning and living
- The underlying importance of the ecstatic in Erasmus
- Earlier and later eclipses of the influence of Erasmus
- Ecstasy and *Ek-stasis* – a word on Heidegger
- Some negative consequences of Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism”

4. Fertile Educational Insights in Erasmus

A brief presentation of educational insights of enduring promise that are present in incipient or more developed ways in the works of Erasmus; ones that come to light when we give attentive and discerning ear to what Erasmus is actually saying.

The "Folly" of Learning : On Hearing Erasmus Afresh (Notes for Presentation)

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Part One: Introduction and Background Remarks

The ultimate justification of education as a practice lies in a shared belief that there is something inherently transformative and emancipatory in the notion of sustained learning as a purposeful human engagement: something elusive but definitive that enables humans to flourish through the disclosure of an unforced, ever-emergent sense of identity.

Ironically, this “something” has progressively leaked away in recent decades, just when “learning” and its cognates become ever more central in the international policy discourse on education : “learning society”, “learning outcomes”, “learner-centred”, “distance learning”, “lifelong learning”, “digital learning.” Crucially, the governing concept in this nest of terms has increasingly become “learning outcomes” - or more precisely: performances that are predicted in advance and defined in ways that make them amenable to purposes of quantification and comparative ranking.

This international shift in usage has been characterised by Biesta (2010) and others as “learnification”; this “deliberately ugly” word being chosen to indicate the loss of something rich and worthy. “Learnification” is habitually preoccupied with taken-for-granted purposes that are individualistic, instrumental and measurable, and it regularly marginalises questions that ask about good education and what it is for. It is important then to reclaim, not to discard, the term “learning”; but to reclaim it *fully*, including its rich historical and cultural connotations.

The dominance of a “learnification” mentality, and of the industry of measurement and ranking associated with it, reproduces in a technological age something similar to the dominance of an oppressive scholasticism in the later medieval world of learning. While acknowledging the historical differences between the two mentalities, parallels such as the following can be drawn between them (Slide 1):

- a preoccupation with defining and measuring that frequently pushes the heart of the matter out of the picture;
- a conformist tenor that domesticates educational efforts, beclouding, or even obscuring, the more venturesome possibilities of learning;
- a self-confident blindness to unquestioned presuppositions in one’s own intellectual outlook, and also to their disabling consequences;
- a doctrinaire sense of orthodoxy that is dismissive of evidence that is at odds with the precepts of that orthodoxy.

Erasmus of Rotterdam was probably the most illustrious critic of scholasticism. The name Erasmus is well known today, mainly because of the EU student exchange programme called after him. But the educational insights of Erasmus are largely unknown. It’s important to stress then that one of his enduring concerns was to illustrate why the experiences of formal education needed to be freed from the scholastic regimes that prevailed in centres of learning throughout Europe. This concern is pursued in his most well-known work, *Praise of Folly*.

Praise of Folly is important to the purposes of my presentation for two main reasons: firstly, its editorial strategy and secondly, its ecstatic conception of the possibilities of human learning. In dealing with these two points - respectively in the second and third sections of the presentation - I’m keen to explore more closely the theme of my title: hearing Erasmus afresh and reclaiming fertile insights that have been eclipsed.

Part Two: The Editorial Strategy of *Praise of Folly*

By taking on the mask of a jocular, erudite female called “Folly”, Erasmus gave himself access to an armoury of rhetorical devices that unsettled, even confounded scholasticism’s habitual paths of thinking.

The opening words of the book are “*Stultitia Locquitor*” - “Folly speaks”. Adopting the disarming stance of “Folly” serves Erasmus’s purposes in ways that a more formal style of argumentation might not. A reader who might feel challenged or unsettled by Folly’s outspoken criticisms is seduced into taking refuge in the comforting attribution of frivolity to the author of these ceaseless barbs. As the book proceeds however the comfort afforded becomes increasingly ambiguous, until finally it becomes a double *discomfort*: firstly, the awareness of having been artfully seduced; secondly the awareness that the dominant scholarly orthodoxies have been thoroughly undermined, even ridiculed, by an imaginative wit that can effortlessly deploy classical allusions and expose the barrenness of the scholastic canon. For instance, the point that scholastic philosophy and theology had become something of a monstrosity is suggested in satirical tones by Folly in passages like the following (Slides 2 and 3):

There are any amount of quibbles [among scholastics] about concepts, formalities, quiddities, ecceties, which no one could possibly perceive unless like Lynceus he could see through the blackest darkness things which don’t exist. (155)

Then add those “maxims” of theirs which are so “paradoxical” that in comparison the pronouncements of the Stoics, which were actually known as paradoxes, seem positively commonplace and banal; for example, that it is a lesser crime to butcher a thousand men than for a poor man to cobble his shoe on a single occasion on the Lord’s Day, and better to let the whole world perish down to the last crumb and stitch, as they say, than to tell a single insignificant lie (155-6).

These subtle refinements of subtleties are made still more subtle by all the different lines of scholastic argument, so that you’d extricate yourself quicker from a Labyrinth than from the tortuous obscurities of realists, nominalists, Thomists, Albertists, Ockhamists and Scotists – and I’ve not mentioned all the sects, only the main ones (156).

And Erasmus insists that in all this preoccupation with conformity, classification and measurement, the heart of the matter drops out of the picture, or becomes pushed out of the picture.

For Erasmus, what *is* the heart of the matter? In giving an initial answer to this question I’ll move from dealing with the editorial strategy of *Praise of Folly* to the third part of this contribution: the “Folly” of learning.

Part Three: The “Folly” of Learning

Here I want to deal firstly with the issue of Erasmus’s transformative, or ecstatic conception of the possibilities of human learning, and then with its subsequent eclipse.

Erasmus wished to see the powerful regime of scholasticism in European universities dismantled, demolished, “deconstructed”. In working for the demise of this educational order he earnestly hoped to see it yield to forms of learning that were more vibrant, more diverse, more tolerant; in short, more genuinely humanising.

In the later pages of *Praise of Folly* it emerges that “Folly”, without losing her playfulness, has all along been the personification of a *practical ethical orientation*; an orientation, moreover, inspired

by an early Christian vision of humankind that also welcomes encounters with sources from pre-Christian Greece and Rome; an orientation, thirdly, that is deeply sceptical of the institutional church of the early sixteenth century and of its influential educational machinery. Without an understanding of these three constitutive features, the so-called “humanism” of Erasmus is misunderstood from the start.

The promise of such an orientation is repeatedly referred to by Erasmus as kind of ecstasy or, madness (*insania*), and in this connection he invokes memorable analogies from Plato – including the visionary emancipation of the prisoners from the cave in the *Republic* and the ecstasy of love in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. This theme of the “ecstatic” is even more explicit in Erasmus’s “Letter to Martin Dorp”, written in late 1515 in response to forceful criticisms of *Praise of Folly* by that conservative theologian of Leuven.

Michael Screech, a leading scholar on the literature of the European Renaissance, published a major study in 1980, intriguingly titled *Erasmus, Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly*. There he writes of Erasmus (Slide 4):

One of the many aspects of his religion which helped to integrate the character of this subtle, complex attractive man, was a particular concept of ecstasy. This ecstasy and what it implies has little or no connection with what often passes for “charismatic” Christianity today. It was marked by discretion, by prudence, by a kind of shyness. It was not based on anti-intellectualism. (xiv-xv).

Elaborating on this ecstasy, Screech writes (Slide 5):

Erasmus worshipped a God who saved the world by an act of divine madness: the mission of his Son as the incarnate Christ. One of the forms in which this madness is found is in the bewildered, ecstatic amazement of those who, some time in their lives, either by special revelation or by the word of God in speech or in writing, catch a glimpse of the face of their transfigured Lord. It is then that they see for a moment the glorious majesty hiding behind the cloak of that lunatic Man of Sorrows who was the manifestation of a God who had, as it were, given up hope of saving the world by wisdom, deciding to save it by an act of infinitely costly madness (xviii).

There’s much more that could be said on this suggestive notion of ecstasy – whether in religious or in other forms – as a fund of educational inspirations. But in any case, the promise of Erasmus’s vision of human learning became eclipsed: initially by the prolonged acrimonies that marked the Reformation and Counter-Reformation; more recently by the deficient understandings of “humanism” that have come to prevail from the later decades of the 20th century.

In relation to the former, Western Christendom became deeply fractured during the sixteenth century. Christianity itself became newly institutionalised in sectarian denominations, and in this event the doctrines of each denomination became more exact in their contents and more exacting upon their followers. Such a climate, which came to prevail in European learning for the following three centuries or so, was singularly inhospitable to the vision of Erasmus.

In relation to the latter issue, in recent decades it is evident that humanism has become somewhat *passé* in philosophical research, as current preoccupations with themes like “posthumanism” and “transhumanism” illustrates.

In this connection I want to refer briefly to Heidegger’s influential text “Letter on Humanism”, first written in 1945. Heidegger is quite emphatic in what he has to say about humanism (Slide 6):

Every humanism is either grounded in a metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground of one. Every determination of the essence of man that already presupposes an interpretation of being without asking about the truth of Being, whether knowingly or not, is metaphysical. ... Accordingly, every humanism remains metaphysical. In defining the humanity of man humanism not only does not ask about the relation of Being to the essence of man; because of its metaphysical origin humanism even impedes the question by neither recognizing nor understanding it (202).

And he is even more emphatic in the following extract (Slide 7):

The first humanism, Roman humanism, and every kind that has emerged from that time to the present, has presupposed the most universal "essence" of man to be obvious. Man is considered to be an *animal rationale*. ... This essential definition of man is not false. But it is conditioned by metaphysics. ... Above and beyond everything else, however, it finally remains to ask whether the essence of man primordially and most decisively lies in the dimension of *animalitas* at all. ... Metaphysics thinks of man on the basis of *animalitas* and does not think in the direction of his *humanitas* (202-4).

Heidegger gives a seminal importance to *Ek-stasis* and its Greek etymology, in his later writings, as does Michal Screech in his study of *Praise of Folly*. (*Ek-stasis* meaning an openly-disposed "standing-out from" that belongs to humans as distinct from other living beings). Despite the strong connections the later Heidegger makes between *Ek-stasis* and *Ek-sistence*, he makes no reference to Erasmus. It is surprising that he finds no antecedents of his own thinking in Erasmus's continuing conflicts with scholastic theologians, or with what Heidegger himself called "onto-theology". Heidegger's influential text has inspired a wealth of philosophical research on humanism in the last half century, but his dismissal of humanism, *per se*, as metaphysical, has helped to obscure some voices that have something vital to say to our own times. Indeed, on a Heideggerian perspective the work of Erasmus might be seen as a prime example of the "logocentrism" criticised by the early Derrida and his disciples: an erroneous intellectual byway springing from mistaken metaphysical assumptions. Such judgements do a great injustice to Erasmus and his work. By contrast, I think that Renaissance scholar James Tracy's assessment captures subtleties *and* fissures in the work of Erasmus that readers schooled in the ways deconstruction should not miss. Tracy writes (Slide 8):

If one regards the Christian-classical synthesis [of Erasmus] as the matrix from which emerged modern ideas of the dignity of the individual, whose long-term viability in isolation from their historical roots may even be open to doubt, Erasmus's lifework becomes an example of that critical thinking of roots upon which the continuity of a civilization depends (9).

Part Four: Fertile Educational Insights in Erasmus

In my remarks in this presentation I have just begun to open up some suggestions that could be pursued at length in a larger-scale study. But let me conclude by assembling, in summary, some fertile educational themes that are present in incipient or more developed ways in the works of Erasmus; themes that come to light when we give attentive ear to what Erasmus is actually saying. I have selected six examples and I'll comment briefly on each (Slides 9 and 10):

- **Human learning is impoverished when it is mainly thought of as a process of transmission, or of conformity with anything laid out from above by decree.**
- **Learning is properly a venturesome undertaking – an ever renewed, unfinished journey that is replete with surprises and setbacks, risks and rewards, disappointments and illuminations.**
- **Learning is a personal responsibility that humanizes, but if it is misconceived it can imprison or even disfigure *humanitas*, and energise a verbal and literary invective.**
- **The voices that reside in inheritances of learning contain their own conflicts and tensions as well as their own harmonies.**
- **Formal education is primarily a species of study that is exploratory, and conversational, in character.**
- **Such conversational encounter opens up new imaginative landscapes and attunes human sensibility to beckonings from beyond the familiar and the predictable.**