Fifth-Annual Bainton Lecture:

Cicero and Erasmus' Moral Philosophy*

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I.

In the dedication to his edition of Cicero's Tusculan Disputations in 1523 Erasmus wrote to John Vlatten that "when I was a boy I liked Cicero less than Seneca, and I was twenty before I could bear to read him for long, though I liked almost everything else." Erasmus turned twenty between 1486 and 1489, depending on which year one accepts as his birthdate. He entered the monastery at Steyn in 1487. Erasmus thus began to read Cicero shortly after he entered the monastery. What was the nature of their encounter?

II.

We can perhaps appreciate more fully the relationship between Erasmus and Cicero if we highlight some of the aspects of Cicero's thought on which Erasmus drew. Cicero wrote his "philosophical works" between 46 and 44 B.C.E., at the end of an active life as a statesman. All of them take the form of narrative dialogues, modeled on the popular works of Aristotle, now lost, but known to Cicero. In narrative dialogues (unlike the Platonic dialogues), the setting is always elaborated so that the conditions of the encounter are vivid to readers. The participants are real or historical people

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who develop standpoints of their own, each of these standpoints is respected by the other participants, and, finally, everyone is left free to determine the final resolution of the debate.  

Cicero’s personal attitude toward the philosophies he discusses is conducive to the narrative dialogue form. He describes that attitude often. Here is one account from the Tusculan Disputations:

[I] prefer the rule of the Peripatetics and the Academy of discussing both sides of every question, not only for the reason that in no other way did I think it possible for the probable truth to be discovered in each particular problem, but also because I found it gave the best practice in oratory.  

Cicero, as he says, leans toward the Academy, that is, toward a skepticism which suspends judgment regarding questions of absolute truth—which can never be determined by rational inquiry—in the interest of discovering what is, in any particular case, most probable. In book 2 of the Academy Cicero defends this position in his own name against the attacks of Antiochus (called Lucullus in the dialogue), who had succeeded Cicero’s teacher Philo in Athens as head of the Academy. Antiochus returned to the older position of the Academy that the senses were reliable and that knowledge is possible. Cicero responds that he is as much fired with a passion for the truth as anyone, but he finds persuasive reasons for rejecting the "dogmatists," not the least of which is that they disagree among themselves, both about physics and about ethics. Moreover, it can be shown that the senses are uncertain and that the ancients fell into many errors in their judgments and opinions. Epicurus recognized that if one holds that the senses give certain knowledge, and if the senses can be known to err at any point, then everything collapses. Probability is a much better guide than this; it does not prevent all action but in fact makes action possible. At the end of the dialogue Cicero places in the mouth of Catulus a view that summarizes his own position, and which he in fact accepts after Catulus enunciates it:

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3 Tusculan Disputations, II. 9; Loeb Classical Library, trans. J. E. King (Cambridge, MA, 1960), 155. See also Tusculan Disputations, I. 8; II. 4; IV. 7; On Ends, I. 15, 27; On the Nature of the Gods, I. 1; On Divination, I. 7; II. 1, 28.