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Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. Pp. xii + 401. USD\$42.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-674-03269-9.

Reviewed by Margaret Cameron, University of Victoria

Lodi Nauta begins his study of Humanist scholar Lorenzo Valla (1407–1457) by explicitly acknowledging that historians of medieval and scholastic philosophy might be surprised by and dismissive of his choice of topic. But, as Nauta urges, this dismissive attitude would be a mistake, in part because of the intrinsic value of Valla's critical stance on the tradition that precedes him (and which continued to dominate the university curriculum at this time) that is given in Valla's *Repastinatio* (or "re-tilling" of Aristotelian-Scholastic philosophy). More importantly, however, it is precisely because of Nauta's familiarity with Scholastic philosophy that he is finely suited to evaluate and, where possible, appreciate Valla's critique of it. One of the greatest achievements of this excellent volume is the extent to which Nauta succeeds in correcting the many, often rather serious, misunderstandings of Valla's views — and by extension, the role of humanist criticism — that have been advanced by scholars who lacked philosophical knowledge of the historical period being criticized.

As it turns out, scholarship on Valla is rife with philosophical confusion. Given Valla's persistent attention to language in combination with his reductionist metaphysics, Valla is frequently paired with the great fourteenth century nominalist William of Ockham. Given his preference for the *usus communis* of speaking, Valla is also commonly compared with Ludwig Wittgenstein and other proponents of the "ordinary language school" in the early twentieth century analytic philosophical tradition. Throughout the volume, Nauta takes care to illustrate that, despite often superficial similarities and common outcomes, Valla's and Ockham's projects were radically divergent in style, execution, and, crucially, motivation. Put succinctly, Ockham is motivated by straightforwardly philosophical concerns, be they epistemological or metaphysical. He turns to the highly technical resources of late Scholastic logic to effect his views, all the while wanting to preserve, insofar as he can, the Aristotelian philosophical edifice. Ockham is a philosopher in his own right but he is squarely within the Aristotelian tradition. Valla, on the other hand, is motivated differently: he is an anti-Aristotelian, wants to divest Latin of Scholastic barbarisms generated in the medieval schools, and, ultimately, aims to purify theological discourse of what he takes to be the pernicious effects of philosophical terminology and theory. Moreover, Valla's focus is on good classical Latin, not on the logic of language itself. After reviewing Nauta's arguments distinguishing Ockham from Valla, although one wonders how so many comparisons were ever made, it seems unlikely that any scholar would attempt to do so again.

Whether the comparison between Valla's methods and goals and that of the ordinary language tradition is warranted is taken up by Nauta in the book's final chapter. A review of Nauta's interpretation

of Valla's negative arguments against Aristotelian metaphysics and logic will help to outline the reasons for Nauta's mostly negative assessment of this frequent association.

In Defense is organized into three parts. The first part tracks Book 1 of the *Repastinatio*. Nauta focuses on Valla's criticisms of Aristotelian logico-metaphysics (the ten categories, six transcendental terms, the predicables, as well as the technical terminology of form and matter, act and potency). According to Nauta, Valla's central aim is to "cut back this useless superstructure of technical jargon and empty concepts by reducing them to what he considers to be the basic elements of a common-sense world view" (13). Careful attention is given to Valla's understanding of "res" (thing, stuff) which plays a key role in Valla's positive philosophical theories. For example, Valla redraws the traditional Porphyrian tree, replacing "substance" with "thing" at its top. Valla's religious motivations start to show here since he draws separate ontological trees for corporeal and incorporeal substances, generating what Nauta calls a combination of a "metaphysical with a biological-physical division of all there is" (32).

In this part, Nauta corrects a lot of confusion over a much-cited topic in Valla's philosophy, namely, his treatment of words (*voces*) and things (*res*) which several scholars have erroneously claimed were identified by Valla (resulting in what Nauta calls "some rather far-fetched interpretations" [59]). The troublesome passage from Valla is this:

So 'thing' signifies thing: the latter is signified, the former is its sign or mark; the one is not a word, the other is a word which can then be defined as follows: 'thing' is a sound or word, embracing the significations of all words in its own. You may say: 'Thus word is above [more general than] thing, because thing too is a word'. But the signification of 'thing is above . . . the signification of 'word', that is, of 'sign': and that is why word or sign is a thing, and merely one thing. (*Repastinatio* 123:23 – 124:4; [58])

At first glance, this passage, especially with its varying uses and mentions of the terms "word" and "thing", does seem tricky. While the details of Nauta's interpretation need not delay us, importantly, he draws on the scholastic-Aristotelian background with which Valla was sufficiently familiar to make clear sense of Valla's meaning. By defining "signification" (to make known, to bring something to mind), and pointing to Aristotle's well-known and widely accepted lesson that "a definition is a phrase signifying a thing's essence," we can see that Valla does not identify words and things. Instead, "'word' is *not* more general than 'thing', even though 'thing' too is just a word, since 'thing' refers to all things (including words, which as sounds are physical *things* after all), while 'word' refers solely to words (a subclass of things)" (59). Without an awareness of the Scholastic background to logic, these distinctions are not recognized and much confusion arises.

The last part of Part I presents Valla's reduction of Aristotle's ten categories to just three: substance, quality, and action. Nauta's outline here is sharp and helpful, as is his careful attention to distinguish Valla's aims from Ockham's well-known reductionist metaphysics. The justification for Valla's reduction of the categories is presented by way of "appeal to authorities [especially Cicero and Quintilian], common linguistic usage, and reason" (94). This strategy is in keeping with Valla's philosophical justifications elsewhere in the *Repastinatio*. At the same time, however, it is only in Part II of *In Defense*, in chapter 6 "Speaking about the Ineffable: The Trinity," that Nauta reveals what may have been Valla's motivation for the reduction: it provides a model for understanding the Trinity (195). Valla's theological views were controversial, and in 1444 he was the subject of an Inquisitorial process (204). By ascribing qualities to God, and by claiming that the "most fitting word" for God is "Person," Valla comes close to the Sabellian heresy (194). Although Nauta mentions the overlap between Valla's categorical triad and his treatment of

the Trinity, a closer study of Valla's motivations might have brought out more clearly the religious motivations for his critique of Scholastic logic and metaphysics.

The remainder of Part II takes up Valla's views on the soul and nature, and on the virtues. Here, Valla comes out most poorly as a critic of Scholasticism since (despite other scholars' comments to the contrary) he is not well versed in the sophisticated and complex medieval theories of soul, nor of the virtues. The value of these chapters lies especially in Nauta's clarifications of Valla's real impact on the tradition of research on the soul and nature. Contrary to previous characterizations, Valla is not an empiricist (although he does rail against transcending the limits of sense and imagination), nor does he advance "a very precise inductive and experimental approach in science" (144). On the contrary, Nauta convincingly argues, Valla does not advance a non-Aristotelian natural science at all (150).

Part III deals with Valla's well-known "rhetoricization of dialectic" which is advanced in Books 2 and 3 of the *Repastinatio*. Nauta's explication of Valla's achievements provides a catalogue of the topics Valla covers, and he emphasizes Valla's attention to contextualizing traditional Aristotelian (syllogistic) logic. Nauta points out a tension in Valla's overall approach: "Comparison with systems of laws and customs underscores the historical and cultural embeddedness of language (*any* language), while Valla also uses classical latinate style as a yardstick for ruling out later developments of that language" (222). Anyone interested in the history of the development of logic — both formal *and* especially informal — would do well to review this section of Nauta's book with care.

The final chapter and conclusion of *In Defense* takes up the Valla-Wittgenstein (more broadly to include ordinary language philosophy) directly. A note here specifically on Nauta's achievement can be generalized to the book as a whole: *In Defense* is a model of philosophical historiography, and many lessons are to be gained by looking at what Nauta achieves. Nauta doesn't mince words: "It is precisely a weak grasp of both terms of the comparison that has led, on the one hand, to far-fetched claims and, on the other hand, to justified but ultimately ineffective rebuttals" (273). For example, while both Valla and Wittgenstein pay careful attention to grammar in their linguistic analyses, and both pay mind to language in use, the terms "grammar" and "use" for each of them mean something importantly different. (As Nauta cleverly notes, scholars "have been misled by the surface grammar of the words 'grammar' and 'use'" (286)!) This chapter, and the book as a whole, serve as excellent examples of the kind of care that needs to be taken by historians of philosophy especially in their efforts to draw comparisons between philosophers in widely distinct philosophical contexts.