

THE HEDONISTIC CALCULUS IN THE RENAISSANCE

Mariano Vilar*

Abstract: In his letters and maxims, Epicurus advises his readers to weigh each pleasure and pain since on occasion a small pain should be tolerated to obtain a greater pleasure, and a small pleasure should be avoided if it will bring a greater pain. This idea is commonly known as the “Epicurean calculus” or “hedonistic calculus.” In the Renaissance, the reappraisal of Epicurus implied rethinking the meaning of this calculus according to the parameters of Christian life. Lorenzo Valla’s *De vero bono* (1431) and Erasmus’ *Epicureus* (1533) show two different ways in which this measuring of pleasures and pain can be reinterpreted to fit new contexts and meanings. We will focus on the meaning that the calculus acquires when it includes heavenly pleasures and in the significance of *utilitas* in relation to the measuring of the advantageous or disadvantageous effects of our actions.

Keywords: Pleasure, Renaissance, hedonistic calculus, Epicureanism, hedonism, Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus, *De vero bono*, *Epicureus*, ethics.

INTRODUCTION: THE EPICUREAN CALCULUS

Epicurus’ “Letter to Menoeceus” is the main source for understanding his moral philosophy. There we find the following statement regarding the choice of pleasures and pains:

Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting-point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, inasmuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge of every good thing. And since pleasure is our first and native good, for that reason we do not choose every pleasure whatsoever, but will often pass over many pleasures when a greater annoyance ensues from them. And often we consider pains superior to pleasures when submission to the pains for a long time brings us as a consequence a greater pleasure. While therefore all pleasure because it is naturally akin to us is good, not all pleasure is should be chosen, just as all pain is an evil and yet not all pain is to be shunned. It is, however, by measuring one against another, and by looking at the conveniences and inconveniences, that all these matters must be judged.¹

The *symmetresis* (“rational measurement” or “calculation”) that appears in the last line necessarily implies the use of *phronesis*, which is exalted a few paragraphs later. This combination of hedonism, which is based on feelings, and calculation, which is based in rational thought, is one of the most important aspects of Epicureanism.² It was through this idea that Bentham created his utilitarian “hedonistic calculus” (also known as “felific calculus”) in the last years of the 18th century. It is also one of the tools which allowed Epicurus and his followers to rebuke two of the most frequent accusations of their enemies and rivals: that Epicurus equated men to beasts, and that he promoted a life of debauchery. Using the Epicurean calculus, it was possible to show that these luxurious pleasures could never be endorsed by Epicurus, since they implied a greater pain, and therefore they should be shunned even if they can be

* Instituto de Filosofía, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras (Universidad de Buenos Aires), 4th floor, Puan 480, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires. Email: marianovilar@filo.uba.ar. This paper was written as part of my research funded by a postdoctoral scholarship granted by CONICET.

¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives Eminent Philosophers* ed. and trans. Robert Hicks (Cambridge, MA 1991) X, §129–130.

² Norman DeWitt *Epicurus and his philosophy* (Minneapolis 1964), 191 points out that the calculation of advantages was the freedom that provided the control of experience. See J.C.B. Gosling and C.C.W. Taylor *The Greeks on Pleasure* (Oxford 1982) 356–357 for a detailed account of some of the problems involved in the calculation, particularly regarding Epicurus’ conception of time, which will not be treated here.

considered “good” in a certain way. Also, the measurement and comparison implied in the calculus made it possible to show that the ability to perform it was related to the human mind, and therefore did not lead to bestiality. The difference between the universal desirability of pleasure and the caution we must employ to choose between them is one of the most distinct characteristics of Epicureanism, and one that helps to distinguish it from other hedonistic traditions.³

It is true, however, that the idea that the benefits of pleasure should be compared with the pain that they might produce was already present in Plato’s *Protagoras*, although the aporetic nature of this dialogue makes it harder to establish the real thoughts of the author on this subject.⁴ In this dialogue, Socrates explicitly states that to choose pleasures a man must have knowledge about measurements (*metretikos*), and that our happiness in life depends on “the right choices of pleasure and pain” (357b).

However, in the *Phaedo*, the position about this measurement seems to be the opposite. Here Socrates explicitly condemns those who consider themselves self-restrained because they choose their pleasures carefully only because they aspire to obtain eventually bigger satisfactions: “they conquer pleasures because they are conquered by other pleasures” (69a). Socrates opposes this kind of calculation to the true virtue that lies in wisdom, which goes beyond mundane strategies.⁵ This is not surprising if we take into account the overall anti-hedonistic tone of the *Phaedo*.⁶

We will not attempt to trace all the different forms the hedonistic calculus had in the Greek philosophical tradition. The contrast between Plato’s *Phaedo* and Epicurus’ “Letter to Menoeceus” (and perhaps the *Protagoras* as well) will be enough to illustrate the two different attitudes about this matter. However, before we analyze the reinterpretation of these ideas in the *Quattrocento* and in the first years of the *Cinquecento*, it is important to see how the hedonistic calculus appears in one of the most influential Latin moral treatises, Cicero’s *De finibus bonorum et malorum*. Although this text does not put forward new ideas on the subject, we must take into account its importance for the divulgation of Epicureanism and Stoicism theories on the *summum bonum* in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Torquatus, the spokesman of Epicureanism in the dialogue, presents the hedonistic calculus early on his dissertation in a simple and straightforward manner:

³ Alain Gigander “Le calcul épicurien des plaisirs: l’utile et l’agréable,” in Laurence Boulègue and Carlos Lévy, eds., *Hédonismes: Penser et dire le plaisir dans l’Antiquité et à la Renaissance* (Paris 2007), 85–94, states that the difference with the Cyrenaics consists in the fact that Epicurus always conceived pleasure in relation to the advantageous. For him, all choices were related to the *telos* of a happy life and not to specific amounts of pleasure.

⁴ We will not enter here in the long-standing debate about the evaluation of pleasure by Plato in this dialogue. The recent book by Clerk J. Shaw, *Plato’s Anti-Hedonism and the Protagoras* (Cambridge 2015), who defends the idea that Plato was never a hedonist (at least in the sense where this implies bodily pleasures) presents an updated point of view of this matter. DeWitt (see n. 2 above) 66, also suggests that Epicurus was indebted to Plato for the utilitarian calculation of advantages related to pleasures.

⁵ There are many excellent monographs regarding Plato’s views on pleasure. See Gerd Van Riel *Pleasure and the Good Life. Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists* (Leiden 2000) and Beatriz Bossi, *Saber gozar: estudios sobre el placer en Platón: Protágoras, Gorgias, Fedón, República, Filebo* (Madrid 2008).

⁶ The *Philebus* is one of the richest sources for understanding Plato’s conflicting relations with hedonism. In this dialogue, Socrates proposes a classification of pleasure that is not related to the pains it could bring in the future, but to the “purity” of pleasure in relation to its cause.

And so the wise person will uphold the following method of selecting pleasures and pains: pleasures are rejected when this results in other greater pleasures; pains are selected when this avoids worse pains.⁷

A few lines after this passage, Torquatus comes back to the same idea in an even simpler formulation which empathizes the parallel between *voluptas* and *dolor*: “aut voluptates omittantur maiorum voluptatum adipiscendarum causa aut dolores suscipiantur maiorum dolorum effugiendorum gratia” (I, 36).

In the second book, Cicero’s character objects to this reasoning because it puts virtue in the position of a maiden of *voluptas*, which is contrary to its dignity and an offense to the moral values of the Roman heroes of the past. This is vividly expressed by referring to a fictional *ekphrasis* composed by the Stoic Cleanthes, where the virtues appear as maidens to *voluptas* sitting in a royal throne (II, 69). In this image, the virtues would whisper advice into Pleasure’s ears about which pleasure should be taken with care because it may beget some pain.⁸ This picture, horrific to any worthy citizen of Rome, points to the idea that virtue should not be measured by the gains it can produce. It is its own reward, as Cicero stated in his *De officiis* and several other writings.

The strong association between Epicurus and the calculation of pains and pleasures in the *De finibus* secured the transmission of this aspect of his moral philosophy, while Plato’s *Protagoras* sunk into oblivion during the Middle Ages. The fathers of the Church generally omitted any mentions of the calculus when they condemned the Epicureans for their hedonism and atheism.⁹ Lactantius, even when he recognizes a certain superiority of Epicurus in comparison with Aristippus of Cyrene, does not mention the calculus and does not hesitate to call him “the champion of hedonism in all its horror,” suggesting that his philosophy is only fit for those who pursue their own interests and disregard all decency and morality.¹⁰

In broad terms, the balanced and clear-minded attitude which is needed for the measurement of pleasure and pains implies the possibility to think beyond immediate desires, admitting at the same time that there is truth in at least some of these desires (as well as there is truth in all the pleasures that are related to them). The overall idea of a calculation implies a critique of the “bestial” hedonism of those who simply throw themselves into pleasures without acknowledging the consequences, and is therefore contrary to the famous association between Epicureans and pigs in Horace’s letter to Albius Tibullus. As we said, it also represents an alliance between the feelings of the animal body and the reasoning power of the soul of man. This alliance goes against the notion of the body as a “prison” of the soul which appears in the *Phaedo*, and that was later characteristic of Neoplatonism. Epicurus’ *phronesis* is supposed to help daily decision-making, and it is rooted in the material world we see with our senses, the only one that exists according to this philosopher. The measurement of pleasure and

⁷ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, trans. Raphael Woolf (Cambridge, MA 2001) I, 33.

⁸ “You will be shamed, I tell you, by that scene which Cleanthes used to depict so skillfully in his lectures. He would ask his audience to imagine a painting of Pleasure, decked out in gorgeous regal attire, sitting on a throne. By her side are the Virtues, depicted as servants who consider that their whole duty and function is to minister to Pleasure and whisper her warnings (if this can be conveyed pictorially) to take care not to do unwittingly anything which might offend public opinion, or bring her pain in any way.”

⁹ See Richard Jungkurtz, “Christian Approval of Epicureanism” *Church History* 31 (1962) 279–293 for a detailed description of those aspects of Epicureanism that were approved by the Church Fathers.

¹⁰ Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones*, trans. Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey (Liverpool 2003) III, 17, 35.

pain is not concerned at all with our role in society, with our legacy after we die, and much less with the afterlife. However, as we will see, some of these elements were reintroduced into the Epicurean calculus during the Renaissance.

THE CALCULUS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE REAPPRAISAL OF EPICURUS

Although the importance of Epicurus (whose texts were known thanks to the testimonia contained in the tenth book of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*) and Lucretius in the Renaissance had been acknowledged long ago by Don Cameron Allen and Eugenio Garin, in the last decade the number of books on this subject has increased dramatically.¹¹ There is not, however, a consensus about the way it influenced the beliefs of the humanists that took part (as editors, commentators, correctors, interpreters, or simply readers) in this process. While Greenblatt stated that that the recovery of Lucretius led to the "birth of the modern world," Palmer pointed out that in most cases the Renaissance readers of Lucretius were mainly interested in formal aspects of the poem and in extracting historical and/or mythological information.¹² Although our overall perspective is similar to Palmer's, we believe that any kind of generalization regarding the influence of Epicurus is almost as impossible as any generalization about the worldview of the humanists of this period. This is the reason why we will focus on a short number of texts by Valla and Erasmus that present an original take on the Epicurean calculus. However, before we start working with them, it will be useful to see a few minor examples of how the calculus appeared in the central years of the *Quattrocento*, when Epicurus' writings started to be consolidated as a valid research interest for those who specialized in the *studia humanitatis*.

Leonardo Bruni's *Isagogicon moralis disciplinae* is usually regarded as one of the first texts that compare the different moral theories of the Ancients from a humanist perspective. Bruni wrote this text between 1424 and 1425, which means that he probably did not have access to Lucretius' poem.¹³ The translation of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* to Latin was performed by Ambrogio Traversari in 1433, although due to Bruni's knowledge of Greek, this does not make it entirely impossible for him to have read it before this date. However, the *Isagogicon* description of Epicureanism is brief and does not suggest a thorough effort to present information recently discovered by manuscript seekers, copyists, and translators. His goal is simply to describe the main ancient theories about the *summum bonum* and their relation to one another. Bruni's sources on Epicureanism seem to be Cicero and Seneca, two authors that were hardly unknown in the Middle Ages. This is what he says regarding the calculation of pleasures and pains:

They therefore maintained that the wise man would choose to pass over the lesser pleasures and seek after the greater; he would endure small pains in order to avoid the greater and more serious ones. This, generally speaking, was the opinion of Eudoxus, Aristippus, and

¹¹ Don Cameron Allen, "The Rehabilitation of Epicurus and His Theory of Pleasure in the Early Renaissance," *Studies in Philology* 41 (1944) 1–15; Eugenio Garin, *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano: Ricerche e documenti* (Florence 1961) 72–93.

¹² Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York 2011); Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA 2014). Two other excellent books on the subject are: Allison Brown, *The return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, MA 2010); Susanna Gambino Longo, *Savoir de la Nature et Poésie des Choses. Lucrèce et Épicure à la Renaissance italienne* (Paris 2004).

¹³ Although the poem was discovered in 1417 by Poggio Bracciolini, who sent it to Niccoli in Florence, it was not until several decades later that it started to be copied and read by other humanists. See Ada Palmer (n. 9 above) for more details about its circulation according to the latest research.

Epicurus, although there was some disagreement more or less as to the importance of bodily pleasures.¹⁴

Here the calculus is mentioned as a *comparatio* between bigger and smaller pleasures and pains. This idea is not, however, attributed to Epicurus specifically. It is shared by the other two most famous ancient hedonists: Aristippus and Eudoxus (a philosopher mentioned repeatedly by Aristotle in his characterization of pleasure in the tenth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*). The only difference between them that comes out of this passage is that Epicurus gives less value to the corporeal pleasures. This is an important qualitative difference, and it is the main reason why his figure should be valued above the most questionable defenders of *hedone*.¹⁵ Although Bruni defends the superiority of the Aristotelian ethics, he does not consider them to be in opposition to the correct interpretation of Epicurus.¹⁶ This is clear when he states that for Epicurus *voluptas*, *iustitia* and *temperantia* are inextricably linked.

Cosma Raimondi's letter to Ambrogio Tignosi in defense of Epicurus was written in 1429, which means that he probably could not have had access to Lucretius or Diogenes Laertius, especially since he was in Lombardy at the time.¹⁷ Still, the description of the main tenets of Epicureanism is more detailed here than in Bruni's text, as the position of the author is much more favorable towards it. Raimondi does not give any details about the hedonistic calculus, but he points out the importance of judgment (*delectus*) in the choice of pleasures:

In fact, so far was he [Epicurus] from wanting us to live without virtue that virtue is actually essential for living up to his teaching, since it constrains and directs, as it were, all the bodily senses (as we argued already) and does not permit us to make use of them except when needed. Epicurus does not slide into pleasure in the manner of animals, without the exercise of judgment and when necessity does not require it, but rather enjoys it with restraint when it is right to do so.¹⁸

¹⁴ "Itaque eum esse sapientis delectum aiunt, ut prætermittendis minoribus sibi maiores comparet voluptates et doloribus parvis suscipiendis maiores graviusque repellat. In hac ferme sententia Eudoxus et Aristippus et Epicurus fuere, etsi eorum alius plus, alius minus tribuerit corporeis voluptatibus." The English translation was taken from Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins and David Thompson, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni* (Binghamton 1987).

¹⁵ Eugenio Garin, *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano: Ricerche e documenti* (Florence 1961) 73 points out that for Bruni Epicureanism was inferior to other philosophical schools since it did not value civil life and the political intervention of the wise.

¹⁶ Bruni participated in a famous debate with Alfonso de Cartagena regarding the new translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that he produced, and that he considered far superior to the medieval ones that were used in the Western Universities from the 13th century. One of the points of the discussion was the translation of *hedone*, which for Bruni should always be translated as *voluptas* according to the Ciceronian usage. Alfonso, on the other hand, thought that *voluptas* was a word tainted by its Epicurean resonances.

¹⁷ The information we have on Raimondi's life is sparse. Gambino Longo (n. 9 above) 60 points out that he surely did not have access to any Epicurean original source and that he based his entire interpretation on Cicero's texts. His influence on Valla's *De vero bono* has been acknowledged by Ricardo Fubini, *Umanesimo e secolarizzazione da Petrarca a Valla* (Rome 1990) 339–394. See Martin Davies, "Cosma Raimondi's Defence of Epicurus," *Rinascimento* 27 (1987) 127–139 for more details.

¹⁸ "Sed vir sapientissimus hoc non dicit nec postulat, tantumque abest ut sine virtute esse nos velit, ut etiam servandis persequendisque illius institutis maxime virtus sit necessaria, quæ et sensus omnes corporis, de quibus supra est disputatum, quasi quodammodo cæceat et dirigar et his, nisi cum opus sit, uti nos non sinat. Non enim Epicurus sine delectu et necessitate non postulante, quemadmodum pecudes, ad voluptatem delabitur, sed cum oportet, et modum adhibens, ea fruitur; ut haud illius doctrina negligenda sit et explosa iudicanda ac Peripatetici non satis ipsi quoque quid dicant intelligere videantur." We quote by the translation by Davies included in Jill Kraye ed., *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts* (Cambridge, MA 1997).

Even if Raimondi does not mention the measuring of pleasure and pain, here we can see that besides the emphasis in the virtuous nature of Epicurus' *voluptas*, we can find a series of words that underline the activity of reason over feeling. For instance, the senses are *constrained* and *directed* (the verbs in Latin are *coerescere* and *dirigere*). The difference in the way beasts and epicurean men deal with pleasure is therefore clearly distinct.

We have to wait until 1457 for a more comprehensive description of Epicurean philosophy. In this year the young Marsilio Ficino, who had not yet begun his famous translation of Plato's *Opera Omnia*, wrote a brief treatise called *De voluptate* (sometimes called *Liber de voluptate*) in which he compared the different views on pleasure of the main philosophic figures and schools of antiquity. Here we have for the first time a conscious use of Lucretius and Diogenes Laertius Epicurean texts. Ficino quotes both of them copiously in a favorable light, which led some of his readers to associate this text with an "Epicurean phase" in Ficino's thought.¹⁹ His description of the calculus at the beginning of the eighteenth chapter (the second one devoted to Epicureanism) is therefore more precise than the ones that we found so far. He clearly makes a distinction between pleasures that should be avoided (*fugiendae*) and those that should be sought after (*expetendae*) according to the effects they have and their relative duration. He states that "etsi voluptates omnes bonae sint, non tamen in omnibus sitam esse beatam vitam," establishing the distinction between eligibility and desirability that lies in the heart of Epicureanism. The opposition between *expetere* and *fugere*, which are relative, and *bonum et malum*, which are absolutes, is defined in equal terms in relation to pleasure and pain.²⁰

It is important to note, however, that not all those interested in the *studia humanitatis* had a similar vision of Epicurus' ability to differentiate between convenient and inconvenient pleasures. Bartolomeo Scala, a contemporary of Ficino who shows some marks of the influence of Lucretius, describes the Epicurean attitude to *voluptas* in terms that are contrary to the ones we found until now:

And even though the Epicureans seem to me to merit utter rejection I hear that some do not altogether despise them. As defenders of pleasure, they say that sorrow and pain not only are bad, but are actually the worst of things, and seem to regard them as even less tolerable than the Stoics did. If you say this, you must necessarily say that we should regularly step back from justice, fortitude and every sort of honor so as to avoid pain and sorrow...It would better suit Epicurean pleasure I think—since we cannot go through life with no experience at all of suffering—if throughout life we see and recognize as quickly as possible the sufferings

¹⁹ The alleged "Epicurean phase" has been much debated. Raymond Marcel, *Marsile Ficino (1433–1499)* (Paris 1958) 277 states that even if Ficino cannot be considered an Epicurean, the deception that caused him the poor reception of his *Institutiones Platonicae* and his interest in Lucretius could be considered a hint of a certain pessimistic materialism that was part of his youthful vision of the world.

²⁰ The full passage reads as this: "Omnem insuper voluptatem suapte natura bonam esse, atque expetenda, fugiendam tamen interdum alterius gratia, quae eam ex immoderatis, et turpibus actionibus suscipiuntur, vitare ob eam causam oportere, quod brevissimae sint, ac fragiles, se cumque ferat penitentiam, curam, sollicitudinem, atque dolorem. Dolores itidem per se fugiendos omnes esse, alterium tamen gratia, eos suscipiendos, quicum leves, ac brevissimi sint, maximas quasdam sint nobis voluptates, et commoda praestaturi, etsi voluptates omnes bonae sint, non tamen in omnibus sitam esse beatam vitam, necque enim eam quae motu fit, ad beatam vitam se ipsa contentam esse, nec ad beate vivendum sui gratia penitus necessariam, caeterum absolutam illam tranquillitatem, quae placidam animi quietem corporisque indolentiam continet, summum omnino bonum putant." The Latin text was taken from the 1576 edition of Ficino's *Opera Omnia*. To our knowledge, the text has never been translated into English.

that are to come and if we start to take up arms now against them, preparing ourselves to resist them and fight back as well as human strength allows.²¹

These lines are pronounced by the character of Cosimo de Medici in Scala's *Dialogus de consolatione*. Although Scala has a more positive view on Epicurus in some of his works, here the perspective runs against the very idea of a pleasure that makes itself virtuous as a result of a careful calculation and judgment.²² A few lines further on he says his philosophy is only adequate for a *muliercula*. Interestingly, however, this text makes reference to one of the implications of the calculus. According to Epicurus, one should not spend time worrying about the possible bad things that may happen to us, since this would mean we would live most of our lives in distress.²³ This could be considered a consequence of the hedonistic calculus: even if we recognize that being prepared for pain is useful, the proportion of mental distress we would need to experience to be continuously ready would be too big. It is better to live pleasantly and endure the occasional pains that life may offer us, than to sacrifice this fundamental pleasure only because there is always the shadow of a possible misfortune. This is a central aspect of the relaxed attitude with which Epicurus sought to deal with life's problems, and in some senses it runs in a different direction from the imposition of the mind over senses that we observed in Raimondi's description. Here Cosimo's character (who just lost his son, Giovanni) is forced to reject such a view, and even if in some other passages he doubts the functionality of the Stoic system, his critiques are less intense than the ones dedicated to the school of the Garden. When the character of Scala answers him, he approves his views on Epicureanism, even though the introduction of the calculus and the *phronesis* that it implies would be a natural way to show that even if all pleasure is good and all pain bad, not all pleasure should be sought.²⁴

With the exception of Scala's *Dialogus*, the texts we have been describing thus far show us an awareness of the importance of measuring pleasure and pain to grasp the true meaning of Epicurean philosophy. However, Bruni, Raimondi and Ficino do not attempt in any of the passages we quoted to think beyond the original intention of Epicurus. In order to revitalize the importance of the calculus it was necessary to think of new contexts and problems where it could be applied. This is what we will find in the texts of Valla and Erasmus.

²¹ "Nam et Epicurei, qui etsi mihi penitus improbandi videntur, tamen audio a quibusdam non omnino contemni, dum voluptati faventes, dolorem dicunt non solum malum sed etiam summum, minus etiam quam Stoici tolerabilia videntur afferre. Qui enim ita dicit, idem dicat necesse est ab iustitia, ab fortitudine, ab omni fere honestate frequentissime, ne in dolorem incidant, esse recedendum. [...] Multoque melius, ut videtur, Epicureorum voluptati erit consultum, quandoquidem sine omni penitus incommoditate tota non traduci vita potest, si quam citius fieri per ætatem poterit, ea perspecta et cognita necessitate, iam tum ceperimus contra ea quæ ventura sunt arma et ad resistendum repugnandumque pro viribus humanis nosmet ipsos paraverimus." We quote both the Latin and English text from Bartolomeo Scala, *Essays and Dialogues* ed. and trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Cambridge, MA 2008) 25.

²² For an analysis of the Lucretian elements in Scala's works, see Allison Brown (n. 9 above) 16–42.

²³ This is especially relevant regarding death, since the anticipation of it is a cause of suffering that should be eradicated from the wise man's soul. Bodily pain should not be dreaded because if it is intense is short, and if it's long, it's not as intense. All of these maxims can be found in the tenth book of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*.

²⁴ Scala's character replies: "Indeed, you have convinced me for the first time to reject Stoicism, if I may call it by that name, though I used to be a follower of that school; and you have made me flee more than ever, by Hercules, from Epicureans with their seductive pleasure and soft insidious effect on our life." *Dialogus de consolatione* (see n. 21 above) 28.

THE EPICUREAN CALCULUS IN VALLA'S *DE VERO BONO*

Lorenzo Valla's *De vero bono* is frequently mentioned as an example of the new attitudes of the cultivators of the *studia humanitatis* towards Epicureanism. However, it has been known for some time that the chances of Valla having known Epicurus' or Lucretius' texts in 1431 are extremely low, as we have just seen with other texts on the subject written before 1450. This does not mean, however, that Valla's figure is not relevant for studying the impact of Epicureanism in the *Quattrocento*. The fact that a young author who longed to be included in the inner circle of the most celebrated humanists of his day would resort to Epicurus to write a defense of *voluptas* reveals the desire to challenge some of the medieval preconceptions about pagan philosophy.

According to Valla's proem, the goal of his *De vero bono* is to show the dangers of overestimating the Stoic notion of *virtus* (or *honestas*), since all true happiness must come from the Christian God. If man could be made happy and wise with only the power of virtue, the Incarnation would have been in vain. Epicureanism is presented in this work as a better philosophy than Stoicism because *voluptas* can be linked, for Valla, to Christian *caritas*, while *honestas* is an empty notion that only serves to dissimulate the philosophers' quest for personal glory.²⁵

The *De vero bono* is written as a Ciceronian dialogue. Its main inspiration seems to be the *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, where Epicureanism is also contrasted with Stoicism.²⁶ Given the fact that, as we have seen, this last text includes a commentary on the calculus (from a positive and a negative point of view), we cannot doubt that Valla was familiar with this notion. In Valla's text, the defender of Epicureanism is Maffeo Vegio, and his speech occupies the larger part of the dialogue. Although his interpretation of *summum bonum* is ultimately surpassed by the Christian message (introduced in the text by the friar Antonio da Rho), his reflections on the nature of pleasure are thoroughly developed. In some cases, Valla recovered them as his own in later texts.²⁷

We can trace the influence of the Epicurean calculus in two different passages of the Epicurean speech in the *De vero bono*. None of them is, however, entirely explicit. We cannot find the calculus as it was presented in the words of Cicero's Torquatus, but some of the reasoning behind Valla's Maffeo Vegio can be traced to it. For instance, this is what this character says in the dialogue about the choice of pleasure in relation to sickness and health:

For someone suffering from fever, for example, what is harmful is not the pleasure found in drinking cold water but the quality of the water, which would have harmed him even without pleasure. I remember having drunk water without any pleasure at all (for sometimes the water at hand is disagreeable); I also remember that a most delicious water, drunk to satiety

²⁵ We will not enter here in the details of the debate between different interpretations of this complex text. In the Preface to her English edition of Lorenzo Valla, Maristella Lorch tried to summarize the main debates relating them to the position of two editors from the first years of the 16th century: Pietro Aleandri and Josse Bade. While the first one valued the work as a bold statement of a Christian refuting pagan virtues through a reinterpretation of the meaning of *voluptas*, the latter considered that the first two parts of the book were entirely condemnable and unworthy even of an Epicurean. Aleandri's perspective on the text is much closer to current interpretations that often underline the religious perspective of Valla's questioning of *honestas* and dismiss an Epicurean reading of the text. See Lorenzo Valla, *On Pleasure*, ed. Maristella Lorch, trans. Kien Hieatt (New York 1977) 27–28.

²⁶ See David Marsh, *The Quattrocento Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA 1980) for a thorough analysis of the dialogical structure of the text and its relation to other manifestations of the genre in this period.

²⁷ Both his *Dialecticae disputationes* and his *Apologia* contain a reflection on Epicurus and on the meaning of *voluptas* that parallel some of the key passages of *De vero bono*.

and with much pleasure, against the doctor's orders and in the very heat of fever, was good for me, so that no blame can be attached to the pleasing taste of the water. Thus, every kind of pleasure is good.²⁸

We do not find here a concrete reference to the comparison between pleasures and pains. The main purpose of Vegio's reasoning, however, is oriented to the same problem, and reaches the same conclusion: all pleasure is good, but from this it does not follow that all pleasure should be chosen. The man with fever should not trade the small pleasure of drinking cold water for the harmful consequences that it would have on his well-being, and inversely, a healthy condition will be a considerable pleasure (the highest pleasure of the body for the Epicureans) that can be traded for the small pain of thirst.

Although the calculus is somewhat presupposed in these lines, it should be noted that Valla's Vegio adds two elements that are not clearly present in the Epicurean (or Ciceronian) sources. In the first place, there is a clear distinction between the *voluptas* provided by the water, the quality of the water itself, and the sick condition of the man in the example. All these elements are vital for determining the difference between the goodness of pleasure and the situations in which it should be measured. The best choice must be a rational consideration of these three aspects, of which *voluptas* is the only one that is good in itself. This adaptation to context is highlighted by Valla in a much more concrete fashion than the rational measurements of pleasure and pain, which is only presupposed here.

Vegio's lines go actually one step further. He does not only bring out the different elements involved in the choice and makes a clear distinction between pleasure and whatever provokes it: he also emphasizes that there are not absolute laws regarding the calculation, since his own experience tells him that sometimes fresh water will not hurt a feverish man. The invocation of experience as the ultimate truth appears frequently in Valla's work, where he uses it in combination with the *sensus communis* to disregard philosophical and historical fallacies.²⁹ The fact that pleasure is recognized instinctively as a good thing by humans and animals alike is a common argument in Epicurean texts which reappears in many of the *Quattrocento's* works that deal with *voluptas* in a positive fashion. Here, it is combined with a reflection on the nature of sickness that goes against the possibility of establishing a definite measurement of pleasure and pain that can be abstracted from their concrete circumstances.

Although this passage may seem of minor significance if we consider it by itself in the totality of the *De vero bono*, it should be noted that Valla uses this same idea in his *Dialecticae disputationes*, his most important philosophical treatise.³⁰ It is clear that

²⁸ "Non voluptas que est, verbi gratia, in bibenda aqua frigida nocet febrem patienti sed qualitas aque que etiam sine voluptate nocuisset. Nam memini sine ulla voluptate (nam contingit aliquando insuavis aquae) bibisse, contraque iussum medici in ipso estu febris dulcissimam aquam et ad satietatem et suavissime potam saluti fuisse, ut nihil imputari dulcedini aque possit. Quare omnis voluptas bona est." (DVB I, XLII). All the quotes from *De vero bono* were taken from the Lorch edition (see n. 25 above).

²⁹ Carlo Ginzburg, *History, Rhetoric, and Proof* (Hanover 1999) analyzes the use of this recourse in Valla's declamation on the *Donatio*. Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA 2009) analyzes it in his *Dialecticae disputationes*.

³⁰ In this text it reads as follows: "The same philosophers and Plato especially have the view that some enjoyable things are good and others evil. It is not enjoyment that should be called 'an evil,' however, since this is what nature strives for and what satisfies it. It is some man's weak and foolish choice—like drinking cold water in a fever even though bodily health is more enjoyable than the brief enjoyment of drinking the water." *Dialecticae disputationes* I, 10, 62. We quote by Nauta's edition: Lorenzo Valla, *Dialectical disputationes* (Cambridge, MA 2012).

Valla (and not only the fictional Vegio) considered it a solid defense of the true nature of *voluptas* and its relation to the human capacity to judge what is good in specific circumstances. Vegio makes another statement that refers more clearly to the Epicurean calculus in the second book of the *De vero bono*:

To answer a generic question, personal advantage is defined as that which, in any action, excludes or clearly compensate for the possibility of personal harm. [...] One might describe as very similar to these the kind of people who prefer small goods to great ones; certainly those things should not be considered goods that bring greater evils in their train.³¹

This discussion of the relation between the amounts of pleasure and harm is clearly taken from Epicurean sources. It should be noted however that here the relation between the measurement of harm (*damnum*) and pleasure is analyzed in the light of one of the key concepts of books I and II of *De vero bono: utilitas*. This concept is at least as important as *voluptas* in the first sections of this text, and only recedes when the focus changes to the joys of the life in Heaven.³² *Utilitas* is the main tool with which Vegio attacks all those who pretend to act for virtue's sake, while in fact they just search for the goods that honor provides. *Utilitas* comes from rational choosing and is therefore tightly connected with the calculus, but it goes beyond the strict relations between big or small pleasures and pains. As we see in the passage quoted above, it is the principal element that measures the quality of a man. It is also the tool which demonstrates the hypocrisy that often lies behind what is considered to be *honestum*.

In the first book, Vegio links *utilitas* to *voluptas* through a quote by Lucanus which he deliberately took out of context.³³ This association goes against the idea that *utilitas* cannot be separated of *honestas* which Cicero defended passionately in his *De officiis*. Vegio's argumentation is based on the notion that there cannot be anything "useful" in a virtue which pretends to be its own reward. A virtuous act, according to this, would be self-enclosed, while in his view a truly useful act should produce a concrete result, which can be translated to a form of pleasure. A few lines later, Vegio makes the Epicurean claim that ultimately the priority must be to avoid danger, anxieties, and hardships ("primum quidem est ut malo careas, periculis, sollicitudinibus, laboribus").³⁴ This would mean that the principle of *utilitas* is mainly understood as a way to avoid anything (pleasurable or not) that will bring problems afterwards. Again we find the calculus in an almost explicit manner.

However, even if we could find more passages in Vegio's speech that amount to the same idea, it is difficult to ascertain that the moral attitude that is presupposed in Epicurus' "Letter to Menoecus" is present in his speech. The orator in Valla's text starts his discourse by claiming that nature is a provident force that has given mankind pleasure as the main gift. He claims therefore that all fears regarding the supposed

³¹ "Etenim ut aliquid generaliter respondeam, ea demum dicenda utilitas que aut citra damnum aut certe ipso damno maior est. [...] His simillimos dixeris qui parva bona magnis preponunt; immo vero nec pro bonis habenda sunt que a tergo maiora mala important." *De vero bono* (see n. 25 above) II, XV.

³² Fubini (see n. 17 above) 369–370 points out the relevance of *utilitas* in Valla's dialogue and he interprets it as a critique of the Augustinian differentiation between *uti* and *frui* which forbade the enjoyment of anything which is not strictly related to the Divinity.

³³ Valla quotes a speech of Pothinus in Lucan's *Bellum Civile* (VIII, 486–487) where this royal counselor advises Ptolemy to carry out the treacherous assassination of Pompey. It is clear that this passage does not reflect Lucan's own opinion, since Pothinus is clearly an evil character, apt for "suadere malis et nosse tyranos."

³⁴ Lorenzo Valla, *De vero bono* (see n. 25 above) II, XV.

cruelty of nature should be abandoned and that we must show our gratefulness by enjoying the multiple goods that surround us. This contrasts with Epicurean physics, which were carefully left out of the discussion by Vegio and his fellow humanists at the beginning of the dialogue. Even if both Epicurus and Vegio declare that we should not fear a vengeful nature and that our main goal must be to avoid creating anxieties and troubles that arrive when we are unable to calculate the consequences of our actions, for Vegio this difficult task had been partially solved by a providential “mother” nature. Epicurus, on the other hand, believed that nature does not have any *telos* whatsoever, and that the responsibility for a well ordered life of *ataraxia* lies in man alone. This is why even with its insistence on the possibility of satiating our natural desires with little effort, Epicurean philosophy is imbued with a sort of melancholy that we won’t find in Valla’s text.³⁵

As we have seen, during Vegio’s speech the possibility of enjoying life is related to the calculation of *utilitas*. After his speech ends, however, Antonio da Rho sets out to prove that there is a higher way of *voluptas* that goes beyond this Earth. In order to do so, he introduces a new calculation:

This experience [of pleasure] is twofold: one pleasure now on earth, the other hereafter in the heavens [...]; one pleasure is the mother of vices, the other, of virtues. Let me speak more plainly. Whatever is done without hope of the later pleasure and in hope of the present pleasure is a sin: not only in major matters, as when we build a house, buy property, enter trade or get married, but also in the least important, as when we eat, sleep, move about, talk, and wish for something. In all these things both a reward and a punishment are offered to us. Therefore we must abstain from the pleasure here below if we want to enjoy the one above. We cannot enjoy both of them, because they differ from each other as do heaven and earth, soul and body.³⁶

The notion of a *duplex voluptas* had been introduced by Valla in the proem of the first book, where he stated that his intention consisted in going from earthly goods to heavenly ones in a gradual manner. Here we find, however, a clear cut division between two types of pleasure that cancel each other. As Antonio’s description of the bliss of heaven (that comes shortly after the passage we just quoted) proves, the difference between them is beyond words. Heavenly pleasure is stable, while the one that comes from our daily lives is uncertain and deceptive.

Antonio also quotes the Gospel of Luke: “He who gives up earthly things for God shall receive much more here below and eternal life in the time to come.” (Luke 18:30).³⁷ This quote belongs to the speech of Christ to the rich men who would not give away their wealth, and it is a key element in our understanding of the meaning of the hedonistic calculation in Christianity. Christ promises that the goods that we

³⁵ Alberto Grilli, *Il problema della vita contemplativa nel mondo greco-romano* (Milan 1953), 36 stated that: “Se osserviamo con esame scrupoloso e al di sopra di pregiudizi le dottrine del nostro filosofo [...], ai nostri occhi, alla nostra dinamica sensibilità di moderni nessuna etica antica pare velata da una tristezza costante più di questa in cui si parla tanto di piacere, ma in cui, a ben vedere, si fanno chiare distinzioni, nette riserve.”

³⁶ “Nam ea duplex est: altera nunc in terris, altera postea in celis (...), altera mater est vitiorum, altera virtutum. Dicam planius. Quicquid citra spem illius posterioris fit propter spem huius presentis peccatum est; nec in magnis modo, ut quod domos edificamus, fundos emimus, mercature operam damus, matrimonium contrahimus, verum etiam in minimis ut quod comedimus, dormimus, ambulamus, loquimur, cupimus, pro quibus omnibus et premium nobis et pena proposita est. Quare hac abstinendam est si frui illa volumus; utraque non possumus, que non aliter inter se contrarie sunt quam celum et terra, anima et corpus.” Lorenzo Valla, *De vero bono* (see n. 25 above).

³⁷ A very similar line appears in Matthew 19:20 and Mark 10:30.

abandon in this life will be returned “a hundred times” in the life to come. This would mean that all the pains of this existence are ultimately small pains if we compare them with the enormous satisfaction that we will experience afterwards. According to Valla, we love God mainly because he is the efficient cause of these promised satisfactions.³⁸

But even if it’s possible to create a link between that which Christ demands and promises and the Epicurean calculus, there are deep differences between them. In the first place, while Epicurus made his evaluation of the importance of *phronesis* to determine the better way to a happy life, he deliberately excluded any consideration of the afterlife, since for him and his followers this notion had no real meaning. The dread of the consequences of our choices in a post-mortem existence was to be eradicated in the same way as any fear concerning the gods. The separation between earthly pleasures and heavenly pleasures is not entirely comparable with the one that exists between “small pleasures” and “big pleasures,” at least if we accept the idea that the nature of heavenly pleasure is essentially different, as the soul and body are essentially different in Valla’s passage quoted above. This implies that they are not strictly comparable in a quantitative manner, even though the difference of value between them is clearly stated.

But the most important difference is the introduction of the notion of sin, which is thoroughly absent in the Epicurean formulation of the calculus, as it was absent in Vegio’s concept of *utilitas*. Antonio declares that the earthly pleasure is not just uncertain or small, it is also *mater vitiorum*, it is *peccatum*. This is why both types of pleasure are mutually exclusive and not simply different in quality. The punishment for a poor choice of pleasures goes beyond the impossibility of attaining greater ones. It becomes the cause of wretchedness and condemnation.

All these elements point to the considerable distance between the hedonistic calculus and the opposition between earthly and heavenly pleasure, which implies (even though Valla barely makes any mention of hell in his book) the small pains of earth and the eternal pains of hell. However, at least in Valla’s text, the importance of *voluptas*, which Antonio makes equivalent to *caritas*, goes beyond moral righteousness or religious fear: it is the true cause of our efforts in this existence. This means that the calculation inspired in the search for the greatest pleasure that drives the common man is still essentially right, and that there is a possible comparison between types of *voluptas*. Otherwise they wouldn’t be both called with the same word.³⁹ Despite what the passage we quoted about the *duplex voluptas* may suggest, sin and hell are not important elements in Valla’s work. Antonio deliberately dismissed any talk about these topics in his Christian reinterpretation of the subject of the dialogue.⁴⁰ The situation of the man on Earth is not perpetual sin and guilt: it is the joyful expectation (*spes*) of the life to come.

ERASMUS’ REINTERPRETATION OF THE CALCULUS

Erasmus’ interest in Epicureanism can be found as early as *De contemptu mundi*, one of the first texts he wrote. Although the date of the composition of this text (that was not published in an authorized edition until 1521) remains unknown, it is supposed to

³⁸ This idea appears in the *De vero bono* and it is further developed in the *Dialecticae disputationes* (see n. 30 above) 269.

³⁹ Vegio uses this argument to refer to the distinction between bodily and spiritual pleasures in II, XXVIII: “At ipse non itelligo, cum unum atque idem nomen sit, quo pacto possimus rem facere diversam.”

⁴⁰ Specifically, Antonio rejects talking about the pains of hell due to the moral probity of his illustrious hearers, who clearly do not need to be frightened this way. See *De vero bono* III, XVI (n. 25 above).

have been written around 1490. By this time Erasmus had already read some of Valla's *Elegantiae*, but it is hard to establish if he knew the *De vero bono*.⁴¹

The knowledge of the Epicurean corpus had increased significantly in the years between Valla's death in 1457 and the last years of the *Quattrocento*. Many of the texts we mentioned at the beginning of this article, such as Marsilio Ficino's *Liber de voluptate*, had already made clear expositions of the Epicurean philosophy, and Lucretius' poem had been circulating for some time.⁴²

The *De contemptu mundi* is famous because of the relation it makes between the pleasures of those who choose the secluded religious life and the teachings of Epicurus. Although Bultot has proven that much of what has been said about the originality of this text is questionable, it is still in many senses a remarkable testimony of the new uses of Epicureanism in early modern Christianity.⁴³ Its importance for us is twofold: it reveals an early interest of Erasmus in the hedonistic calculation, and it will also serve as an anticipation of the discussion of this subject in his *Epicureus* from 1533.⁴⁴

The purpose of the *De contemptu* is to make a convincing case about the benefits of taking the habits and abandoning the secular world. Most of the text is therefore devoted to describe the hardships and temptations of life outside the monasteries, where opportunities for sin are abundant and peace of mind is impossible. Epicurus' teachings do not make an appearance in this section of the text. However, there is hint of the calculation of pleasures and pains in an imaginary dialogue that the author of the text has with a sailor. According to Erasmus, if we ask a sailor if his line of work gives him trouble, he will say that it does, but that these troubles are minor in comparison with the expected profits. Overall, his life is made pleasant even with the inconveniences and dangers he experiences because: "sweet profits sweeten every pot."⁴⁵ Erasmus concludes this dialogue with the following remark: "If the dim hope of making a slight profit sweetens the hardest labor for these workmen, why should we not experience the same effect when we have certain hope for eternal happiness?"⁴⁶

Although this is not more than an analogy, it is significant that here a Christianized form of the hedonistic calculation is directly linked with the capitalist calculation of risk and profit. This is another layer that was absent in the Epicurean original idea and that it will be important for the utilitarian reappraisal of the calculus. The question is not to obtain *aponia* and *ataraxia* but to reasonably calculate winnings and losses. Abandoning earthly pleasures will always be a profitable decision for a Christian man,

⁴¹ A summary about the issues related to this text dating can be found in Rummel's introduction to the English translation of this text *The Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto 1988) 129–133.

⁴² The *editio princeps* is from 1473, when Erasmus was seven years old.

⁴³ Robert Bultot, "Érasme, Epicure et le *De contemptu mundi* d'Érasme" in Jerome Coppens ed., *Scrinium Erasmianum* 2 (Leiden 1969) 205–238.

⁴⁴ For Peter Bietenholz, *Encounters with a Radical Erasmus. Erasmus' Work as a Source of Radical Thought in Early Modern Europe* (Toronto 2009) 114, the relation between Christianity and Epicureanism in this text is "awkward," since the fact that Epicurus denied all forms of afterlife it's in open contradiction with the idea that the *voluptas* of the monks can be obtained by their faith in future rewards. According to James Tracy, *Erasmus of the Low Countries* (Berkeley 1996) 22, the most important aspect of this text lies in the fact that Erasmus avoids dealing with the basest forms of *humilitas* and self-deprecation that often appeared in a text of this genre.

⁴⁵ "At contra, plurimæ res sunt quæ me fatigari non sinant. Quæ? Primum dulce lucrum quid non dulce faciat?" *De contemptu mundi* VIII, 647. We quote from the Latin edition of the *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* ed. Sem Dresden (Amsterdam 1977) V–I, 3–86 and the English translation of Erika Rummel (see n. 41 above).

⁴⁶ "Si operariis istis lucelli vllissimi incerta spe summus dulcescit labor, quidni idem in nobis efficiat sempiternæ felicitatis expectatione certissima?" *Ibid.* 656–657.

since these are fleeting and dangerous, while accepting the toils of a pious existence is the safest strategy.

Epicureanism makes its entrance in the eleventh chapter of the *De contemptu*, where Erasmus provides the explanation for the claim that the highest form of *voluptas* in this existence must be sought in the secluded life. Now the Epicurean calculation appears in a more explicit way than in any of the texts we have seen so far:

Epicurus also teaches that one must sometimes undergo pain for the sake of avoiding greater pain, similarly, that one must always pass up some pleasures to obtain greater ones. Is that not exactly what we are doing? We bear vigils, fasts, solitude, silence, and other such deprivations so as not to be forced into suffering greater pains. We do not drink at sumptuous banquets, or dance, or run off wherever the desire carries us, or indulge in similarly worthless pursuits—but if you could only see how much we profit from this, our abstinence! Did you think that we missed out on pleasure? No, we did not miss out, we exchanged one for another, and in a manner that allowed us to receive a great many pleasures in exchange for a few insignificant ones.⁴⁷

Here we found a straightforward reinterpretation of Epicurus under a Christian light. We are moving, still, in the earthly realm, since the pleasures that Erasmus is describing belong to the life in the monasteries and not to the joys of heaven itself. The two are linked (or connected), however, as the text states a few lines later, the happiness of the religious life consists mostly in thinking and imagining the bliss of the future existence.

These lines bring to memory Valla's *duplex voluptas*, but here the connection with Epicureanism is made explicit. As Erasmus says in another passage, all the pleasures entailing troubles must be rejected, and since every pleasure in the secular world (as the first chapters of the *De contemptu mundi* show) is troublesome, the calculation is obvious. The sailor who believes that his life is pleasant because it provides a good chance of profit ignores that there was a better choice, where the chances of success are granted by God from the start and where the toils are made light by the sole hope of the everlasting joys.

The *De contemptu mundi* is still a rather uncommon text in Erasmus' production, and there is good reason for believing his statement in the first authorized edition about his unwillingness to publish it. The twelfth and last chapter goes against what he said in the first eleven, since here it declares that it would be a mistake to press everyone to take the vows right away without a serious consideration. It is unnecessary to remember that Erasmus did not enjoy his stay in a monastery during his youth, and that in most of his texts he has a critical perspective about these institutions.

His *Epicureus*, written in the last years of his life (and in the middle of the debates with Luther), is a much more representative text of the main lines of his thinking about pagan moral philosophy and Christianity. It is possible that Erasmus wrote this colloquy in 1533 as a response to Luther's accusation (included in his *De servo arbitrio*) of being a follower of Lucian and an Epicurean atheist.⁴⁸ Erasmus attempts in

⁴⁷ "Præterea docet nonnunquam adeundos esse dolores maiorum dolorum effugiendorum gratia, item sæpe omittendas esse voluptates vt maiores assequamur. Quid nos? Vigilia, ieiunia, solitudinem, silentium cæteraque eius generis perferimus, ne maiores dolores ferendi nobis sint. Non potamus vncti, non choreas ducimus, non cursitamus quocunq̄ fert libido, non cæteris ineptiis indulgemus, at vtinam videas quanto cum fœnore istis careamus! Tu nos voluptatem amisisse credebas? Commutavimus, non amisimus! Atque ita quidem vt pro paucis ac paruis plurimas ac maximas receperimus" Ibid. XI, 947–955.

⁴⁸ Luther's *De servo arbitrio* was already a response to a previous text written by Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collation* (1524). The core of the debate was free will and the nature of God's justice.

this text to prove that the true Christian message is closer to Epicureanism than it may seem. The topic of the monastic life is not central in this dialogue, although some arguments concerning the unstable nature of earthly pleasures appear in both texts in a very similar manner. The influence of Valla's *De vero bono* is clearer than in *De contemptu*, in part because both share the dialogic form.⁴⁹

The calculation is presented here even more clearly than in the previous text and occupies an important part of the discussion. At the beginning of the text, 'Hedonius' (the Epicurean spokesman in this dialogue) declares that his intention is to show 'Spudaeus' that if Epicurus' teachings are correctly understood they are more Christian than the ones from any other philosopher. In order to prove this, Hedonius proposes a series of axioms that should be accepted for the discussion to proceed. These include philosophical and religious dogmas generally regarded as true, such as the difference between body and soul, and the fact that God is the highest good. However, one of the axioms has a clear Epicurean flavor: we should only accept as pleasurable those things that do not bring bigger troubles with them.⁵⁰

Once these ideas are accepted, the relation between the Epicurean calculation of pleasure and the choice of a Christian life becomes almost obvious. The reasoning is the same that appears in the *De contemptu*, only now it is not specifically directed towards the secluded life in the monasteries. We can observe that there is also an important use of economic metaphors in this explanation: Hedonius asks for several concessions before starting his argument, stating that he will "pay a profit if you [Spudaeus] will put up the capital" ("Lucrum annumerabo, si sortem dederis"). Spudaeus will later say that he granted more than he thought ("Plus igitur largitus sum quam putabam"). When the discussion about the nature of the calculation begins, we find many words related to the measuring of goods and the obtaining of profits

Hedonius Again, let's omit avarice, thirst for power, anger, pride, envy, which are sad evils in themselves; let's consider those things especially recommended in the name of enjoyment. When fever, headache, colic, fuzzy-mindedness, disgrace, loss of memory, vomiting, ruined digestion, and palsy follow too much drinking, would even Epicurus think that a pleasure worth seeking?

Spudaeus He'd advise us to shun it [...]

Hedonius Now weigh the pleasure against the pain; would you want the agony of toothache for as long as the pleasure of drinking or whoring lasted?

Spudaeus Well, I'd prefer to do without both, for to buy pleasure with pain is not getting but spending (*non est lucrum, sed pensatio*).⁵¹

We should remember also that Erasmus was facing opposition by both Catholics and Lutherans at this point in this life. See Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries: Erasmus in Pursuit of Wisdom* (Toronto 1981) for an in-depth analysis of the effects of this debate in the *Epicureus*.

⁴⁹ It should be noted however that Valla's dialogue follows closely the Ciceronian model of long expositions by each character, while instead Erasmus' *Epicureus* resembles more Platonic dialogues. See my previous study "La construcción dialógica del placer en el *De vero bono* de Lorenzo Valla" *Studia Aurea* 8 (2014) 347–368 for a more detailed comparison.

⁵⁰ "HEDONIVS. Nec ipse, ni fallor, Epicurus, amplecteretur voluptatem, quæ longe maiorem cruciatum multoque diuturniorem secum adduceret." English text: Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus. Colloquies*, trans. Craig Thompson (Toronto 1997) vol.40, 1073–1094; Latin text: *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami. Colloquia*, eds. René Hoven, Leon Halkin and Franz Bierlaire (North-Holland 1972) 720–733.

⁵¹ "HEDONIVS. Rursus omittamus avariciam, ambitionem, iram, superbiam, invidiam, quæ per se tristia sunt mala; conferamus illa, quæ præcipue delectationis nomine commendantur. Quum largiori potationi succedit febris, capitis dolor, alui tormina, ingenii stupor, famæ macula, memoriæ detrimentum, vomitus et ruina stomachi, tremor corporis, num vel Epicurus existimaret eam voluptatem expetendam?"

A few lines later Hedonius refers to this selection of pleasures as a “stricter calculation” (*supputatio exactior*). The word *supputatio* had not appeared in the texts we analyzed so far, and it shows an awareness of the calculating nature of Epicurus’ proposal that may even go beyond his original intention. It should also be noted that even if during most of the dialogue the speakers agree not to refer specifically to Epicurus as an individual and to consider “the thing in itself,” each time that the calculation appears there is an emphasis on the fact that this was *in fact* Epicurus’ teaching and not an interpretation of it.⁵²

Several times during the dialogue, Hedonius emphasizes the importance of measuring the duration of pleasures and pains. He asks Spudaeus if he would accept small pains (such as being pricked by a needle in the ear) if he would obtain as a reward the suppression of larger pains (such as toothache). Both speakers come to the following conclusion:

Hedonius Now if somebody convinced you that you would be free of trouble all your life long if you passed your hand once through a flame (which Pythagoras forbade), wouldn’t you be glad to do it?

Spudaeus I’d do it even a hundred times, provided the one who promised didn’t deceive me.

Hedonius God cannot deceive. But that sensation of the flame lasts longer, in comparison, with a man’s whole life, than a whole life compared with heavenly bliss, though you outlived three Nestors; since that thrusting of the hand, however brief, is *some* portion of this life; but the entire life of man is no portion of eternity.⁵³

God guarantees the happy conclusion of the calculation. We cannot doubt him and therefore the possibility of deception is annulled, even if we don’t have a sensory perception of the goods that we will obtain for our sacrifice of the pleasures of this life. As it often happens when describing the nature of the heavenly existence, there is an approach to earthly feelings, which are needed for a comparison, and immediately after a departure from their limited nature. The calculation is possible, since eternity is always *more* than any fraction of time, but the measuring cannot be taken literally since they are really incommensurable, just as the earthly and heavenly pleasures are.

Going to back to our experience on Earth, the main value that comes from using the Epicurean calculation is avoiding the *animus cruciatus*, the loss of *tranquillitas* that

SPVADEVVS. Fugiendam diceret. [...]

HEDONIVS. Iam finge delectationis ac doloris æquilibrium; optaresne tam diu cruciari dolore dentium, quam diu duravit potationis aut scortationis voluptas?

SPVDAEVVS. Equidem malle[m] vtroque carere; nam voluptatem emere dolore non est lucrum, sed pensatio.” Ibid. 209–224.

⁵² Beert Verstraete, “The defense of epicureanism in Erasmus’ Colloquies: from the ‘Banquet’ Colloquies to Epicureus,” *Canadian Journal for Netherlandic Studies* 27 (2006) 43 considers that the description of the calculus in the *Epicureus* is “inadequate by modern critical-exegetical standards,” since it does not explicitly refer to the distinction between katastematic and kinematic pleasures made by Epicurus. Although this is technically true, Erasmus’ insistence on the tranquility of the soul as the most important pleasure in our earthly life can be easily linked with Epicurus’ notion of static pleasures that come from the absence of discomfort or anxiety.

⁵³ “HEDONIVS. Iam si quis tibi persuadet te per omnem vitam omni molestia cariturum, si semel manu flammam diuidas, quod fieri vetuit Pythagoras, nonne id faceres?”

SPVDAEVVS. Ego sane vel centies, modo ne me fallat promissor.

HEDONIVS. Deus ne potest quidem fallere, sed ille flammæ sensus diuturnior est ad totam hominis vitam collatus quam tota vita collata ad cœlestem beatitudinem, etiam si quis trium Nestorum excedat annos.” *Epicureus* (see n. 50 above) 344–351.

comes from a bad conscience. This is related to the Epicurean concept of *ataraxia* in a much clearer way than what we found in Valla's *De vero bono*. Although Hedonius and Spudaeus mention the fires of hell in several parts of the dialogue, the fact that *all* pleasures based on false goods have as a consequence the pains of a bad conscience make the results of the calculation an absolute certainty. We might not know how many wrong pleasures it takes to deserve hell; however, we do know that if we do not choose carefully, the pleasures of this life will leave us with an unhappy mind and, probably, a diseased body.

Overall, we found in Erasmus a clearer application of the hedonistic calculus to the horizon of the Christian life. While in Valla's *De vero bono* there is no reference to the Christian worldview in the discussion of the pagan philosophies for two thirds of the text, in the *Epicureus* the discussion of the choice of pleasures is immediately set in a dialogue between Epicurean moral philosophy and Christian religion. It is important to notice that the calculus does not appear in *De contemptu* and *Epicureus* as a way to prove that Epicurean philosophy can be considered divinely inspired.⁵⁴ Its purpose is to show how the ascetic aspects of the Christian life are not incompatible with the hedonist worldview. There is no renouncement of pleasure produced by Christian morality, there is only an abandonment of those pleasures that should not have been chosen in the first place, and an acceptance of those pains that are inferior to the pleasures that they will bring. In this respect, the only difference between *De contemptu* and *Epicureus* is that the first text assures that this is only possible if we choose the secluded life of the monks, while the second (in accordance with Erasmus' mature view on the religion) extends this to all Christian men and women.

CONCLUSION

If we strive to condense the main results of our reading of Valla's and Erasmus' reappraisal of the Epicurean calculus, we should say that the main operation we find is the one that equates small pleasures and small pains with the reality of our life on earth, and big pleasures and big pains with heaven and hell respectively. In this way, the schism between this life and the next that defines Christian dualism is not debilitated in any way by the use of Epicurus' comparison: on the contrary, it is made stronger by it. The observation of our daily toils that preoccupied him and that led him to search for a peaceful retirement is transformed into a straightforward condemnation of the pleasures and pains we experience with our senses and with our mind, since they lack the durability and intensity of the ones we will necessarily experience later on.

This interpretation, however, severely limits the significance of the calculus in the texts we studied. It seems clear that Valla and Erasmus did use this notion as a way of showing that the sacrifices imposed by Christian morals are not sacrifices at all, once we understand correctly that the quality of pleasure is not as determined by its immediate intensity as by its aftermath. This is, in other words, the basic Epicurean notion that the pleasures are not bad in themselves, even if some of them should be avoided in most circumstances. The calculus is a way to legitimize *voluptas* as a true good (if not the *summum bonum* itself) that it is desirable *per se*. This means that even

⁵⁴ In Erasmus' *Paraclesis*, which serves as an introduction for his translation of the New Testament, he points out that Epicurus, as other pagan philosophers, provides useful ideas for the *philosophia Christi*. He particularly underlines the importance of peace of mind: "Nihil in vita homini suave esse posse, nisi adsit animus nullius mali sibi conscius, unde ceu fonte scatet vera voluptas, fatetur et Epicurus." (*Paraclesis ad lectorem pium*, LB 142).

if the greatest pleasure does not belong to this life, the hedonistic impulse that we experience in this existence should not be spurned as a sinful temptation of the flesh. It is an indication that should serve us to understand that if we want to obtain this pleasure, we should be able to choose, measure, and calculate.

It is not surprising that this measurement appears in both texts linked with *utilitas* and commerce. The idea of *trading* pains for pleasures in a profitable way is part of the hedonistic calculus, and it was one of the features that attracted the utilitarians of the 18th century. Neither Valla nor Erasmus deal explicitly with the nature of commerce, but we may suppose that the background of the economic expansion in the times in which they lived was part of the horizon that could have influenced their use of this terminology.⁵⁵ It was natural that the necessity of anchoring Christian morals in the daily experience of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain would lead them to the realm of economy, a strictly earthly enterprise.

However, as we have seen in the texts studied, the use of an economic perspective to consider pleasure and pain could lead to the idea that to abandon fleeting earthly pleasures for eternal heavenly bliss was a risky enterprise. This explains the necessity to assure the safety of this transaction by referring to a providential force of nature, or directly to God. This tension between the economic perspective of the profit that the calculus itself would guarantee and the difficulties of ensuring the interchangeability between what we can feel and what has been promised, is central to all the texts we analyzed.

There is, finally, another source of tension that appears subtly in Valla's and Erasmus' dialogues. The measuring of pleasure and pain according to the ideal of maximizing the first and reducing the latter implies an attitude towards existence that may seem dishonest and lukewarm. It is, at some point, contrary to the devotion which could be expected either from a true hedonist or a true Christian. In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger describes the action of "calculating the accidents" as opposed to the true resoluteness of those who acknowledge the depth of anguish.⁵⁶ Luther wouldn't accept either that this kind of bargaining with God could be used to obtain favors from him. As we have seen, the Christianized Epicurean calculus requires faith in punishments and rewards that only God can provide. But it also assumes that the benefits that we would obtain from him correspond to a rule which is easily understandable for us, and that we can learn it from the teachings of a pagan philosopher. This optimism regarding the human capacity to obtain the true pleasures through a careful measurement is a key element of Valla's *De vero bono* and Erasmus's *Epicureus*. It is also one of the main trends in the reappraisal of Epicureanism in the period when these texts were produced.

⁵⁵ We may compare this with the influence of commercial practices that Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford 1988) linked to the innovations in painting in the *Quattrocento*.

⁵⁶ "For the they [*Das Man*], however, situation is essentially closed off. The they knows only the "general situation" [*allgemeine Lage*], loses itself in the closest "opportunities," and settles its Dasein by calculating the "accidents" which it misjudges as its own achievement and passes off as such" (II, ii §60). Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany 2010) 287.