

Putting On Virtue

The Legacy of the Splendid Vices

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Putting On Christ

Renaissance moral thought has been something of a puzzle for scholars. On the one hand, it has been characterized as an ethic of glory, instrumentalizing virtue to the pursuit of honor and fame. On the other hand, it has been understood as a restoration of a eudaimonist pursuit of perfection, in which virtue is constitutive of our true end. This chapter will not attempt to offer a comprehensive account of Renaissance thought. It does make sense to begin, though, by offering some context for our consideration of Erasmus, often called “Prince of Humanists.” Erasmus sometimes uses the language of an ethic of glory. He does so, though, in order to combat a view of morality as mere external conformity, to restore genuine spiritual and moral aspiration, and ultimately to open up an avenue for understanding virtue as divine gift. He thus employs one semblance of virtue against another, ultimately subverting an ethic of glory in favor of divine Folly, the virtue of humility. Despite the fact that Erasmus offers nothing to rival Aquinas’s systematic account of human action, habit, and virtue and despite the fact that his account of *philosophia Christi* was subject to Pelagian readings, he nevertheless has something important to offer: like Augustine’s, Erasmus’s is a mimetic account of virtue, but without Augustine’s anxiety about splendid vices and pagan virtues.

Jacob Burckhardt’s vision of the Renaissance as essentially pagan and anti-Christian is no longer accepted by scholars, even if it is still alive in the popular imagination.¹ Paul Oskar Kristeller is no doubt the key figure in its demise. Kristeller set forth a strictly delimited, formal definition of humanism. According to Kristeller, humanists were characterized by their devotion to the *studia humanitatis*, a specific group of studies based

on the reading of ancient Latin and Greek classics, with rhetoric foremost among them. The humanists were united first by their rhetorical concerns and their reliance on classical modes for rhetoric rather than by a substantial normative position.² Influential as Kristeller's thesis has been in allowing the internal diversity of humanist thought to appear, other scholars have sought to characterize anew the defining commitments of Renaissance scholarship. They have argued that the shared emphasis on rhetoric must itself be understood as a substantive commitment. As Charles Nauert suggests, "study of the humanists' intellectual methods, especially their attempts to make rhetoric the center of humanistic education, points directly toward ideas which lay at the heart of all Renaissance thought—ideas of the relation between truth and eloquence, and ideas about the relative importance of knowledge and action in the life of man."³

Humanistic studies as revived in the fourteenth century included grammar, rhetoric, poetics, history, and moral philosophy, but not natural philosophy, logic, or theology. Moral philosophy was treated as something to be studied in the context of the humanist retrieval of classical learning and especially of rhetoric, and thus as newly distinct from theology. Despite important points of continuity between medieval rhetoricians (*dictatores*) and fourteenth-century humanists, the latter recognized in a new way the discontinuity of their own society with that of ancient Greece and Rome. The ancient schools of philosophy were understood more nearly in their own terms as opposed to being read always through the lens of Patristic and medieval commentary. Quentin Skinner suggests that one of the discoveries that most excited the humanists was their new grasp of Cicero's ideal of an education centered on rhetoric and philosophy and aimed at cultivating "the single virtue" (*virtus*), which has been "found to outshine the rest."⁴ Rhetoric was crucial because of the need to argue "in such a way that our hearers are not only instructed in the virtues but incited to the performance of virtuous acts."⁵

The humanists' newfound appreciation for Cicero is crucial also, argues Skinner, to understanding why ethical discourse increasingly spoke of virtue in the singular, even while continuing to assume that this required the cultivation of plural virtues. Virtue so conceived went hand in hand, he argues, with an anthropology substantially at odds with that of Augustine. For Cicero, the derivation of *virtus* from *vir*, "man," was significant. The virtuous man is thus the truly manly man, the embodiment of human perfection, and the human capacity to acquire virtue is

regarded as nearly without limit. In the medieval period, in contrast, “it is of course accepted that a man of saintly disposition may be capable of attaining a number of individual virtues, and thus of avoiding most of the grosser forms of vice. It is always assumed, however, in line with St. Paul’s teachings in Corinthians, that *virtus generalis* is possessed by God alone and personified only by Christ.”⁶

If Renaissance humanism reflected a greater sense of confidence in human capacities and downplayed the effects of original sin, Skinner notes that it remained self-consciously Christian.⁷ Faith is one of the virtues characteristic of the *vir virtutis*, the truly virtuous man. While human beings are capable of achieving virtue and ought to strive ardently to that end, they must at the same time acknowledge that their ability to do so has been given them by God. Petrarch insists, notes Skinner, that the virtuous must honor God, not congratulate themselves. At times, particularly among the quattrocento Florentines, such comments often appear as little more than lip service. The godlike qualities of human beings become cause for self-congratulation rather than humble gratitude, as in Pico della Mirandola’s famous oration. Honor, glory, and praise are properly due to the virtuous person, not solely to God. Similarly, while the humanists continue to insist that the virtues are to be pursued purely as good in themselves, this claim appears increasingly empty alongside their enthusiasm for inspiring persons to pursue virtue as the path to worldly glory and fame. So Alberti argues that “the principal aim of education must be to guide young men ‘in the ways of honour and praise,’ leading them in ‘the path of virtue and honour’ and showing them that this is also ‘the path to glory and fame.’ The value of this training is of course said to be that it produces the fully manly man, the true *vir virtutis* who finally comes to prize ‘the beauty of honour, the delights of fame and the divineness of glory’ above everything else in life.”⁸ It was perhaps the humanists’ emphasis on rhetoric that led them to recommend the pursuit of glory. After all, this easily engaged with natural human aspirations and could be hoped to bridge the gap between knowledge of virtue and “incitement” to perform virtuous actions.

Skinner notes that like the Italian humanists, the northern humanists, too, often wrote educational treatises and concerned themselves in particular with the education proper to future government leaders, those charged with serving the common good. Like their Italian predecessors, these thinkers worried that political leaders would pursue individual or factional interests rather than those of the community as such, and that

they would tend to take advice only from hypocritical flatterers. The solution lay in persuading these leaders of the importance of cultivating the virtues. In general, the approach taken, as in quattrocento Florence, was to promote the desire for glory, fame, and honor and to claim that only the virtues finally guarantee the possession of these goods. In addition to the four cardinal virtues, governors should acquire the princely virtues of liberality, clemency, and fidelity to one's word, along with affability, placability, mercy, and godliness. While this final virtue was more strongly insisted on by Italian humanists, it remained the case that godliness was typically seen by northern humanists as instrumental to the achievement of glory.⁹

Skinner's account of Renaissance humanism is useful in indicating with what enthusiasm an ethic of glory was embraced by some thinkers during this period. Even if what they advocated was not an outright pagan ethic, it sought to reprimatinate precisely what Augustine had regarded as most problematic in pagan virtue. Skinner's account falls short, though, insofar as it abstracts the humanist movement from a broader intellectual and social context within which, for instance, it came into constant contact with scholasticism.¹⁰ Just as problematic is the fact that it suggests an overly homogenized view of humanism itself. Some humanists, such as Lorenzo Valla, were emphatic Augustinians, and as Jill Kraye notes, "the attempt to establish the proper relation between Christian and classical moral doctrines and the effort to determine the supreme good of man were two of the most important issues in Renaissance ethics."¹¹ Scholastic worries over the status of pagan virtue in general, over magnanimity and the desire for honor versus humility, and over virtue as secure achievement versus continual struggle did not disappear, and indeed took on added urgency.

Anthony Levi, in an interpretation strikingly at odds with that of Skinner, has suggested that what was at stake in the Renaissance debate over pagan virtue was the inseparability of supernatural from natural aspiration, of religious from moral perfection. The humanists rebelled against a "view of man as perfectible by norms of belief and behaviour extrinsic and irrelevant to his rational needs and moral aspirations."¹² The humanist critique was directed against those who wrongly regarded their final good as something contingent on external conformity to commandments, rather than as the culmination of an inner transformation. For reform-minded humanist thinkers, the most sinister semblance was not that of pagan virtue, which they were, like Aquinas, inclined to regard

as directed toward true if proximate goods, but rather the semblance displayed within Christendom by those who performed certain actions, not for the sake of a process of inner transformation initiated by these actions but simply as instrumental means to a purely extrinsic end of eternal heavenly reward.

It is somewhat paradoxical that late medieval scholasticism should have fostered a conception of final end as external reward. After all, Scotus had picked up on Anselm of Canterbury's doctrine of the two affections of the will in order to stress the capacity of human beings for *disinterested* choice. Only this capacity to will a good that in no way is our own, argued Scotus, could guarantee the freedom of the will.¹³ Scotus does not reduce moral goodness to compliance for the sake of personal benefit; quite the contrary, he understands it in terms of the capacity to transcend the natural desire for the advantageous in favor of the affection for justice.¹⁴ It is not enough to say with Augustine that our love of God fulfills us only by transforming our desires, or with Aquinas that perfect charity is love of God for God's own sake, not for the sake of any derivative benefit to oneself. Scotus and others insisted on a newly unconditioned form of disinterestedness. According to Scotus, "everyone according to right reason should be willing to cease to exist for the sake of a divine good."¹⁵ Ironically, Scotus carved out the possibility of this pure love for the divine good by appeal to Aristotle: if Aristotle could assume that the brave citizen will accept death for the good of the state, without assuming any reward in the afterlife, this shows that a proper love for God, too, is purely disinterested.¹⁶ Love of God is tainted by any connection with self-fulfillment, even if, as Scotus concedes, it is impossible that we should not in fact be benefited by our love of God.¹⁷ If Augustine had radically stretched and redefined pagan eudaimonism with his denial that happiness is fully attainable in this life, late medieval voluntarism demanded an utter break with eudaimonism—which Scotus accomplished through reinterpreting a pagan eudaimonist. This is hyper-Augustinianism, emerging out of a demand for a kind of freedom and thus a kind of disinterestedness that Augustine himself would not have found intelligible.

On such a view, habits that render a life of virtue pleasant and easy do not seem to be the kind of heroic exercise of will that would prove one's selfless love for God. Rather, the key could easily seem to be subordination of one's will to God, obedience to God, a free but finite will bending to a free and infinite will.¹⁸ If one can discern in divine laws no

intrinsic benefit to oneself, in which only a sacrifice is required, obedience seems indeed a heroic testament of love. So a demand for obedience that initially revealed intense concern for interior moral values could, ironically, result in a lack of concern for interiority—if the required actions carried with them no intrinsic meaning for the agent, either they could be performed with a purely selfless intention or they could be performed without regard for intention. It was in this context that hypocrisy could rival pride for the place of chief vice and that the problem of semblance could take on gargantuan proportions.

Renaissance humanists, claims Levi, insisted “that human perfection, including the religious perfection which was grace-aided and necessarily rewarded by eternal salvation, had to be intrinsic to the fulfillment of the highest human moral aspirations inscribed on rational nature itself, and not something different from or in addition to human moral achievement, as measured by rational norms.”¹⁹ On this account, the humanists sought to sustain a teleological, eudaemonist conception of human moral activity. They did not pursue virtue as instrumental to glory, fame, and honor, but they did seek to show that spiritual and moral aspirations are not alien to one another, that the pursuit of virtue and the pursuit of salvation, properly understood, are one and the same. Levi’s account has the virtue of viewing humanism not solely against the backdrop of an abstract Augustinian anthropology but as involved in an active debate with late medieval theologies and popular religious practice. As an all-encompassing portrait of Renaissance humanism, it is probably no more adequate than that of Skinner.²⁰ It does, though, help to make better sense of the so-called Christian humanism of John Colet, Thomas More, and Erasmus. These thinkers insisted that the pursuit of virtue was important first and foremost not because it could secure the peace and order of the commonwealth but because virtue is the essence of Christianity and only a virtuous commonwealth can be truly a Christian commonwealth. The pursuit of virtue thus has ultimate religious significance and is not simply an avenue to private glory or to communal security. Erasmus in particular can be seen as navigating between Florentine humanism, late medieval scholastic theology, and the popular piety of his day, striving to articulate a robustly Christian virtue capable of generosity toward splendid vices and pagan moral aspirations. Erasmus offered an account that was able to absorb the energies and insights of those promoting an ethic of glory while showing how such an ethic properly transcends itself.

Erasmus and the Mask of Piety

Long regarded as little more than a skeptical moralist, Erasmus, and his theological seriousness, is now increasingly appreciated. Erasmus critiqued both the scholastic thought and popular piety of his day for their lack of heartfelt devotion and called for a renewal of *philosophia Christi*, the philosophy of Christ. His prescription sought to reunite theology with spirituality, placing classical learning and rhetoric at the service of a simple, heartfelt piety that owed much to what Erasmus had absorbed as a boy in schools of the Brethren of the Common Life.²¹ And while Erasmus sought as a young man to reform contemporary thought and culture simply by recovering the riches of antiquity, the mature Erasmus saw scripture as the touchstone against which the purity of everything mined would have to be tested. Theology should once again become what it had been for the church fathers, *sacra doctrina*, centered on scripture, and on scripture studied and taught in a way that could reform whole persons, not simply inform the intellect. For Erasmus, the only thing that could truly renew the church of his day was a fundamental transformation of “the heart.” This would be made possible by the learned art of persuasive rhetoric applied to scripture, designed most fundamentally to encourage imitation (*mimesis*) of the perfect pattern of Christ. Erasmus, deeply concerned though he was with undoing the exterior semblance of virtue through an inner transformation, a transformation of the heart, of character, of desires and intentions, did not see this as incongruous with a prescription that called for imitation, for acting out a part that is thus necessarily not yet who one really is.

Like so many of his era, Erasmus was persuaded that his own generation was by far the most corrupt in the history of the world.²² Everywhere he looked, he found tyranny, greed, ambition, evil-speaking, and lack of charity. Erasmus’s particular concern, though, were vices that wear the semblance of virtue, that “make themselves respectable under a mask of religion and duty.” These are particularly dangerous because they not only pervert their possessors but also divert *others* from their true goal, Christ; “if in place of this heavenly goal you set up an earthly one, the man who strives to make progress will have nothing to which he can rightly direct his efforts.” This is what happens when “we exercise tyrannical power under a pretext of justice and right, when we make religion an excuse for personal gain, when we seek worldly rule in the

name of defending the church, when laws are laid down which purport to serve Christ's cause and in fact are poles apart from the teaching of Christ." Along with vices that masquerade as virtues, Erasmus worries about indifferent things that are falsely claimed to be gateways to sanctity, things that wear the "mask of piety without its genuine force."²³ In this category Erasmus places what he calls the religion of ceremonies. Far from *expressing* a pure heart/soul/mind, "ceremonies" such as celebrating Mass daily, venerating the relics of the saints, holding vigils, fasting, even silence and prayer serve too often to *conceal* the lack thereof. If you focus on such externalities, he says, "outwardly you are a Christian, but in private you are more pagan than the pagans."²⁴

In his effort to capture what has gone awry in the monastic practices of his day, and in the lay spirituality that aped these practices, Erasmus aligns Pauline with Neoplatonic dualisms.²⁵ True piety is "inner," "invisible," "real," of the "spirit" or "heart," while ceremonies are "outer," "visible," "deceptive," "fleshly."²⁶ If we are able to move beyond our distaste for these dualisms and attend to Erasmus's deployment of them, we find, underlying apparent inconsistencies in his application of them, a central concern with differentiating between proximate or preliminary goods on the one hand and ultimate goods on the other, where our ultimate good is to become bearers of humble, Christlike love able thereby to enter into a perfect community of love with Christ and neighbor. So for all his dismissive comments concerning external ceremonies, Erasmus does not fail to appreciate how liturgical and devotional practices work to form Christians into the body of Christ. Rather, he perceives that they do so fully when those who partake in fact come eventually to understand themselves as living members of the body of Christ.

If a virtuous spirit is "inward" and "invisible," we might inquire how we are to know such a spirit. As worried as Erasmus is about the potential deceptiveness of "external" behavior, though, it becomes clear that actions as such are not always "external," since some reveal the true state of the heart. Thus, if you celebrate Mass daily but live only for your own welfare, with no concern for the needs of your neighbor, you are "still in the flesh of the sacrament," while "if you consider all your goods to be the common property of all men, if you are afflicted by the misfortunes of others as if they were your own, then you celebrate mass with great profit, since you do so spiritually (LB V 30F; CWE 66:71). The way we habitually act toward our neighbor reveals our hearts, suggests Erasmus, even if our other actions may not. It is Christlike love "to edify our

neighbor, to consider everyone as members of the same body, to regard everyone as one in Christ . . . Just as he was not born for himself and did not live for himself or die for himself, but dedicated himself entirely to our needs, so let us also devote ourselves to the interests of our brethren, not to our own" (LB V 35E, cf. 49A; CWE 66:79, see also 101). Similarly, the most proper veneration of the saints is the imitation of their virtues, the example of their lives: "Would you like to win the favour of Peter and Paul? Imitate the faith of the one and the charity of the other, and you will accomplish more than if you were to dash off to Rome ten times" (LB V 30F; CWE 66:71). Erasmus does not indulge in the worry that even our charity, our generosity toward our neighbor and her needs, might itself be merely an "act" of piety and an expression of pride. To imitate exemplary virtues—the charity of Christ and the saints—is not to do something merely "external"; to honor and admire exemplary virtue without imitating it is.

Erasmus shows himself time and time again to be optimistic about the possibility of gradual progress toward perfection in Christ; "I approve of what you do as long as your purpose is not vitiated and you do not consider as a fixed goal a stage from which you must make further progress towards salvation" (LB V 23E; CWE 66:74). At their best, then, all the practices of popular piety have the potential to habituate us in Christlike virtue. What is "exterior," what appears, can shape what is "interior," the character of our hearts. Such practices can do so insofar as they center our attention on the virtues of Christ and the saints, insofar as relic and image and sacrament serve to capture our imagination and draw us into the practice of humble charity. Often, though, Erasmus alleges that they simply render us captive, distracting us from Christ and from the active cultivation of virtue. They are misunderstood as fully constituting piety. This is what Erasmus terms "the common plague of Christianity, all the more insidious because in appearance it bears a great resemblance to piety. There are no vices more dangerous than those which simulate virtue" (LB V 32B; CWE 66:73). If not accompanied by a dawning awareness of our proper end as conformity to the humble, loving character of Christ, then these things become an obstacle, engendering a false semblance of virtue that rests in "externals" and, moreover, glories in them as the self's own achievement: "To worship Christ through visible things for the sake of visible things and to think of this as the summit of religious perfection; to be complacent with oneself and to condemn others on this basis; to become transfixed by them and die there and, to put it succinctly, to be

alienated from Christ by those very things that should be employed to lead us to him—this would be to desert the law of the gospel, which is spiritual” (LB V 32E; CWE 66:74).

The beauty of image and liturgy is central to their power to capture our attention. And Erasmus certainly recognizes the transformative power of beauty. He deplores the theologians of his own day for their tangled scholasticism and suggests that students of Christian virtue return to the fathers of the church, who “could adorn and enrich arid and tedious subjects through their eloquent command of language” (LB V 29E; CWE 66:69). A pastor should seek not just to teach but to move and to please, “otherwise his message, no matter how sublime, will rest inert and never reach the hearts of those for whom it was intended.”²⁷ But for Erasmus, not all beauty is equal. The beauty of rhetoric is trustworthy in a way that visual beauty is not; words are closer to mind and heart than are paintings. “You give homage to an image of Christ’s countenance represented in stone or wood or depicted in colour. With how much more religious feeling should you render homage to the image of his mind, which has been reproduced in the Gospels through the artistry of the Holy Spirit” (LB V 31D; CWE 66:72).

Erasmus’s belief in the power of rhetoric to form character was shared by many humanists, but Erasmus was distinctive in his particular emphasis on exempla—paradigmatic stories.²⁸ In an important work on the rhetoric of example in early modern France and Italy, John Lyons has argued that example became for a number of important thinkers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—notably Montaigne, Machiavelli, Marguerite de Navarre—no longer a way of promoting the authority of the past but rather a process of discovery, “in which the tension between instance and general statement forced modifications in that statement.” Lyons argues that practice ran ahead of theory; most theorists continued to understand exempla simply in terms of proposing models of conduct for imitation, failing to attend to the complex ways in which examples must be constructed, and even when corrected to fit authoritative models, can nevertheless have a variety of effects. For Lyons, Erasmus stands as a refreshing exception among Renaissance theorists of composition, one who provides “a richer view of example, closer to the view of the practicing writers than to the view of the authors of treatises of poetics.”²⁹ Erasmus recognized the need for selection in the use of example and argued that the criterion of selection is what is most “striking” or “distinguished.” “Despite Erasmus’s undeniable emphasis on the moral

and religious utility of the act of writing, this emphasis does not provide the key to the selection of material. Instead the ‘striking’ or ‘outstanding’ (*praecipua*), an aesthetic-rhetorical criterion, is for Erasmus the criterion for selection in the gathering of *copia*. An example of good conduct that is not striking would be of no use, for example is not a moral concept but a discursive one.”³⁰ Erasmus grasps, then, that examples are discursive constructions—they are not simply pieces of reality that can on their own function to model conduct. Perceptive as Lyons’s analysis is, though, he does not recognize the fact that Christ in the Gospels is for Erasmus the ultimate exemplum, the paradigmatic paradigm. He can function as such because, as we shall see below, there is for Erasmus no gap between the reality of Christ and the Christ of the Gospel narratives. This is not because the example of Christ is not rhetorically constructed but because Christ himself constructs his own exemplum or, even more powerfully, *is* the exemplum that he provides. It is the beauty of Christ as conveyed in scripture that is the most “striking” example of all, the one that can most truly transform our affections and habituate us in virtue.³¹

While the Gospels hold a special place in bringing Christ to us, there is in Erasmus, as in Augustine, also the hope that human rhetoric placed in the service of Christ will itself become a vessel of transformative grace. In the *Paraclesis*, Erasmus wishes for the purpose of exhorting others to study the New Testament that “an eloquence far different from Cicero’s be given me: an eloquence certainly much more efficacious, if less ornate than his.”³² And having recited a litany of pagan accounts of rare and wondrous eloquence, he concludes, “if there were any such kind of incantation anywhere, if there were any power of song which truly could inspire, if any Pytho truly swayed the heart, I would desire that it be at hand for me so that I might convince all of the most wholesome truth of all. However, it is more desirable that Christ himself, whose business we are about, so guide the strings of our lyre that this song might deeply affect and move the minds of all.”³³ Rather than ask the pagan Muses to attend him, Erasmus’s wish is after all that Christ’s transformative presence work through his prose. If the pagans dreamed of rhetoric with magical power, it is after all only God’s Word that truly possesses this. This shift from magical power to divine grace is reminiscent of *Praise of Folly*, in which Folly’s magical power to create the *illusion* of comedy in the midst of the earthly scene of real tragedy is finally and utterly overshadowed by God’s power to replace fragile and mutable illusion with lasting, real bliss.³⁴

Christ is himself at work not only within his exemplum in scripture but also in the very response that hearers have to scripture. Christ's power is not confined to the original historical event of Jesus, nor to the scriptural narrative, but encompasses even the response of hearers of the Word. Moreover, the rhetoric of Christ's example is for Erasmus a process of discovery, not simply the imposition of a static authority. One of the characteristics of example to which Lyons draws our attention is that of "excess." "Example is excessive," he writes, "because any element of historical reality and even any fiction adduced to support a generalization will have characteristics that exceed what can be covered by the generalization."³⁵ Lyons believes that this subverts efforts to deploy examples as models for character. But because it is Christ himself, and not any generalization, that is authoritative for Christians, this excess serves not to undermine the authority of Christ's example but rather to generate an ongoing transcendence of any attempt to distill Christ's example into a fixed and final statement.

The Imitation of Christ

The heart of *philosophia Christi* is the re-formation of human nature through conformity with Christ.³⁶ The notion of "putting on Christ," mimesis of a perfect exemplar, Erasmus draws from his return *ad fontes*—from the Pauline epistles and from Patristic thought.³⁷ It is not just that sixteenth-century society is to be renewed by a return to its sources in classical culture; more fundamentally, human nature is to be renewed by a return to its own proper font, Christ himself. "Our plight would be sorry indeed, had not Christ left us some live coals of his teaching, some living unfailing rivulets from the spring of his mind" (OE lines 181–83; CWE 6:78). Christ, God's Word, has left us his words, and if we return to this spring, clearing it of the dirt of texts and interpretations corrupted through ignorance, ambition, and false ceremonialism, it will well up in us as transformative, living water.³⁸

This does not mean that Christians are, in imitating Christ, fundamentally agents of their own salvation.³⁹ It is true that we are sometimes left with this impression, or the sense that Christ saves just through teaching: "You must only conceive in your mind with great courage the ideal of the perfect life and once it has been conceived, pursue it with vigour. The human mind has never made vehement demands upon itself that it

has not accomplished” (LB V 16B; CWE 66:46). To be sure, these lines are immediately preceded by the remark that subjecting flesh to spirit is easy with God as one’s helper, but the resounding note of the passage is one of self-reliance. Particularly in the *Enchiridion*, Erasmus espouses Neoplatonic assertions of human perfectibility that seem to leave little room even for the doctrines of sin and atonement, let alone the radical dependency of created being.⁴⁰ “We have such a capacity for divinity that we can soar past the minds of the angels and become one with God”; “the soul, remembering its heavenly origin, strives upwards with all its might and struggles against its earthly burden” (LB V 12D; CWE 66:41). Certainly there is in Erasmus no room for the critique that Christian virtue is passive, something simply received or infused. The greater danger from a theological perspective is the heresy of Pelagianism, the claim that human beings, despite the Fall, possess an autonomous capacity for goodness.

There are, in fact, scholars who argue that Erasmus did slide into a semi-Pelagianism that lost sight of the priority of grace insisted on by the Augustinian-Thomist tradition.⁴¹ Certainly the confrontation with Luther’s extreme position on sin and freedom of the will made it easy to shift in this direction. The famous example of the child and the apple from Erasmus’s *Diatribes Concerning Free Will* can be read in a variety of ways: “The child could not have raised himself without the father’s help; he would not have seen the apple without the father’s showing; he would not have stepped forward without the father’s helping . . . ; he would not have reached the apple without the father’s placing it into his hand.”⁴² The child did do something, he did try with all his might to reach the apple, but the child had first to be shown something attractive in order for his active powers to be engaged; not only does the initiative lie thus with the father, not the child, but the child’s activity remains both free and dependent at every subsequent step as well. This is hardly a systematic discussion of grace and human freedom, and thus it is not surprising that it is subject to a variety of interpretations. Its lack of systematicity is also a virtue, though. It does not attempt to pin down the respective contributions of divine and human agency as synergism does; it simply insists on the priority of grace, on free human response, and on the dependency of this response. Human freedom is not defined as acting within a space devoid of divine agency. Moreover, read in light of Erasmus’s affirmation that grace is active in the ways that beauty lures our attention and inspires our activity, the example of the apple captures something of the way Erasmus sees grace as enabling rather than displacing human agency.⁴³

It is Erasmus so understood whose account of Christian virtue might be worthy of retrieval.

Levi makes much of Erasmus's dependence on the Neoplatonic tradition "because that tradition contains both the belief in intrinsic human perfectibility, which was the pole of Erasmus' opposition to the scholastics, and the belief in an autonomous power of self-determination, which was to be the pole of Erasmus' opposition to the reformers."⁴⁴ There was, argues Levi, no way in the sixteenth century (and really no way until Rahner's account of the supernatural existential in the twentieth century) to insist both that human beings are perfected only by norms of belief and behavior that answer to intrinsic rational needs and moral aspirations, and also that human beings can determine themselves to pursue these goods, without thereby falling into Pelagianism. Erasmus and other northern humanists, claims Levi, were in fact striving to articulate just such a power in human nature, "a power of self-determination to good in which faith itself is implicit and in which the acceptance of grace therefore no longer carries Pelagian implications." But because he did not quite have the conceptual resources at his disposal to articulate such a view, Erasmus "deliberately chose to write obliquely, insinuating much but stating only that which he felt he could defend theologically."⁴⁵ This is an intriguing interpretation. Erasmus certainly did insist that spiritual and moral perfection cannot be divorced from one another, that *philosophia Christi* fulfills the best impulses of human nature, and that human persons must be fully active in the process of becoming conformed to Christ. But it is also the case that Erasmus's mature stance is highly critical of Neoplatonic accounts of self-divinization. Against Levi, I would argue that Erasmus ultimately allows no *autonomous* power of self-determination.

While in the *Enchiridion* Erasmus seemed at times too sanguine about human powers of self-perfection, in *Encomium Moriae* Folly attacks the Stoic wise man for his aspirations to godlike self-sufficiency: "What contrast between these divine pretensions and the real condition of the wiseman Folly described! What hypocrisy and self-delusion on his part to attack men as fools when he is first among Stultitia's servants!"⁴⁶ As Wayne Rebhorn has noted, the goddess "fires her heaviest barrage of criticism at [the sage's] arrogant self-divination, in what must be considered a significant rejection of a fundamental humanist tendency." In her culminating persona, as sincere devotee of Christian foolishness, Folly reveals that true wisdom, paradoxically, is humble dependence

on Christ. Far from striving for self-deification, the truly wise “do not trust in their own weak reason or feeble strength, but rely completely on Christ.”⁴⁷ Christians are indeed called to imitate Christ, but this act of imitation is not a willful grasping after divine perfection. Rather, to imitate Christ is fundamentally to imitate Christ’s humility and thus to be willing to be dependent, receptive, open to transformation from without.⁴⁸ Erasmus thus exhorts Christians to be on guard against two forms of the semblance of virtue: one that relies on mere performance rather than transformation of the heart, and one (that of the Stoic sage and Neoplatonic aspirant to divinity) that relies on self rather than God, fundamentally misunderstanding the nature of Christ’s example and its transformative power.

So we may conclude that even when Christ is depicted as teacher, the imitation of Christ is not a moralistic displacement of grace but an acceptance of grace. Christ’s “word has an inner and transforming force that other teachings lack.”⁴⁹ Christ’s word is strongly identified with Christ’s person, “for as he was the essence of simplicity and truth, there could be no dissimilarity between the archetype of the divine mind and the form of speech that issued from it” (LB V 31D; CWE 66:72). In the Gospel we encounter not just persuasive rhetoric but Christ himself, fully present with the power to remake us in conformity with himself. A statue of Christ “represents only the form of the body—if indeed it represents anything of Him—but these writings bring you the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ himself.”⁵⁰ As Lewis Spitz argues, the imitation of Christ for Erasmus “involved the mystic and spiritual indwelling of Christ in the human heart, not merely the outward mimicking of his actions.”⁵¹ Moreover, because power lies ultimately with the Word rather than with the interpreter of the Word, Erasmus is confident that true theology is open to all; “the journey is simple, and it is ready for anyone. Only bring a pious and open mind, possessed above all with a pure and simple faith. Only be docile, and you have advanced far in this philosophy. It itself supplies inspiration as a teacher which communicates itself to no one more gladly than to minds that are without guile.”⁵² No special intellectual gifts or achievements are required, only a willingness to receive what Christ imparts. It is here that Erasmus can sound most like the *Devotio Moderna*, with its disdain for scholarship and its insistence that the spiritual life is open to all Christians.⁵³

Imitatio and *Aemulatio*

Erasmus's embrace of the *Devotio Moderna* ideal of the imitation of Christ comes into sharper focus against the backdrop of his broader reflections on the important Renaissance topoi of *imitatio* and *aemulatio*. Erasmus makes his most significant contribution on this topic in his *Dialogus Ciceronianus*. This dialogue, subtitled *The Ideal Latin Style*, develops a subtle critique of the so-called Ciceronians of Erasmus's day, who regarded Cicero as the epitome of Latin style and sought to imitate him as closely as possible. Some Ciceronians went so far as to refuse to use any Latin words unless they were actually present in Cicero's corpus. In the dialogue, Nosoponus, a caricature of the Ciceronian ideal, is gradually cured of his insanity by Bulephorus and Hypologus. Bulephorus, who represents Erasmus's views, reveals the ridiculous nature of Nosoponus's efforts to imitate Cicero while urging him to seek a higher form of Ciceronianism. What emerges is a contrast between imitation and emulation, in which imitation seeks to be *like* the model and emulation seeks to *surpass* the model.⁵⁴ While such a contrast is implicit even in the classical period, Erasmus appears to have been the first to make it explicit.⁵⁵ G. W. Pigman has argued that *aemulatio* never fully emerges as a technical term because of negative associations that cling to it: *aemulatio* is often seen as inherently conflictual and expressive of negative emotions or dispositions such as envy, even if some authors argued for a distinction between competition and contentiousness that could be used to redeem *aemulatio*.⁵⁶

Erasmus can thus be seen as working in this dialogue to redeem *aemulatio* from these negative associations. He defends the effort to surpass Cicero's style on three complementary grounds. First, in order to become a genuine Ciceronian it is necessary to work as Cicero did, not copy the results of his labor. After all, Cicero did not simply imitate any particular exemplar of style (LB I 1002A–D, CWE 28:401–2). Second, one of the features of excellent style, and thus something to which any true Ciceronian should aspire, is decorum, sensitivity to context. In this sense, the true Ciceronian must actually abandon the example of Cicero, since “wherever I turn I see everything changed, I stand on a different stage, I see a different theatre, a different world” (LB I 992C, CWE 28:383). While Bulephorus remarks on changes of “religion, empire, government, constitution, law, customs, pursuits, even men's physical appearance,” the most significant changes are due to the arrival of Christianity. So he

insists that someone is a Ciceronian “only if he speaks as Cicero would be likely to speak if he were living today as a Christian among Christians, endowed with his original native ability and his oratorical experience, possessed of the same understanding of our concerns that he once had of pagan ones, inspired, finally, with love and loyalty for the Christian world as he was once fired with pride and passion for the city of Rome and the honour of the Roman name” (LB I 997B, CWE 28:392). Third, Bulephorus demands that the true Ciceronian must display something we might be tempted to call authenticity, but that is better termed “expression of natural form.” Each person has his own natural gifts and abilities, and a successful stylist must work with these, not fight against them: “If you want to express the whole Cicero you cannot express yourself, and if you do not express yourself your speech will be a lying mirror.” So “it may well be that the most Ciceronian person is the one least like Cicero, the person, that is, who expresses himself in the best and most appropriate way, even though he does so in a manner very different from Cicero’s—which would be hardly surprising, considering that everything has been completely altered” (LB I 1001A, CWE 28:399).

Erasmus is not simply ridiculing the Ciceronian ideal, even if he is transforming it. His admiration for Cicero is genuine.⁵⁷ While descriptions of *aemulatio* by some authors betray a definite resentment of dependence on authoritative models, this is not the case in Erasmus.⁵⁸ Bulephorus joins genuine respect and gratitude for the model offered by Cicero together with a call to express that very acknowledgment of dependence through the attempt to surpass Cicero.⁵⁹ Still, if the appropriate response to Cicero’s excellent style is emulation rather than imitation, what implications does this hold for Erasmus’s embrace of the ideal of *imitatio Christi*?

One obvious difference between Ciceronian and Christian confronts us at once: Christians are called to imitate not Christ’s style and rhetoric but Christ’s character and action. At the same time, we should not exaggerate this difference, since for Erasmus rhetoric forms character, and character is powerfully conveyed by rhetoric. Moreover, each of the three arguments Erasmus offers on behalf of emulating Cicero is in some way also appropriate to the task of imitating Christ. First, Christians, no less than Ciceronians, will fail if they copy an external result rather than the mode in which their respective models set to work. We have already examined in some detail Erasmus’s critique of false externals. And at one point in *Ciceronianus* Bulephorus draws a parallel between bad

Ciceronians and bad Christians. Those who simply ape Cicero's writings "darken Cicero's name by putting themselves forward under the title of Ciceronian when that is the last thing they are," and "maybe Christ" is defamed, too, "by those who have nothing of him but his name" (LB I 994D, CWE 28:387). So the imitation of Christ involves more, as we have seen, than claiming the name Christian or performing a wooden action.⁶⁰

Second, Christians too must observe decorum, acting suitably to their own social-historical context, if their imitation of Christ is to be meaningful; they should not pretend to be a wandering rabbi in Galilee or seek to be crucified by the Romans. Determining positively what will constitute appropriate imitation of Christ within one's own context is, of course, an immensely challenging task, but at any rate the principle of decorum offers a meaningful constraint on this aspiration. And third, just as aspiring Ciceronians fail if they work at cross-purposes to their own natural forms, Christians too must express themselves as the finite human persons they are, persons with particular characteristics, gifts, and weaknesses. Christ, too, as fully human, was possessed of a particular human character, the peculiarities of whom it would be futile to imitate.

If imitation is futile and self-defeating, what is the point in noting that Christians are called not to *aemulatio Christi* but to *imitatio Christi*? Certainly if we might have been inclined to consider the aspiration to imitate Christ hubristic, the contrast with *aemulatio* makes clear that the attempt to imitate should rather be viewed as expressing humility. Christians strive to surpass their own previous attempts to imitate Christ, but they do not strive to surpass Christ. The competitive aspect of *aemulatio*, however positively construed, is wholly out of place in this context. In relation to Christ as model, Christians recognize no progressive aspect to historical change; to act suitably to our own historical context rather than that of first-century Galilee does not mean that we have surpassed Jesus, though it does mean that we must grapple with weapons of mass destruction and stem-cell research. To recognize Christ as God incarnate is to find in him an inexhaustible exemplarity, which Christians can image or reflect only in some limited and finite respect. Insofar as each human person is capable of imitating this inexhaustible model, we do so in a way expressive of what Erasmus would call our own particular natural form. There is, then, no conflict between imitation of Christ and what we might call authenticity, originality, or self-expression. And, as noted in the previous section, we fail to grasp what is involved in the imita-

tion of Christ if we understand it only as an exercise of human agency. For Erasmus, the exercise of human agency involved in the imitation of Christ is at the same time an indwelling of Christ in us and thus a human participation in divine agency.

Erasmus sustains what Karl Morrison has termed “mimetic Christology,” in which mimesis unites copy with exemplar or, better, reunites copy with exemplar, restoring us to the God from whom we came. To know God is to love God, and to love is to imitate, to move toward, to become one with God. But fallen as we are, “we cannot see, or know, or love God unless He is in us, unless He gives Himself to us.”⁶¹ It is Christ, by uniting in himself both divine and human natures, who brings God to us, makes it possible for us to love God. To imitate Christ is thus to participate in something greater than oneself. Joan Lockwood O’Donovan helpfully characterizes this in terms of *ecstasis*: “the single movement of divine love in which God in Christ ecstatically united himself with sinful humanity so that sinful humanity might be ecstatically united with him in the Holy Spirit.” She rightly grasps that for Erasmus mimesis is fundamentally a matter of participation: Erasmus “conceives the redemption of society in terms of communicating participation in the perfections of Jesus Christ who is the final exemplar of the good and the beautiful.” She worries, though, that Erasmus fails to discriminate sufficiently “the goods of created human community from their disordered condition.”⁶² This is a perceptive critique. As we shall see, however, Erasmus certainly shows himself willing and able to critique disordered goods and communities—always, though, refusing to appropriate to himself the right to draw any absolute line in the sand that would effectively deny that God is already at work to redeem them. For Erasmus, grace is active in our acting, in the beauty of virtue displayed that engages and transforms our affections, allowing us to play a part that becomes our own as we play it. While imitation is an act, there is also a chastening of human agency implied in the cascade. We must be inspired by our exemplars; we cannot simply decide to love them, to find them beautiful. In a sense, then, Erasmus subverts the distinction between acting and being acted upon, fiction and reality, hypocrisy and honesty. Accepting the essential theatricality of virtue involves embracing a paradoxical convergence of outer and inner, ideal and real, grace and nature, other and self. It gives up the preoccupation with control betrayed by the need to draw clear distinctions between self and not-self, acting and being acted upon, giving and receiving.

The Body of Christ

James Tracy has recently suggested that Erasmus's vision of Christian piety is stamped by his opposition to the traditional corporative structure of late medieval society.⁶³ Far from fostering the common good and forming persons into Christs, the traditional guilds, religious orders, and schools had, Erasmus believed, degenerated into conflicting interest groups.⁶⁴ Those in authority—princes, popes, and prelates—Erasmus accused of seeking only the enhancement of their own power. Against the enslavement to human rules concocted by the power hungry, Erasmus called for liberty in Christ (OE 858, line 511, CWE 6:87). Tracy terms Erasmus's vision a form of "religious individualism."⁶⁵ But even if Tracy is right about Erasmus's "reaction against the densely corporatist character of civil and religious life in his native provinces," it does not follow that Erasmus promoted individualism in any usual sense of the word. Christian liberty means for Erasmus accepting as addressed to oneself the command to "Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." Those in authority do wrong in keeping those under their leadership in a state of perpetual infancy, requiring them to obey the whims of those over them without allowing them to make the least progress toward their true goal, that of putting on Christ (OE 858, lines 504–10, CWE 6:87). They promote a passive piety, one that will obey without questioning and venerate without emulating. "They love to hear themselves called fathers; and yet what father is there in real life who wishes that his children may remain infants always, that he may rule them more easily at his own sweet will?" (OE 858, lines 507–10, CWE 6:87). But Erasmus's vision is not of a host of independent, self-sufficient sages. Those at "liberty" nevertheless make up the Body of Christ.⁶⁶

The letter to Paul Volz, with its conception of the church as composed of three concentric circles surrounding Christ, presents what at first appears as a corporatist vision, in which fixed higher social orders mediate salvation to lower social orders—clerical and religious orders to princes, princes to common people. But as the letter proceeds, it subtly dismantles this authoritarian hierarchy from within. So after saying that the common people belong in the third circle because they are as yet only infant Christians, Erasmus adds, "if now someone thinks that this circle is more suitable for princes, there will be no serious difference of opinion between us. For if we observe their characters, we shall hardly find Christians more rudimentary than they" (OE 858, lines 333–35, CWE 6:82). Princes

may not in fact be closer to Christ than common folk. And Erasmus goes further—"among monks there are some who are barely included in the outermost circle," while "among those who have married twice there are some whom Christ thinks worthy of the first circle" (OE 858, lines 354–57, CWE 6:83). So it is not the case that the badge of membership in any particular group carries with it spiritual authority. But neither is this simply a vision of private pursuits of perfection. Rather, those more fully formed in Christ—whoever they may be, clerical or lay, royalty or commonfolk—assist those farther from the goal.⁶⁷ There is a vital place for human authority within the Body of Christ, but it should be held by those who are mature in their piety, those capable of inspiring by example rather than coercing by threats. At its origins, the monastic life approached this ideal; "they ruled this great concourse of men without violent language and whipping and prisons, but solely by teaching and exhorting, by mutual service and by examples of godly life" (OE 858, lines 558–60, CWE 6:88). Real spiritual authority is a teaching authority, and so temporary and limited. Only the example of Christ cannot be superseded; any human example can go only so far in conforming others to Christ. Erasmus can recognize gratefully how existing Christian authorities and practices have formed in him piety and virtue while at the same time calling these authorities and practices to something higher in the name of Christ. He refuses to separate from communion with the Church of Rome, but at the same time he is an untiring critic of corruption within its ranks, unafraid to acknowledge that "sometimes it is none too clear where the church might be found" (OE 734, line 50, CWE 5:233).

One Step Closer

Erasmus offers what is at once a demanding and an indulgent vision—all are called to the perfection of Christ, "there is no reason to excuse any walk of life from pursuit of this goal," but at the same time "piety like other things has its infancy, it has its periods of growth, it has its full and vigorous adult strength" (OE 858, lines 352–53, CWE 6:83, 82). We start out in a realm of illusions, of false appearances, relying on externals, and we progress insofar as we come to discern that these are indeed externals that point beyond themselves, rather than mistaking them for ultimate reality. For Christians, this may involve moving beyond an understanding of eternal bliss as a reward for devotional observances. For pagans,

this may involve growing appreciation of the dependent character of all human virtues. As we see in this final section, Erasmus at his most indulgent can seem simply to buy into an ethic of honor, self-interested pursuit of heavenly bliss, or Neoplatonic absorption into the spiritual realm. In fact, though, Erasmus refuses to demonize any of these while calling each beyond itself into the humble fellowship of divine love.

For all his insistence that Christians aim at their true end, conformity with Christ, Erasmus is quite tolerant of “impurity” of intention.⁶⁸ So, for instance, he does not shy away from setting up a contrast between the illusory rewards available in this life and the true and lasting rewards offered by God, even if this would seem to instrumentalize the goal of conformity with Christ. Speaking of the soul’s combat against vice for the sake of virtue, Erasmus reminds his reader that “since heaven is promised to him who fights valiantly; would not the lively courage of a noble spirit glow with ardour at the prospect of such an auspicious reward? Especially since the author of this promise is one who could no more deceive than he could cease to exist” (LB V 3D; CWE 66:27). Similarly, Erasmus contrasts the false honor offered by the world with the true honor that comes from being approved by God; “the only honour to be sought after by a Christian is to be praised not by men, but by God” (LB V 62B; CWE 66:121). Virtue, conformity to Christ’s charity and humility, rather than constituting our final end, seems here to be a prerequisite for an external goal, one that can be conceived of independently of the means or path that leads to it. If so, we might also pursue the reward of heaven for ourselves in a selfish or problematically self-referential way. These are of course the same set of objections with which we wrestled in connection with Augustine’s thought. For Augustine, though, it is in fact clear that virtue is partially constitutive of our final end. Eternal life, properly understood, is life in the enjoyment of God, which is possible only for friends of God, those whose love of God and creation has been perfected—that is, for the truly virtuous. The same is true of Erasmus, although it is also typical of him that for all his insistence that Christians must aim at their true end of conformity with Christ, Erasmus is at the same time quite tolerant of “impurity” of intention.

If we pause to consider Folly’s final contrast between illusion and reality, we will be in a position to grasp both the ambiguity/impurity of Erasmus’s depiction of our last end and the reasons for it. In her final persona, as devotee of Christian piety, Folly interprets Pauline foolishness of the cross through Plato’s myth of the cave: “the common herd of men

feels admiration only for the things of the body and believes that these alone exist, whereas the pious scorn whatever concerns the body and are wholly uplifted towards the contemplation of invisible things” (LB IV 501C; CWE 27:150). From the perspective of those entrenched in what is visible, bodily, and material, the pious appear foolish or even mad. And in a sense they are indeed mad, explains Folly, as she sets out to show that “the supreme reward for man is no other than a kind of madness” (LB IV 520D; CWE 27:152). Following Plato, she insists that all lovers are mad, since “anyone who loves intensely lives not in himself but in the object of his love.” Analogously, “when the soul is planning to leave the body and ceases to make proper use of its organs, it is thought to be mad, and doubtless with good reason.” Life in heaven will be the fulfillment of this lover’s madness, for “then the spirit will itself be absorbed by the supreme Mind, which is more powerful than its infinite parts.”

One thing that is evident from this discussion is that the “reward” of heaven is not the fulfillment of the self’s subjective desires but in fact is a radical unselfing; “and so when the whole man will be outside himself, and happy for no reason except that he is so outside himself, he will enjoy some ineffable share in the supreme good which draws everything into itself” (LB IV 520D; CWE 27:152). Also clear is that “heaven” is not merely an external reward; while only a foretaste of heavenly madness is possible in this life, the struggles of the pious transform them in ways that make possible absorption by the supreme Mind; in heaven “the spirit will be the stronger, and will conquer and absorb the body, and this it will do the more easily partly because it is, as it were, in its own kingdom, partly for having previously in life purged and weakened the body in preparation for this transformation” (LB IV 520D; CWE 27:152).

We might still worry that this Neoplatonic vision bears few if any distinctively Christian marks. Although heaven is depicted as the perfection of love, it is described in impersonal terms: “absorbed by the supreme Mind,” “some ineffable share in the supreme good.” But here, as always, Erasmus preserves the language of Neoplatonism while interpreting it through the lens of Christian charity. Immediately prior to this Neoplatonic vision, Folly, discussing the “spiritual element” of the Eucharist, offers a glimpse of a fully relational account of the new life. Christians must express the death of Christ “through the mastery and extinction of their bodily passions, laying them in the tomb, as it were, in order to rise again to a new life wherein they can be united with him and with each other” (LB IV 501C; CWE 27:151). Here asceticism serves

the prior demands of charity, and acts of charity are partly constitutive of our final end of unity. Folly's litany of the acts of Christian "folly" can also be read in this way: Christians "squander their possessions, ignore insults, submit to being cheated, make no distinction between friends and enemies, shun pleasure, sustain themselves on fasting, vigils, tears, toil, and humiliations, scorn life, and desire only death" (LB IV 498C; CWE 27:149). We are reminded, then, that ultimately we must grasp our final end as communal enjoyment of God, the culmination of a growing friendship in charity.

Three distinguishable accounts of our last end appear together across Erasmus's writings: (1) eternal happiness, given by God as a reward to those who have valiantly sought it and have rejected merely temporal happiness; (2) reabsorption of the human spirit into the supreme Mind or spirit, made possible by leaving the body and anticipated through asceticism; and (3) unity with Christ and one another, made possible when we are all conformed to Christ's charity and humility. For the first, but not the second and third, heaven is an external good that is granted in response to the presence of certain prerequisites. Moreover, for the first, heaven is sought as a good for the self. Virtuous action is primarily understood as rejection of false goods, as *contemptus mundi*, rather than as the growing perception of true goods. For the second and third, heaven is anticipated by the pious in this life; it is not purely external, since it is constituted in part by a transformation of human character that begins here and now. From these perspectives, heaven is not sought as a proprietary good of the self; for the second, it is possible only through absorption of the self, while for the third, it is possible only when shared. But though for the second the end is not purely external nor sought merely for the good of the self, to conceive heaven in this way empties much of the activity of Christian charity of all but instrumental significance. Only for the third is neighbor-love itself properly constitutive of our last end.

This ambiguity about the last end reflects once again Erasmus's inclusive instincts and his pedagogical optimism: to understand our end as external reward is incomplete and immature, but it has its role to play in engaging the aspirations of human persons (kindling the lively courage of a noble spirit); "if it is not granted to all to arrive at the perfect imitation of the Head, all must none the less strive with all their strength to reach it. He who has earnestly resolved to become a Christian has already acquired a good share of Christianity" (LB V 23B; CWE 66:58).

In this sense, Erasmus's ongoing exhortation to Christians to think of the reward that awaits them is of a piece with his exhortation to a young man inclined to sin: "if neither hope of immortality nor fear of eternal punishment can restrain him, then let the thousand disadvantages that attend the sinner even in this life act as a deterrent. . . . If Christ is of little account to you, although you cost him dearly, refrain from base conduct at least for your own sake" (LB V 51C; CWE 66:105). Neither focusing on winning a reward for oneself nor abstaining from vice for one's own sake is conformity to Christ's charity (even if Erasmus sees the former as closer to that end than is the latter), but insofar as each has the chance of engaging human affections, each also has the chance of beginning to transform those affections: "although it is dangerous to remain any longer in this state, as if at the crossroads, as they say, nevertheless for those who cannot yet rise to heroic virtue, it would be much more advantageous to have a firm footing in civic virtue than to plunge precipitously into all manner of immorality. This is not the final goal of happiness, but from there one is one step closer to happiness" (LB V 51C; CWE 66:105). Even the splendid vices of pride and love of honor can be transformed from within; they can engage us in practices of charity whose intrinsic goodness we come to grasp as we participate in them. That such things can constitute steps in the right direction rather than the opposite exposes one of Erasmus's underlying assumptions—original sin has not meant loss of the image of God in humankind. Erasmus does not share the acute consciousness of sin and hatred of the world that Jean Delumeau has argued was developed in the monasteries and then spread to society as a whole at the end of the Middle Ages.⁶⁹ In fact, for Erasmus everything in creation still contains an imperfect resemblance to God and thus has the capacity, when rightly understood and employed, to bring us nearer to God.

Pagans, too, then, by practicing virtue, imitating the beautiful exemplars set before them, and acknowledging their dependency on these exemplars, may be embarking on a journey whose end they do not yet grasp. They, too, are in the process of being transformed by Christ's beauty, even if they do not yet know how to name this. Erasmus had few qualms about insisting that pagans who lived before Christ are saved, though he was to be censured for this.⁷⁰ "Saint Socrates, pray for us!" exclaims one of the characters in "The Godly Feast" (*Convivium religiosum*), adding that reading the treatises of Cicero has convinced him that this pagan, at least, must truly have been favored by divine inspiration.⁷¹ In the preface to his edition of the *Tusculan Disputations*, Erasmus suggests

in his own voice that there is good reason to think that Cicero, with his innocent, even saintly, life, was saved. Moreover, if pagans are saved through their virtue, this is not a dismissal of grace; those saved prior to the preaching of the gospel were nevertheless saved by Christ, communicating Himself to them in some other way.⁷² While Erasmus is explicit only about pre-Christian pagans, Levi, as we have seen, argues that Erasmus sought to articulate the necessity of grace for salvation while at the same time insisting that this grace is available to all.⁷³ Even if Levi's argument is too conjectural, it remains clear that Erasmus's attempt to make room for pagan virtue coheres with his general trust that we can take baby steps toward conformity with Christ even when we do not yet even explicitly desire this conformity. While one might expect that an ethic of mimetic participation in Christ would require explicit recognition of Christ, in fact Erasmus is open to the possibility that persons can, in imitating the exemplars whose moral beauty they *are* able to recognize, already begin to be assimilated to Christ by grace.⁷⁴

What is sometimes presented by Erasmus as a simple distinction between false and true goods, illusion and reality, exterior and interior, turns out to be a telescoping set of contrasts, in which what from each stage appears as an adequate grasp of truth and reality is shown at the next stage to have been inadequate. It is to be expected that *in via* we are simply not yet able fully to distinguish ultimate truth from penultimate illusions. What finally distinguishes our muddled virtue from a *false* semblance of virtue is our recognition, however inchoate, of the merely provisional character of whatever virtue we now have, of the fact that wherever we have arrived is merely one step in a continuing journey, a stage that must be surpassed. Erasmus's aspiration for invisible reality, despite its Platonic heritage, is not finally an expression of contemptus mundi but a yearning for a community of perfect love as yet only tasted. Those deceived by the semblance of exteriority make the mistake of taking as final what is only preliminary. So they regard the performances that should serve to transform the heart's affections as themselves sufficient for virtue and piety. And rather than grasping their agency as enabled by and participating in divine agency, they hold on to an illusion of themselves as independent and unconditioned and therefore worthy of honor. The remedy against the false semblance of virtue, which denies its own provisional status, is acceptance that all human virtue remains a semblance of perfect virtue insofar as it is still preliminary, impure, clothed in illusion. Moreover, it remains fundamen-

tally always mimetic, a copy, not an original. This recognition should not, though, lead to self-castigation, despair, and immobility, but rather continually feed our aspirations. Since neither we ourselves nor the communities and practices that have formed us are perfectly conformed to Christ's virtue, we are summoned always to critique both personal and social semblances and seek to embody something higher. We recognize that we are only *in via*, but we grasp at the same moment that we *are* on The Way. Hence the whole program of *philosophia Christi*, more a matter of the affections than of syllogisms, "inspiration more than erudition, transformation more than reasoning."⁷⁵ We must fall in love with the truth that is Christ, even if we are not yet able fully to understand our beloved, and even if in order to do so we must be progressively and dramatically transformed by our love. We emulate that which we love and in so doing are transformed, restoring the likeness to God in which we were first created.