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Essays in Renaissance Thought and Letters

In Honor of John Monfasani

Edited by

Alison Frazier and Patrick Nold

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De-essentializing the World

Valla, Agricola, Vives, and Nizolio on Universals and Topics

Lodi Nauta

Introduction

In this contribution I would like to address an old question that concerns the possible affinity between Renaissance humanism and medieval nominalism. It is a question that continues to be debated among scholars, and opinions are divided of course.¹ The issue is this: many humanists criticized the medieval scholastics for their terminology, language, and approach in philosophy and theology. They disliked words such as *entitas*, *quidditas*, and *haeceitas*, which they found not only ungrammatical and ugly Latin but also misleading, because these words might create a belief in the existence of such abstract entities. Now such criticisms can already be found among the nominalists, who were, of course, still working within the scholastic Aristotelian framework. A nominalist such as William of Ockham, for instance, rejected the existence of abstract things such as universals. He found the introduction of abstract terms in philosophy dangerous because it could easily lead to the conviction that such entities do in fact exist. Since this criticism reminds us of the humanist critique of scholastic language, historians have frequently regarded

1 On the affirmative side see, e.g., Eckhard Kessler, "Die Transformation des aristotelischen Organon durch Lorenzo Valla," in *Aristotelismus und Renaissance. In memoriam Charles B. Schmitt*, ed. Eckhard Kessler et al. (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1988), 53–74; id., "Die verborgene Gegenwart Ockhams in der Sprachphilosophie der Renaissance," in *Die Gegenwart Ockhams*, ed. Wilhelm Vossenkuhl and Rolf Schönberger (Weinheim: VCH-Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990), 147–164. On the skeptical side see John Monfasani, "Lorenzo Valla and Rudolph Agricola," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28 (1990): 181–200; repr. in his *Language and Learning in Renaissance Italy. Selected Articles* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994), no. v; Wolfgang Hübener, "Die Nominalismus-Legende. Über das Mißverhältnis zwischen Dichtung und Wahrheit in der Deutung der Wirkungsgeschichte des Ockhamismus," in *Spiegel und Gleichnis. Festschrift für Jacob Taubes*, ed. Norbert W. Bolz and Wolfgang Hübener (Würzburg: Koenigshausen and Neuman, 1983), 87–111. See Lodi Nauta, *In Defense in Common Sense. Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 296 n. 5 for more references. The literature is extensive.

these humanists as stepping in the footsteps of the nominalists, and they have looked for quotations, references or allusions to nominalist authors – mainly Ockham – in the writings of humanists.

It does not require much reflection to realize that such an issue can hardly be discussed in these general terms. If it often already proves difficult to speak of the influence of thinker X on thinker Y, it is almost impossible to postulate an influence of an ‘-ism’ on another ‘-ism,’ though historians often find themselves unable to avoid this (“the influence of medieval Augustinianism on the rising tide of Aristotelianism”).² In this particular case we are working with highly slippery, even essentially contested concepts. Humanism is of course a concept that is notoriously difficult to define, and even if we tie the term to the fifteenth-century usage of ‘humanista,’ a term that meant a student of the *studia humanitatis*, there is still much debate over the question who or what counts as a humanist. In the late Renaissance we find ‘humanist’ methods employed in a wide range of disciplines, something which is reflected in descriptions such as ‘medical humanism,’ ‘humanist chronology,’ ‘humanist science,’ to the brink of becoming unclear what exactly is ‘humanist’ about it. Humanism was thus not a monolithic movement: it had its own transmutations, and depending on time and place could take different forms. Nominalism too is a slippery concept, and scholarship of the last two decades has shown that it is highly problematic to postulate the existence of “a continuous stream that we can call Ockhamism from 1330 to 1530.”³ In Italy, for instance, Ockhamism was largely absent from theological thinking due to the lack of theological faculties.⁴ Terminist logic was flourishing in fifteen-century Italy but the vast majority of humanists chose to remain in blissful ignorance of it. The names of these logicians were objects of scorn rather than sources of inspirations. The situation

2 On the concept of influence, see Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” in id., *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57–89, on 74–76.

3 William J. Courtenay, *Ockham and Ockhamism. Studies in the Dissemination and Impact of His Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 378.

4 John Monfasani, “Aristotelians, Platonists, and the Missing Ockhamists: Philosophical Liberty in Pre-Reformation Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 46 (1993): 248: “But Italy lacked colleges or any sort of corporate bodies of secular theologians. Consequently, she was devoid of any tradition of Ockhamism in theology. Not having Ockhamist theologians, she also missed the competition between the two *viae*, the *Wegestreit* which cut across theology and arts faculties.” Many scholars have of course commented on the difficulty of defining these “-isms.” See, e.g., Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* 2nd ed. (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2004), chapters 2 (on humanism) and 3 (on nominalism). In fact, most such studies begin by saying something about these difficulties.

in northern Europe was different with the emergence of schools of thought such as 'the Thomists,' 'the Albertists,' 'the Scotists,' and 'the nominalists' or 'Ockhamists,' and by the end of the fifteenth century Ockham "became textually wedded to the 'modern' approach and an important authority for the *Nominalistae* at Paris and universities in Germany."⁵ What is understood by nominalism or Ockhamism (and these two are not the same, obviously) thus depends on time, place, and institutional context.

With these two slippery concepts, the question of the influence of the one on the other cannot but give a slippery answer. Yet the question is not completely devoid of historical sense. Some humanists explicitly showed sympathy for the *nominales*, and a few had more than an inkling of knowledge about ideas that were associated with the *via moderna* in the fifteenth-century schools.⁶ And even though their methods, approaches, and aims were vastly different, the outcome of the humanists' criticisms of some aspects of scholastic thought looks rather similar to those of the nominalists, even though similarity might prove to be deceptive on closer examination. So if we want to study possible affinities between two such '-isms', this can only be done on a case-by-case basis, and we need to be cautious in our generalizations, if only because the majority of humanists were not interested in these philosophical issues at all. Yet a historian might also detect (or want to detect) patterns over a longer period of time, patterns that transcend the here and now of the individual author with his or her time-bounded questions. In the long run the scholastic traditions came under attack, and early modern philosophers – for all their claims to originality and modernity – were indebted to humanist scholarship and nominalist reductions, no less than to Thomist and Scotist traditions, and to the new science and many other developments that took place in the period that we call the Renaissance but which, according to some historians, was just the last phase of the Middle Ages.⁷ From such a general point of view too the question of how these developments might have reinforced or rather hindered each other (if at all) is worth exploring. With these general caveats in mind, I propose to look at four humanists who have been assigned an important role in the humanist critique of scholastic thought or, as some scholars would like

5 Courtenay, *Ockham and Ockhamism*, 105.

6 I will come back to this point at the end of my article.

7 John Monfasani, "The Renaissance as the Concluding Phase of the Middle Ages," *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano Per Il Medio Evo* 108 (2006): 165–85.

to put it,⁸ the transformation of scholastic themes in new directions: Lorenzo Valla (1406–1457), Rudolph Agricola (1444–1485), Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540), and Mario Nizolio (1488–1567).

Lorenzo Valla

Lorenzo Valla was one of the fiercest critics of scholastic thinking. His *Repastinatio dialectice et philosophie* – or, to use the title of a sixteenth-century editor, the *Dialectical Disputations* – is a sustained attack on what he regards as the foundations of this scholastic edifice, of which Aristotle, Porphyry, Boethius, Thomas Aquinas, and Peter of Spain were the master builders, assisted by an army of less well-known dialecticians and theologians.⁹ As John Monfasani has rightly said “as Valla’s most comprehensive work, touching on grammar, rhetoric, classical philology, moral philosophy, physics, metaphysics, theology, and even biology in addition to logic, the *Dialectica* aimed at nothing less than a total reformation of the contemporary scientific culture of scholasticism.”¹⁰ The quality of Valla’s arguments does not always match the sharpness of his pen (to put it mildly), but its importance lies indeed in its grand plan, scope, and methods. What makes Valla’s critique philosophically interesting is precisely his anti-philosophical sentiment.¹¹ For him thinking about man and the world should be done on a wholly different basis than what was common in scholastic traditions, looking to rhetoric and grammar rather than metaphysics and logic for inspiration and guidelines. Theory and speculation easily make us blind for the concrete and practical way in which people actually argue, speak, and think, and express their faith. It was not only

8 So Eckhard Kessler, “Die Transformation des aristotelischen Organon durch Lorenzo Valla,” 55, arguing that humanism is to be regarded “nicht als ‘Wiederbelebung des klassischen Altertums’ durch Überwindung der Scholastik sondern als Transformation der scholastisch-aristotelischen Tradition mit Hilfe antiker Denkelemente (...)”. And the polemics of the humanists show that “sie noch an diese gebunden sind und das Neue, das sie vertreten, auf die scholastische Tradition bezogen ist und nur von ihr her, als Antwort auf ihre Probleme, verstanden werden kann.”

9 Ed. and trans. Brian P. Copenhagen and Lodi Nauta in the I Tatti Renaissance Library (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 2 vols. The paragraph on Valla is based on Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense*.

10 Monfasani, review of Zippel’s edition of the *Repastinatio*, in *Rivista di letteratura italiana* 2 (1984): 177–194; repr. in his *Language and Learning*, no. vi.

11 Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense*, 272–73.

Aristotle and the scholastics who were his targets – in fact, Valla's knowledge of what we now consider as the main authorities seems meager – but also late-classical grammarians, and also occasionally classical authorities and Church Fathers (e.g. Augustine in his speculations about the Trinity).

In view of his staunch criticism of anything scholastic, we would not expect Valla to praise the work of William of Ockham, and indeed the only time Valla mentions Ockham's name is in a negative way: in a letter to his friend Giovanni Serra he gives a list of those “barbarous” dialecticians.¹² Yet modern scholars have often detected a nominalist strain in Valla's work. They are struck by Valla's reductive aim to cut down scholastic concepts and distinctions in a way that brings to mind Ockham's nominalist project. Ockham's razor cuts through categories, transcendentals, universals, abstract entities of various sorts. Abstract terms might suggest the existence of such entities, but we should resist the temptation to postulate things as referents of such abstract terminology. All there is are substances and qualities, and terminology that seems to refer to the existence of something beyond these two basic categories, must be rendered harmless by reducing it to terminology referring to these latter two categories.¹³ Valla too wields a razor, and though the workshop where his razor was sharpened is called rhetoric and grammar rather than terministic logic, the motivation – according to this interpretation – is more or less the same. Hence, we find a similarly lean ontology in Valla, which exists of substances, qualities, and actions. We also find a reduction of the transcendental terms ('good,' 'one,' 'true,' 'something,' 'being,' 'thing') to just one, 'thing,' and we find similar *skopsis* concerning other matters. These similarities, however, are superficial, outweighed by important differences in objective, argument, and method. Since I have compared the two extensively in my Valla book, I will summarize just a few salient points.¹⁴

Valla's treatment of the Aristotelian categories is vastly different from Ockham's. For Ockham the Aristotelian categories do not describe things in the world but categorize terms – relational terms (such as father), temporary

12 Valla, *Epistole*, ed. Ottavio Besomi and Mariangela Regoliosi (Padua: Antenore, 1984), 201: “aut illos dialecticos, Albertum utrunque, Strodem, Occam, Paulum Venetum.” In his *Encomium of St Thomas Aquinas* Valla gives a similar list of “new theologians – Albert the Great, Giles [of Rome], Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, John Scotus and the others,” in *Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Leonard A. Kennedy (The Hague: Mouton, 1973), 24.

13 This is a bit too quick. For a good succinct discussion see Claude Panaccio, “Semantics and Mental Language,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ockham*, ed. Paul Vincent Spade (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 53–75.

14 *In Defense of Common Sense*, in particular chapters 1–3.

terms (such as yesterday) etc. – by which we describe an individual thing. Ockham thus rejects a realist interpretation of the categories in order to *defend* the Aristotelian categories as distinct groups of terms. Valla's motivation is different. For Valla the three categories that he admits categorize *things*: they describe real things in the world: substances, with their qualities and actions. The other categories have no function and can be abolished: from a grammatical point of view all such terms just describe the quality of something. His grammatical approach leads to wholly different results than does Ockham's logical approach.

On universals too the differences are significant. Ockham's program is explicitly addressed to the question how a nominalist, who admits of only singular entities, can explain generality in thought and language without having recourse to universals. His solution is to ground spoken and written language on the mental language of our concepts, that is, singular entities in the mind which stand for their singular referents. Valla, on the other hand, does not refer to mental concepts as the primary language on which to ground the meanings of spoken and written language. He does not deal with the philosophical problem of generality, and what he writes against the use of abstract terms and concepts is motivated by his aversion to ungrammatical Latin and his wish to stay within the limits drawn by the imagination and the senses.

On other subjects too we can find similar differences between Ockham and Valla, and this is of course not surprising: As a logician Ockham is interested in the logic of natural language rather than in the grammatical features of Latin or any other specific type of language, while as a humanist Valla approaches everything from a grammatical and rhetorical point of view. As suggested, this grammatical approach leads to a rejection of abstract entities but the inspiration of this de-essentializing tendency is not Ockhamistic or nominalistic – at least not in a philosophically technical sense of the word. The final results of Valla's simplification and reduction of terms and distinctions may sometimes look similar to Ockham's ontology, but Ockham's razor was of a wholly different kind than Valla's.

Rudolph Agricola

My second case study is Rudolph Agricola, famous for his dialectical manual, *De inventione dialectica*, published 30 years after his death in 1485. In this work, which was truly a bestseller in the sixteenth century, Agricola tries to bring together rhetoric and dialectic into one system of topical invention, showing how we can find arguments by using a set of places or topics (*loci*) such

as definition, genus, species, place, time, similars, opposites, and so forth.¹⁵ Agricola has a place in our story, however, because he also wrote a small treatise on universals earlier in his life. In this treatise he seems to accept the existence of universals, even though at least one modern scholar has argued that his definition of the universal “is analogous to Ockham’s definition of the universal sign” and hence that his position is compatible with nominalism.¹⁶ I think this brief treatise on universals can be seen as an early step in Agricola’s long-term project of revising and re-organizing the systems of topics as he found them in Aristotle, Cicero, and Boethius.¹⁷ Let me briefly discuss this point.

In this treatise Agricola argues – quite traditionally – that a universal is what things have in common, e.g. animal is common to horse, cow and man. A universal is thus, he writes, “a certain essential similitude” (*essentialis similitudo*); it is that which makes things similar to each other.¹⁸ This is quite a realist view of universals, and indeed his further discussion shows a general debt to the school of Duns Scotus, which he explicitly mentions (*Ioanni Scoti secta*).¹⁹ Scotus had argued that e.g. Socrates and Plato have the form humanity in common but

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- 15 Peter Mack, *Renaissance Argument. Valla and Agricola in the Traditions of Rhetoric and Dialectic* (Leiden: Brill, 1993). For a concise treatment see also Mack’s *History of Renaissance Rhetoric 1380–1620* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 56–75. For another good discussion see Marc Cogan, “Rodolphus Agricola and the Semantic Revolutions of the History of Invention,” *Rhetorica* 2, 2 (1984): 163–194 on the topical systems of Cicero, Boethius and Agricola, and their differences.
 - 16 Kessler, “Die verborgene Gegenwart Ockhams,” 151: “in Analogie zu Ockhams Definition des universalen Zeichens.” Cf. Markus Friedrich, “‘War Rudolf Agricola Nominalist?’ Zur Bedeutung der Philosophie Ockhams für den Sprachhumanismus,” in *Res et Verba in der Renaissance*, ed. Eckhard Kessler and Ian Maclean (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 369–88.
 - 17 On this treatise as well as a second little treatise that Agricola wrote on the same theme, see Lodi Nauta, “From Universals to Topics: The Realism of Rudolph Agricola, with an Edition of his Reply to a Critic,” *Vivarium* 50 (2012): 190–224, with an edition of this second treatise.
 - 18 The treatise is incorporated in Alardus of Amsterdam’s edition of Agricola’s *De inventione dialectica* (Cologne: Johann Gymnich, 1539; repr. Nieuwkoop: de Graaf, 1967); the quotation appears at 38.
 - 19 Scotus was allowed at Louvain by a decision of 1446, as mentioned by Jan Papy, “The reception of Agricola’s *De inventione dialectica* in the teaching of logic at the Louvain faculty of arts in the early sixteenth century,” in *Northern Humanism in European Context, 1469–1625*, ed. Fokke Akkerman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 169, n. 12, while Ockham “was a stranger in Louvain and remained as such in the commentaries [on Aristotle’s *Organon*] of 1535” (170). Maarten Dorp, however, was able to praise Ockham in glowing terms in a treatise from 1512, as Demmy Verbeke suggests in a forthcoming article on Dorp.

what makes the one different from the other is not a piece of bodily matter but an individual form, a 'this-ness' (*haeceitas*): Plato has a unique this-ness and Socrates has his own unique this-ness, added to the universal humanity they share.²⁰ Without discussing the intricacies of Scotist philosophy, Agricola accepts the existence of such a principle of individuation. He seems to follow Scotist teaching in thinking that universals as common natures exist independent of the intellect but that 'community' is something that arises only because the mind notices and judges things as similar in a particular respect. In this way Agricola tries to do justice to the individuality of things while at the same time believing that the common patterns we see are grounded in reality.

The same conviction also informs his work on the topics, *De inventione dialectica*, even though this work does not address such theoretical issues directly. Topics (*loci*) or seats of argumentation, such as definition, genus, species, property, whole, parts and so on, can be seen as headings which we can use to list things that two things have in common or do not have in common, which is important in making arguments. If we want to argue that a dog is an animal we can make use of the topic genus. Topics thus help us to see the agreements and disagreements between two things, because topics are what all things have in common: each thing, e.g., belongs to a genus, each thing has a certain substance, is caused by something, has a certain effect, is at a certain place, and so on. This is also how the topics were invented in the first place:

All things which are said either for or against something fit together and are, so to speak, joined with it by a certain community of nature (*quadam naturae societate*). Now the number of things is immense and consequently the number of their properties (*proprietas*) and differences (*diversitas*) is also immense. This is the reason why no discourse and no power of the human mind can comprehend individually all the relations in which individuals agree and differ. However a certain common condition (*communis quaedam habitudo*) is present in all things (even though they are different in their appearances), and they all tend to a similarity

20 See e.g. Timothy B. Noone, "Universals and Individuation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*, ed. Thomas Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 100–28, on 105; Constantino Marmo, "Ontology and Semantics in the Logic of Duns Scotus," in *On the Medieval Theory of Signs*, ed. Umberto Eco and Constantino Marmo (Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1989), 143–93. Jorge J.E. Garcia, "Individuality and the Individuating Entity in Scotus's *Ordinatio*: An Ontological Characterization," in *John Duns Scotus: Metaphysics and Ethics*, ed. Ludger Honnefelder et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 246. Cf. Nauta, "From Universals to Topics," 201–205.

of their nature (*naturae similitudinem*). So, for example, every thing has a certain substance of its own, certain causes from which it arises, certain effects it produces. And so the cleverest men have picked out (*excerpere*), from that vast variety of things, these common headings (*communia capita*) such as substance, cause, effect and the others . . .²¹

Topics are universal aspects of things, and hence direct our attention to what two things, A and B, have in common or not. Some of the Aristotelian categories and the predicables are thus included in the list of topics, but the topics contain more than the traditional set of universals; they are rather universal aspects of things, and hence a good starting point for speaking about them.²²

Now to some extent the *De inventione dialectica* can be regarded as a development from the early treatise on universals. In both works Agricola emphasizes the common aspects of things, aspects that enable us to categorize and talk about things without denying their fundamental unicity and individuality. But while in his early treatise he talked about universals as “essential similitudes,” in the *De inventione dialectica* they have become the topics of his dialectical system, that is, topics as labels of the general features that things share (or do not share). The traditional universals such as genus and species thus become a subclass of a much wider group of common headings to be used in inventing arguments. These headings direct our view to what things have in common and in what they disagree, and at several places in his work we see Agricola arguing for careful observation of all aspects of things, which enables us to bring the phenomena under groups, general laws, general rules – important for the arts and sciences.

If dialectic, as Agricola says, is a system that enables us to find similarities between things, it is a small step to identify a universal with the group that has a particular feature in common, that is, to identify, e.g., the universal cathood with the class of individual cats ‘out there’: the focus now lies on the group of things that show particular similarities (and dissimilarities) rather than on a

21 *De inventione dialectica*, 9; cf. Mack, *Renaissance Argument*, 140. Agricola frequently says that things have their own nature, power and function, e.g. “nativa enim est quaedam omnibus adiacens vis” and “omniaque propositum sibi destinatumque finem” (*De inventione*, 64 and 79). Things behave in a predictable and regular way because they have a particular ontological structure.

22 Agricola, at one point, equates the order of things with the order of the categories: “at illa [homo and virtus] toto rerum ordine, hoc est, praedicamentis, sunt diducta” (*De inventione dialectica*, 154). Substance is called the “receptacle and foundation of every thing” (76); magnitude plays the role of subject for the other accidental categories, called “adiacentia” in Agricola’s system (76).

mysterious entity (cathood) that lies hidden in the individual cats and that somehow needs to be disclosed by analysis and abstraction. This final step of identifying the universal with a collection of individuals is a step that the sixteenth-century humanist Mario Nizolio took, but since he frequently refers not only to Valla and Agricola but also to Juan Luis Vives, we will first examine Vives's position before ending with Nizolio's.

Juan Luis Vives

Vives certainly has a place in the series of humanists here considered: he was much inspired by Valla and Agricola, and, as said, was often quoted by Nizolio. Vives was in particular indebted to Agricola's *De inventione dialectica*, not only for Agricola's treatment of the topics but also for his general view of knowledge and language. The two hang together of course. As Agricola writes:

For almost everyone speaks *probabiliter* on the subject which they have undertaken to teach. For there is not a great supply of things known to us which can be necessary and undoubted; and, if we believe the Academy, nothing at all. No one denies this about things which belong to life and to norms of behavior. Similarly, in what belongs to the knowledge of the nature of things, there is nothing which is not argued about and debated on all sides with great ingenuity.²³

The fact that so much cannot be known for certain gives only more weight to arguing *probabiliter*; one does not need to argue for something which is certain (as ancient rhetoricians and philosophers already tell us). This does not mean that Agricola was a skeptic, but only that, as Peter Mack rightly concluded, that "there are many subjects on which there is no certainty."²⁴ The same is true for Vives, who also stresses the limitations of human knowledge without becoming a skeptic.

²³ *De inventione dialectica*, 207; trans. Mack, *Renaissance Argument*, 179

²⁴ Mack, *Renaissance Argument*, 179: "Agricola was not a sceptic in the strict sense, in that, although he believed that most things are not certain, for him the *probabile* included the certain," referring to passages where Agricola includes certain arguments as part of the *probabile*. See also John Monfasani, "Lorenzo Valla and Rudolph Agricola," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 28 (1990): 181–99.

[W]hat knowledge we have gained can only be reckoned as probable and not assumed as absolutely true . . . The first precept in the contemplation and discussion of nature, is that since we cannot gain any certain knowledge from it, we must not indulge ourselves too much in examining and inquiring into those things which we can never attain, but that all our studies should be applied to the necessities of life, to some bodily or mental gain, to the cultivation and increase of reverence.²⁵

At various places in his work Vives makes clear that investigations of nature can never result in indubitable knowledge and absolute certainty but are always approximations, the quality of which depends on our data and our reasoning process. We should therefore collect as much data as possible and be wary of hasty generalizations: “from a number of separate experiments the mind gathered a universal law, which, after support and confirmation by many experiments was considered certain and established.”²⁶ These laws should always be checked against our data, also when we collect data from our reading:

in teaching the arts, we shall collect many experiments and observe the experience of many teachers, so that from them general rules may be formed. If some of the experiments do not agree with the rule, then the reason why this happens must be noted down. If there are more deviations than agreements or an equal number, a dogma must not be established from the fact, but the facts must be transmitted to the astonishment of posterity, so that from astonishment . . . philosophy may grow.²⁷

Thus the gap between the essential structure of the world and human knowledge can be bridged by employing the right methodology, so to speak. It is here that the topics, as laid out by Agricola, also become important for Vives. Since, as we have seen, the topics are labels or headings under which we are invited to view and discuss things, they become – so to speak – a bridge between the world and the human mind. It is the human mind that notices aspects that things have in common (e.g. essence, quality, cause, effect, and so on). In Vives’s account the topics are a reflection of the ontological order and as such

25 *De tradendis disciplinis* IV, 1, in Vives, *Opera omnia*, ed. Gregorio Myans y Siscar (8 vols., Valencia: In officina Benedicti Montfort, 1782–90; repr. London: Gregg, 1964), VI: 347–48; trans. Foster Watson, *Vives: On Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913; repr. Totowa NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1971), 166–67.

26 *De tradendis disciplinis* I, 2, in *Opera omnia* VI, 250; trans. Watson, *Vives*, 20.

27 *De tradendis disciplinis* II, 4, in *Opera omnia* VI, 296; trans. Watson, *Vives*, 87–88.

an instrument and heuristic aid for the human mind. They constitute a kind of grid through which we observe the world: they guide us in noticing similarities between things: the topic *cause* makes us looking for causes. This is of course very important for the ultimate goal: finding arguments. If we want to argue – to put it in the most elementary form – that A is B, we need to see what they have in common, finding a medium that connects what we already know and what is still in doubt.

There is an ambiguity in the use of topics, however, which Vives might have inherited from Agricola's account as well.²⁸ As universal aspects of things, the topics themselves are a kind of universals: indeed, the 'traditional' universals such as genus, species, property and difference are just a subgroup of the topics. So it is not surprising to find Vives saying that the "essential similitude is called a universal in the schools (*in schola*)."²⁹ Vives also makes clear that these similitudes exist in reality, independent of our thinking and linguistic expression (*extra nomina atque intelligentias nostras*) "since the similitude is in the things themselves, or rather the things themselves are similar and conforming to each other."³⁰ This similitude can be called a "nature, manner, reason, form, or sign (*natura seu conditio seu ratio seu forma seu nota*)" and "genus for wider groups and species for smaller more limited groups." On the other hand, similitude also refers to what these essences, unknown to the human mind, effect at the level of what *is* visible and knowable to the human mind, viz. sensible qualities and actions. The similarities are what things have in common, and these common features are ultimately caused by the inner essences. Thus, A and B can have something in common, e.g. both are yellow, but this universal is not to be identified with the topic *contingent* that has led the mind to look for common accidents in A and B. Similarly, the genus *animality* in a horse is not identical with the topic *genus* that has led the mind to look for the type of genus in that horse. Because of this ambiguity it proves therefore to be a small step from the essential aspects of things to the organizing principles of the human mind. As similitudes topics are called the essences of things while they also are the set of categories that organize the features we see.

While the use of topics is thus primarily directed at argumentation, the wider framework in which they have a place includes epistemology and

28 For this ambiguity in Agricola see Nauta, "From Universals to Topics," 212–13.

29 *De instrumento probabilitatis*, in *Opera omnia* III, 86.

30 *De explanatione cuiusque essentiae*, in *Opera omnia* III, 124: "... genus hoc aut species non modo in nominibus vel nostris intelligentiis est situm, sed in natura rerum est ea similitudo ac communio, etiam extra nomina atque intelligentias nostras; est enim in ipsis rebus seu potius res ipsae similes conformesque."

ontology. While Vives does not deny that essences exist, he shifts the attention away from these hidden entities to what we can observe of things. Such a move is also visible in his account of the soul, where he turns his attention from the metaphysical nature of the soul towards its phenomenological manifestations – something which earned him, quite anachronistically, the title of “father of modern psychology.”³¹ We can already see such a move away from substance and essence towards sensible qualities and actions in late-medieval thought.³² What is new in the fifteenth century is the way in which the topics are used to encourage the process of collecting and comparing data with a view to finding arguments.

This shift in focus makes it difficult to characterize Vives as a realist or a nominalist. Like his predecessor Agricola, Vives believes in an essential order – universals as “essential similitudes” – since otherwise concepts would be null and void if there would be nothing in extramental reality to correspond to those concepts. On the other hand, he also sounds very much like a nominalist when he writes that “there is no universal in the imagination nor in nature; but it is only attained through discursive reason (*ratione discurrente*) under a very confused and very thin image when the mind strips itself off, as best as it can, from the attributes of fantasy.”³³ This comes close to the position that we ascribed to Agricola above: Doghood is not a mysterious entity that is one and many at the same time – one thing because it is one and the same nature, but also many because it is instantiated in all individual dogs – but Doghood is a concept that is formed by the human mind, though with firm grounding in reality. Vives’s position comes close to the traditional account as formulated by Boethius, according to which universals exist both in particular things and as concepts in our minds. Since Boethius does not want to give up the Aristotelian principle that everything that exists is one in number, universals must be said to be particular as sensed in particular things – they might be identified with the ‘likenesses’ between things – but universal as grasped in thought. Both Agricola and Vives seem to accept a similar position, wavering

31 Foster Watson, “The Father of Modern Psychology,” *Psychological Review* 22 (1915): 333–53; G. Zilboorg, *A History of Medical Psychology* (New York: Norton, 1941), 194: “father of modern, empirical psychology, but the true forerunner of the dynamic psychology of the twentieth century.” Cited in Lorenzo Casini, *Cognitive and Moral Psychology in Renaissance Philosophy. A Study of Juan Luis Vives’ De anima et vita* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2006), 12.

32 Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes, 1274–1671* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 634–35.

33 *De anima et vita* II, 1, in *Opera omnia* III, 344; cf. Casini, *Cognitive and Moral Psychology*, 22–23.

perhaps between conceptualism and realism (just as Scotus is said to have done).³⁴ But once the focus falls entirely on the human mind – governed by the topics as organizing principles of knowledge and argumentation – it might be tempting to identify the universals with just the collection of individuals that the human mind has formed on the basis of the similarities that it detects. This is a step Mario Nizolio was prepared to take, who indeed praised Agricola and Vives but also criticized them for their reluctance to give up their belief in universals.³⁵

Mario Nizolio

Famous in his own time for his *Thesaurus Ciceronianus*, which had already gone through more than fifty editions in the sixteenth century, Nizolio's philosophical work, entitled *On the true principles and the true manner of philosophizing against the pseudophilosophers* from 1553 was given serious attention only much later thanks to Leibniz's catholic philosophical interests. One of the assumptions in Nizolio's attack on scholastic philosophy is that the scholastics endorsed, almost tout court, a realist interpretation of the universals. With the exception of the nominalists almost all philosophers from the time of Plato and Aristotle onward believed, so Nizolio assumes, in the existence of universals in a way that, in his view, is fundamentally mistaken. He sees it therefore as his main task to attack the Aristotelian building by destroying its foundations, that is, universals – and, in their wake, other abstract notions such as transcendentals and the categories.³⁶

A first important step in his argument is to claim that universal terms such as 'animal', 'man' and so on, are really collective terms.³⁷ They are singular but that does not mean that they stand for a singular entity, animality or humanity. Philosophers have simply ignored the fact that in daily speech (and also in refined literate language), we often use figures of speech: singular for plural, part for whole, or one thing for a whole class (and vice versa):

34 Olivier Boulnois, "Réelles intentions: nature commune et universaux selon Duns Scot," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 1 (1992): 3–33, in particular 28–33.

35 Nizolio, *De veris principiis et vera ratione philosophandi contra pseudophilosophos*, ed. Quirinus Breen, 2 vols. (Rome: Fratelli Bocca, 1956), 1: 92.

36 For an extensive analysis see Nauta, "Anti-Essentialism and the Rhetoricization of Knowledge: Mario Nizolio's Humanist Attack on Universals," *Renaissance Quarterly* 65 (2012): 31–66.

37 Nizolio, *De veris principiis*, 1: 41–53.

For the names *man* and *animal* and other such words never signify a genus or a species or some common nature except when they are used and accepted figuratively. This [common] nature, which is signified by these figuratively used words, is nothing else but a multitude composed of individuals; and it is a certain discrete whole that truly consists of nothing else but singulars.³⁸

Nizolio thus wants terms to refer either to one singular or to a group as a whole – *singillatim aut universe sive in universum*. There is nothing in between: *animal* does not refer to a universal that is one and common at the same time. Universals are thus caused, Nizolio thinks, by a misunderstanding of language: a universal is nothing but the group of individuals: doghood is just the collection of individual dogs.³⁹

But now Nizolio faces a problem: for once we agree that that there are no universals, that is, no essences that divide reality at its joints (dogs, cats, trees, humans, etc.), is any categorization possible and as real as any other? Does anything go? Even for Nizolio it would be difficult to accept such a position. To group dogs with dogs makes infinitely more sense than to group dogs with maple trees or with gems. And yet, some examples give the impression that indeed we are quite flexible in grouping things together as long as we have found something that they all have in common. To quote an example that Nizolio himself gives: we can group human beings together with ants because they share the quality of taking precautions for the future. Whatever common trait we happen to notice among things is sufficient to form a group, a class. Such a position implies a deflation – or what we may call a de-ontologization – of the predicables: genus and species become no more than convenient labels for indicating groups and subgroups. We may of course group things into species and genus (man-animal), but ontologically speaking there are only individuals which we can categorize dependent on what we note as similarity. At times, Nizolio seems to recoil from holding such a position, speaking of the genus *animal* and the species *horse* in terms of an ‘essential’ relationship, just like the relationship between an apple and the color it happens to have at a particular

38 Ibid., I: 51.

39 Nizolio's account is hardly satisfactory. He suggests that *genus* and *army* are collective names in much the same way, which they are not. A genus-term such as “animal” is clearly different from “army” or “nation,” for while we can say “Socrates is a living being,” we cannot say “the soldier is the army.” Nizolio mentions the objection but has no good answer; see Nauta, “Anti-Essentialism and the Rhetoricization of Knowledge,” 42–43.

moment can be called an accidental relationship.⁴⁰ This terminology might seem problematic for a self-styled nominalist such as Nizolio, but he tries to explain ‘essential’ in purely extensional terms: there is no horse that is not an animal. In his edition of Nizolio’s work, Leibniz criticized this solution, arguing that the meaning of a concept is not the same as its extension: the meaning of the concept horse is not the same as the collection of individual horses. Even if there were no horses on earth, it would still be true to say that horse is a non-rational animal.⁴¹

The next step in Nizolio’s argument concerns the making of our categorizations. Are they just human inventions or do they have a grounding in reality? It is a bit of both for Nizolio. But given his claim that universals are just collections of individuals that the mind takes as one group, it is the role of the mind that takes center stage in Nizolio’s account: it is a creative, comprehensive act of the human mind that sees a group of individuals as group “simultaneously and all at once (*simul et semel*).” He calls it a “philosophical and oratorical act,” by which he means an act of comparing things and seeing the similarities between them.⁴² It is a philosophical act, since it plays an important role in philosophy, where definitions are based on similarities between things. It is an “oratorical act” because we find the trope of using the singular instead of the plural – or part instead of the whole, or one thing instead of a plurality or the entire group – often used not only by orators, poets, and prose writers, but also by common people (*populus, vulgus*). It is what rhetoricians call *intellectio*, or synecdoche.⁴³ For Nizolio synecdoche is the linguistic expression of *comprehensio*: when we take a group together we use a word that, because of its singular case (e.g. dog), might suggest that it refers to a single thing (the universal Doghood), while in fact it refers to just all the individuals taken together (Bello, Fido, Brownie, Snoopie, etc.).⁴⁴

Because Nizolio has equated universals with just groups of things ‘out there,’ he can now claim that his account has reestablished a direct contact between the human mind and the world of concrete things. Having rejected universals as nonsensical entities – *ficta* of the philosophers – Nizolio claims that his universals constitute reality itself (that is, collections of individuals grouped together): they are made by nature (*a natura facta*).⁴⁵ There are of course also

40 Ibid., 1: 140–41; cf. 122 and 139.

41 Leibniz in Nizolio, *De veris principiis*, 1: 87 n. 5.

42 Nizolio, *De veris principiis*, 2: 80.

43 Ibid., 1: 41 and 46, referring to Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 8.6.19–20.

44 Ibid., 2: 80; Cicero, *De oratore* 3.27.106 and 2.31.135, quoted by Nizolio, 1: 74.

45 Ibid., 1: 78.

a number of unsolved problems in Nizolio's account but we now have a rough idea of his attempt to replace the doctrine of universals and abstraction of those universals by an extensional approach in which classes are groups of individuals grasped by the mind.

Since Nizolio only perfunctorily refers once or twice to the *nominales*,⁴⁶ the question arises: how nominalistic is his project? His final objective is certainly not nominalistic at all: the rejection of universals is aimed at putting dialectic and metaphysics in their place and restoring rhetoric to its proper place as the queen of arts. Nizolio's ardent defense of the Ciceronian union of reason and eloquence, and of philosophy and rhetoric, finds of course no equivalent in nominalism.⁴⁷ But even on a more detailed level, it is difficult to see structural similarities. While for Nizolio universals are out there (as groups of things), for Ockham universals are singular concepts in our mind, that is, singular entities that can stand for many things. The whole notion of mental language that is so important for Ockham is completely absent from Nizolio's account. Even though Nizolio's notion of a mental act by which the human mind sees a group of individuals might remind us of Ockham's theory of the universal as a particular act of the mind, the context and development of the idea is wholly different. Nizolio does not show any awareness that this act-theory of Ockham requires an abstractionist account of knowledge. On Ockham's account the concept cat is produced in our mind when we see a cat: this concept can then be used to stand for all objects that we meet and that resemble it.⁴⁸ Though it is a particular act of the mind it can stand universally for all its referents, by virtue of its resemblance to each of them. As already indicated, Nizolio does not develop such an abstractionist account of knowledge, placing instead universals outside the mind: they are the genera out there, comprehensively understood by the human mind.⁴⁹

46 Ibid., I: 65 and 82.

47 Nizolio cites various passages from Cicero's *De oratore*, drawing, without doubt, on his own *Observationes in M.T. Ciceronem*; cf. Matthias Wesseler, *Die Einheit von Wort und Sache. Der Entwurf einer rhetorischen Philosophie bei Marius Nizolius* (Munich: W. Fink, 1974), 27–29; Erika Rummel, *The Humanist-Scholastic Debate in the Renaissance and Reformation* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 175.

48 William of Ockham, *Summa logicae*, ed. Philotheus Boehner et al. (St. Bonaventure NY: Franciscan Institute, 1974), 57–65.

49 Nizolio's notion of *comprehensio* is different from Ockham's notion of intuitive cognition. Intuitive cognition gives us direct and correct information about the existence of an object, while Nizolio's *comprehensio*, as we have seen, is a mental act by which we grasp individual things as a group.

Concluding Remarks

My discussion has confirmed an obvious point, that it is almost impossible to say anything in general about the influence of nominalism on humanism. As was said in the introduction, the labels are too general and too vague. If we define humanism in terms of the *studia humanitatis*, a direct influence of nominalist teaching on humanism is of course not to be expected. From the time of Petrarch onwards the whole point of the program of the *studia humanitatis* was to get away from the ‘barbari Brittani’ and their logical studies. Logic should be replaced by rhetoric, or at least be subordinated to it, and such a subordinate role for logic was, as is well known, defended by Valla and by Nizolio; the latter redefined logic in ‘true’ and ‘false logic’ of which the former was then equated with rhetoric.⁵⁰ Agricola, and to some extent Vives, aimed at a transformation of the three arts of the *trivium* into one system of thinking and arguing. The aims, approach as well as the tone in which these ideas were presented could vary considerably among humanists, but the least we can say is that such attempts to reinstate rhetoric (or a rhetorical-dialectical system) at the heart of the *trivium* would hardly be congenial to an Ockhamist.

This is of course not to say that some humanists could not have found inspiration in nominalist writings, especially in Northern Europe. An argument has been made for Melanchthon’s debt to nominalism, though recent scholars have questioned this interpretation, pointing to aspects of his thinking, such as the notion of *lumen naturale* and the existence of innate ideas that seem to square oddly with a nominalist point of view.⁵¹ Similar remarks could be made about Wessel Gansfort and Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples, but the evidence is often tenuous and controversial, and again it all depends on what one understands by nominalism and whether we have in mind theology and moral philosophy or logic.⁵² In the case of the four humanists examined in this article it is difficult

50 Nizolio, *De veris principiis*, 2: 91; cf. Nauta, “Anti-Essentialism and the Rhetoricization of Knowledge,” 55. Valla, *Dialectical Disputations*, II, proemium, ed. and trans. Copenhagen and Nauta, vol. 2: 2–6. Agricola, *De inventione dialectica*, on which see Mack, *Renaissance Argument*, and Vives, esp. *De instrumento probabilitatis* (*Opera omnia* III), *De ratione dicendi* and *De consultatione* (both in *OO* II).

51 Günter Frank, *Die theologische Philosophie Philipp Melanchthons (1497–1560)* (Leipzig: Benno, 1995), 33–37; Kees G. Meerhoff, “Philippe Melanchthon aux Pays-Bas et en France: quelques sondages,” in *Melanchthon und Europa*, 2. Teilband. *Westeuropa*, eds. Günter Frank and Kees Meerhoff (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog 2002), 163–93.

52 Henk A.G. Braakhuis, “Wessel Gansfort between Albertism and Nominalism,” in *Wessel Gansfort, 1419–1489, and Northern Humanism*, ed. Fokke Akkerman et al. (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 30–43. On Lefèvre d’Étaples, who according to his student Beatus Rhenanus was

to see a close connection between their humanist program and nominalism. As we have seen, Valla turns out not to be an Ockhamist and at essential points his approach differs fundamentally from Ockham's. Agricola was a realist finding inspiration in Boethius and Duns Scotus rather than Ockham. Vives sounds like a nominalist and a realist at the same time, perhaps in the final analysis coming close to the traditional position of Boethius' conceptualism. Only Nizolio explicitly refers to the *nominales*, but apart from the rejection of the universals, the context and development of that rejection are wholly different. For all these humanists, the main sources were Cicero, Quintilian and Boethius rather than nominalist authors from the late-scholastic period. Nizolio, for instance, worked in a wholly different intellectual milieu in which Ciceronianism was the main issue.⁵³

What has probably contributed to the association of humanism with nominalism is an old interpretation of nominalism that has been criticized by recent scholarship but which is still rather influential, namely nominalism as a critical movement that undermined faith in the foundations of Aristotelian-scholastic philosophy and theology, thereby contributing to the Reformation and also, because of its alleged empiricism, to the rise of a new scientific culture.⁵⁴ These features of criticism, skepticism, empiricism and a pre-Reformation mentality have long been ascribed to humanism too, even though here too it seems that the outcome – the emergence of a 'modern,' scientific, secularized culture – has been projected onto these earlier traditions on the principle of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. From such a perspective humanists then appear as brothers-in-arms (and a few sisters) with nominalists, and hence the association in the minds of not a few historians.

Although it seems that this whole interpretation must be considered wishful thinking – a piece of Whiggish historiography – there is one aspect that would certainly find favor with nominalists. In the humanists here considered we see a move towards a de-essentialization of universals and abstract entities, that is, a move away from universals as such and away from the process of abstraction by which universals as essences are to be dug up. The final result is

positive about nominalism, see Cesare Vasoli, *La dialettica e la retorica dell'Umanesimo. "Invention" e "Metodo" nella cultura del XV e XVI secolo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1968), 187–88; but cf. Stanislas Musial, "Beatus Rhenanus étudiant de philosophie à Paris (1503–1507)," *Annuaire de la société des amis de la Bibliothèque de Sélestat*, 35 (1985): 275 (skeptical). For another example see the contribution by Copenhaver and Ward in this volume.

53 See Breen's introduction to his Nizolio edition.

54 Courtenay, *Ockham and Ockhamism*, 1–19 ("In Search of Nominalism: Two Centuries of Historical Debate").

a horizontal ontology in which concrete things, grouped in classes on the basis of what we empirically observe, take center stage, rather than hierarchies of universals such as genus and species somehow residing in, though never identical with, individual things. These humanists were certainly not alone nor the first to warn against reification and hypostatization, but equipped with their linguistic and rhetorical training they could argue that such reification and hence a belief in abstract entities was caused by a misunderstanding of the Latin language. Of course, this belief was an article of faith, but as most articles of faith it had its consequences in how the world was viewed. The humanists thus believed that once we have got rid of the metaphysical superstructure of universals, essences, categories, transcendentals and so on, we can look at the world directly and describe it in the common language of good Latin, either because this language had its intrinsic qualities to do so (as Valla's argument implies) or because we simply need a lingua franca for scholarship, science and learned communication (as Vives argued). This is of course not to say that these humanists were empiricists or that they were engaged in a natural philosophical program that focused on the world of concrete things – even though we find glowing pleas for concrete observation of all kinds of phenomena. Agricola, for instance, writes to a friend that he must “reach out to the things themselves (*res ipsas*),” examining “the geography and nature of lands, seas, mountains and rivers; the customs, borders and circumstances of nations that live on earth; the empires in their historical or extended forms (...); the medicinal properties of trees and herbs.”⁵⁵ Similar statements can be found in his *De inventione dialectica* and also in the works of Vives and other humanists. This might not be a direct result of a move away from universals and abstraction, but on the other hand it is not too far-fetched to see these as two sides of the same coin. In a way the critique of what the humanists regarded as the theoretical and unduly abstract terminology and notions of the scholastics could only lead to a plea for the examination of the world as we see it, and think and talk about it, following the *intellectus communis* and the *sensus communis*, expressions that, not incidentally, abound in their works.

55 Agricola, *Letters*, ed. Adrie van der Laan and Fokke Akkerman (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2002), letter no. 38, p. 207 (their translation slightly adapted).