From an Outsider’s Point of View: Lorenzo Valla on the Soul

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Abstract
In his *Repastinatio*... Lorenzo Valla launched a heavy attack on Aristotelian-scholastic thought. While most of this book is devoted to metaphysics, language and argumentation, Valla also incorporates chapters on the soul and natural philosophy. Using as criteria good Latin, common sense and common observation, he rejected much of standard Aristotelian teaching on the soul, replacing the hylopmorphic account of the scholastics by an Augustinian one. In this article his arguments on the soul’s autonomy, nobility and independency from the body are studied and analysed. His critique of Aristotle’s opinions on natural phenomena as being untrue to what we observe will also be briefly studied. His arguments do not show him always to be deep or consistent thinker, but the critical review of Aristotelian philosophy proceeds from some philosophically interesting assumptions. Moreover, from a broader historical perspective his undermining of Aristotle’s authority may be regarded as a contribution to the final demise of the Aristotelian paradigm, even though the humanist critique was just one factor in this process.

Keywords
Lorenzo Valla, soul, humanism, Augustinianism

1. Introduction: An Archcritic of Aristotelian Philosophy in our Midst?

Today one no longer needs to excuse bringing humanism into a discussion on Aristotelian traditions regarding the *scientia de anima*.¹ Humanists contrib-

uted significantly to the rediscovery, dissemination and understanding of a great number of important texts on natural philosophy, medicine, and mathematics. Through textual studies, they also influenced scientific practices and techniques, as well as fostered new ideas on scientific methodology. Humanists interested in Aristotelian psychology turned to the Greek text of the *De anima*. New translations were made, though older ones, particularly that of William of Moerbeke, remained in use. They also explored the ancient commentary tradition on Aristotle, editing and translating the works of, for example, Philoponus, Simplicius and Themistius.

Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457), however, is not generally associated with natural philosophy or psychology. Certainly, Valla was one of the most important humanists of Quattrocento Italy. His *Elegantiae linguae Latinae* became an international bestseller and gave the humanist programme some of its most trenchant and combative formulations. Valla has long been understood to be an extremely hostile critic of all things Aristotelian—someone who accused the entire *natio peripatetica* of presenting a skewed picture of the supernatural and natural world, and of man. This picture, he implied, was based on their complete misunderstanding of Latin and of the workings of language more generally. Valla thus attacked the Aristotelian-scholastic tradition *tout court*, disproving of their language, methods and approaches.

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4) A critical discussion of Valla’s programme is presented in my forthcoming book *In Defense of Common Sense. Lorenzo Valla’s Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (I Tatti Studies in