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Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	‘
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	’
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a		◌ًا، ◌ًى	an
◌ُ	u		◌ٌو	un
◌ِ	i		◌ٍي	in
◌َا، ◌ٰ، ◌َى،	ā		◌َوْ	aw
◌ُو	ū		◌َيْ	ay
◌ِي	ī		◌ُوّ	uww, ū (in final position)
			◌ِيّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: http://rotas.iium.edu.my

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The Philosophical Background of the Criticisms of the Renaissance Humanist Lorenzo Valla: On Church Authority and the Latin Language

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Bilge Salur[****]

Abstract: This study examines the philosophical foundations of Lorenzo Valla's critiques of ecclesiastical authority and Latin learning. While previous studies have often treated his philology, theology, and criticism of scholasticism separately, this article analyses their shared humanist basis. Valla challenged certain forms of scholastic abstraction and Aristotelian logic, favouring rhetoric, historical inquiry, and close textual analysis. In the *Elegantiae linguae Latinae*, he sought to restore Latin according to classical standards and emphasised the relationship between language and thought. His analysis of the *Donation of Constantine* showed how philology could question inherited claims of Church authority. Rather than directly anticipating the Reformation, some of his criticisms later resonated with Reformation debates. The study argues that Valla transformed philology into a broader critical method for reassessing linguistic, theological, and institutional traditions.

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Keywords: Church authority, Donation of Constantine, Latin language, Lorenzo Valla, philology.

Abstrak: Kajian ini meneliti asas-asas falsafah kritikan Lorenzo Valla terhadap autoriti gerejawi dan pembelajaran bahasa Latin. Walaupun kajian terdahulu sering memperlakukan filologi, teologi, dan kritikannya terhadap skolastisisme secara berasingan, artikel ini menganalisis asas humanis yang dikongsi oleh ketiga-tiganya. Valla mencabar bentuk-bentuk tertentu abstraksi skolastik dan logik Aristotelian, dengan mengutamakan retorik, penyelidikan sejarah, dan analisis teks yang dekat. Dalam *Elegantiae linguae Latinae*, beliau berusaha memulihkan bahasa Latin menurut piawaian klasik dan menekankan hubungan antara bahasa dan pemikiran. Analisisnya terhadap *Donation of Constantine* menunjukkan bagaimana filologi dapat mempersoalkan dakwaan autoriti Gereja yang diwarisi. Daripada secara langsung mendahului Reformasi, beberapa kritikannya kemudian bergema dalam perdebatan Reformasi. Kajian ini berhujah bahawa Valla mengubah filologi menjadi suatu kaedah kritis yang lebih luas untuk menilai semula tradisi linguistik, teologi, dan institusi.

Kata kunci: autoriti Gereja, *Donation of Constantine*, bahasa Latin, Lorenzo Valla, filologi.

Introduction

Renaissance humanism began in Italy in the late fourteenth century, reached maturity in the fifteenth century, and spread to the rest of Europe after the middle of that century. By the sixteenth century, however, it had become the dominant intellectual movement in Europe. Renaissance humanism was not a sharp break with the Middle Ages or a direct "transition to modernity," but rather a revival and reshaping of classical learning rooted in the rhetorical and educational traditions of antiquity (Grendler, 2010, p. 3). As Kristeller (1961, p. 100) observed, the humanist movement did not originate from philosophical or scientific studies but from grammar and rhetoric; the humanists' primary concern was to cultivate rhetorical competence and master the use of Latin, continuing and reshaping a tradition extending back to the Middle Ages. Their engagement with Greek and Roman texts aimed less at creating new "values" than at rediscovering classical linguistic and stylistic models and adapting them to contemporary educational curricula.

From the fifteenth century onward, intellectuals across various disciplines—jurists, physicians, philosophers, and theologians—participated in humanist studies, broadening the movement's influence. Its effects ranged from refining literary style to developing critical methods in historiography. Yet it is difficult to claim that humanism fundamentally transformed existing medieval traditions; many humanists remained amateurs in specialised fields, and even professional scholars influenced by humanist critiques did not wholly abandon the medieval legacy of their disciplines (Kristeller, 1961, p. 101).

Within this climate, the Aristotelian scholastic tradition continued to dominate the universities. Although most humanists preferred rhetoric over dialectic, they did not entirely repudiate Aristotelian thought. Lorenzo Valla, however, occupied an exceptional position. Nauta (2009) describes him as one of the most vehement critics of the Aristotelian-scholastic paradigm and, arguably, one of the most philosophically minded humanists. Through his philological rigour, his critiques of scholastic logic, and his questioning of institutional authority, he pushed the intellectual horizons of his age. His investigations into the Donation of Constantine demonstrated that humanist philology could serve not only as a linguistic tool but as a force capable of challenging historical and institutional authority.

Although Valla's contributions to philology, theology, philosophy, and the critique of scholasticism have received considerable scholarly attention, they have frequently been approached within specialised lines of inquiry—for example, his reform of dialectic and critique of scholastic philosophy (Nauta, 2009), his biblical philology and New Testament textual criticism (den Haan, 2024), and his theological and ecclesiastical interventions in the context of reform (Rummel, 1995). This fragmentation risks obscuring the common critical principles underlying his diverse intellectual interventions, particularly his use of linguistic and philological criticism to question inherited claims to authority.

This article therefore addresses the problem of how Valla's critiques in seemingly distinct fields can be understood as interconnected components of a broader humanist approach to intellectual reform. It argues that Valla's historical significance lies not in his anticipation of the modern scientific method, but in his use of linguistic, philological,

historical, and rational criticism to examine established forms of textual, philosophical, and ecclesiastical authority. Methodologically, this study employs a contextual and thematic analysis of Valla's critiques of the Latin language, ecclesiastical authority, scholastic logic, Aristotelian philosophy, and natural philosophy in order to identify the methodological continuities connecting these different areas of his thought. By bringing these interventions within a unified analytical framework, the article demonstrates that Valla's contribution to Renaissance thought can be understood through the relationship he established between language, knowledge, and authority and through his broader contribution to the development of critical humanism, historical criticism, and philological method.

Method and Sources

This study adopts a contextual and comparative textual approach centred on a selective corpus of Valla's primary works. The *Elegantiae linguae Latinae* is examined because it most clearly presents his understanding of classical usage and the relationship between language and thought; the *Declamatio de falso credita et ementita Donatione Constantini* is selected because it demonstrates the extension of linguistic analysis into historical, legal, and institutional criticism; and the *Dialecticae disputationes* is used to assess how Valla applied ordinary linguistic usage and rhetorical reasoning to scholastic categories and Aristotelian logic. *De Voluptate* and *In Praise of Saint Thomas Aquinas* are considered more selectively where the discussion concerns ethics, theology, and the relationship between philosophy and religious belief. These works were chosen not as an exhaustive account of Valla's writings, but as representative texts through which the methodological continuity among his linguistic, philosophical, and ecclesiastical criticisms can be tested.

The analysis proceeds through close reading of specific lexical choices, grammatical constructions, conceptual distinctions, historical references, and argumentative examples. In the *Elegantiae*, attention is given to Valla's comparison of classical and later Latin usage and to his claim that linguistic corruption produces intellectual confusion. In the *Declamatio*, the study examines his identification of anachronisms, grammatical irregularities, chronological inconsistencies, and the absence of evidence for the formal transfer of imperial possession. In the *Dialecticae disputationes*, it considers his reduction of Aristotelian categories, his preference for customary words over

scholastic technicalities, and his use of concrete counterexamples. Secondary scholarship is employed to establish the historical context, clarify contested interpretations, and trace the later reception of these arguments, rather than as a substitute for primary-textual evidence. This combination of close reading, conceptual analysis, and historical contextualisation makes it possible to evaluate philology as a broader critical method while avoiding anachronistic claims that Valla directly founded modern experimental science or caused the Reformation.

The Life and Works of Lorenzo Valla

Lorenzo Valla, whose full name was Lorenzo della Valle, was an erudite philologist and one of the most distinguished figures associated with the revival of classical learning. He was born in Rome, around 1407 (*Neues Conversations-Lexikon*, 1866, p. 139; Rubini, 2007, p. 1947). His father Luca della Valle was a lawyer and respected figure in the Roman Curia; his mother was Caterina Scribani (Schwahn, 1896, p. 3; Vahlen, 1864, p. 4). Educated in the humanist schools of Rome, Valla studied Latin under Leonardo Bruni and Greek under Giovanni Aurispa (Holder, 2009, p. 46; Mack, 2011, p. 47). At age 24, his request for a position in the papal secretariat was denied on grounds of youth. After his father's death, he went to the University of Pavia in 1431 as professor of rhetoric, where he composed *De Voluptate*, later revised as *De Vero Bono* (Benigni, 1915, p. 257). This work is a dialogue between Epicurean, Stoic, and Christian views, defending sensual pleasure as the greatest good, though not perfectly attainable in this life (Livingstone & Cross, 2005, p. 1689). In 1433, Valla was forced to leave Pavia following a polemic that challenged the legal methods of his time and undermined the medieval jurist Bartolus of Sassoferrato. He later resided in Milan and Florence, finally settling in Naples in 1437 as royal secretary to Alfonso of Aragon (Rubini, 2007, p. 1946).

In Naples, Valla produced several controversial works that critically examined ecclesiastical traditions and texts, attracting the attention of the Inquisition, though Alfonso's protection prevented prosecution. He later returned to Rome, where his philological and cultural reform programme aligned with Pope Nicholas V's efforts to revive the city's classical heritage. This convergence led to Valla's appointment as an apostolic scriptor. He also translated major ancient Greek works into Latin (Durmaz, 2023, p. 34; Foley, 2016, p. 222).

Valla's multifaceted intellectual activities are reflected in contemporary testimonies. Bartolomeo Facio's *De viris illustribus* emphasises his teaching of rhetoric in Naples and Rome, his philological studies, and his Latin translations of the works of Thucydides and Herodotus (Facio, 1745, p. 23). During his years in Naples, Valla composed several of his most important works, including *De libero arbitrio*, the *Repastinatio dialectice et philosophie*—later known as the *Dialecticae disputationes*—the *Declamatio de falso credita et ementita Donatione Constantini*, and *De professione religiosorum* (Benigni, 1915, p. 257). His *Elegantiae linguae Latinae* sought to restore Latin usage according to classical models (Holder, 2009, p. 46). He also turned to biblical philology, composing two treatises devoted specifically to the improvement of the Latin text of the New Testament: *Collatio Novi Testamenti* and *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum* (Linde, 2015, p. 262; den Haan, 2024, p. 267).

In *Dialecticae disputationes*, Valla offered a sharp critique of Aristotelian logic and the scholastic method, though his engagement was primarily linguistic (Benigni, 1915, p. 257). He sought to reconsider dialectic by reducing the unnecessary complexities of scholastic logic, replacing them with simpler propositions from ancient sources, including Scripture. As Wright notes, drawing on Trinkaus, Valla offered "the rhetorical equivalent of scholastic nominalism," a rhetorical alternative grounded in humanist-philological sources and methods. Since Valla regarded language as the medium through which humans make sense of the world, he considered rhetoric to be philosophy itself (Wright, 2010, pp. 65–66). His philological method also extended to ecclesiastical authority, most notably in his critique of the Donation of Constantine, which carried theological, political, and legal implications (Rummel, 1995, p. 64). Valla is often regarded as an important early figure in the development of modern historical criticism (Gudeman, 2022, p. 159).

The Main Dimensions of Lorenzo Valla's Critical Thought

Lorenzo Valla's Conception of Latin Language and Usage

Lorenzo Valla can be regarded as a pivotal figure in the intellectual transformation of his time. His work showed a keen sensitivity to the historical situatedness of texts and concepts, and he sought to establish a philologically grounded methodology that redefined epistemic standards in historical and philosophical discourse (Oral, 2014, p. 66).

Valla's most enduring influence on humanism lay in his engagement with language. Through his intensive study of classical Latin and its pedagogical applications, he contributed to reviving ancient linguistic models and provided humanism with its principal medium of expression. He translated the works of Herodotus and Thucydides and studied the Latin language. His reflections on Ancient Greece and Aristotle influenced the principles of humanism. According to Valla, the things in the world are those that we see and experience. There is no need for theoretical structures or metaphysical concepts in order to examine and explain them. Language is what should be used to explain this world, because language shapes the way in which we think about and categorise it. For a humanist such as Valla, this language could be none other than Latin. According to the humanist understanding, Latin should therefore be learned and studied (Güler, 2018, p. 5; Pugliese, 1994, p. 11).

Among Valla's works, his most influential contribution to Latin style and grammar was the *Elegantiae linguae Latinae*. Based on a rigorous analysis of the leading authors of the Latin Golden Age, it served as a comprehensive guide to classical usage. One of its longest and most valuable sections provides a comparative study of the precise meanings of Latin words (Nauert, 2011, p. 53). In this widely influential work, Valla examined morphological, syntactic, and semantic features of Latin as no one had done before. His aim was to demonstrate the linguistic foundation of law, theology, philosophy, and all intellectual activity. A person who misunderstands the use of words, he argued, will fall into confused thoughts and empty theories; language constitutes the very framework through which thought is formed and articulated. For Valla and his humanist circle, only classical Latin was acceptable. He thus accepted the development of Latin during the classical period but rejected post-second-century developments, focusing on the Latin spoken between Cicero and Quintilian—a timeless medium of expression (Nauta, 2007, pp. 195–197).

In the *Elegantiae*, Valla argued that the Romans contributed to humanity not only through military success but through their language. Latin constitutes the most valuable "product" transmitted to other nations, nourishment not for the body but the soul. Through language,

peoples became acquainted with arts, laws, and wisdom, liberating themselves from barbarism. Although Rome's political dominion was lost, Latin established an enduring "cultural empire," preserved for centuries as a sacred inheritance even among foreigners and adversaries. Rome no longer possesses a kingdom or political sovereignty, yet its presence endures across Europe through Latin, which functions as a "common law" unifying diverse peoples. Contrasting Latin's unity with the dialectal diversity of the Greek world, Valla argued that the unity of Latin surpassed the Greeks' many dialects (Valla, 1541).

Although Latin long endured as Rome's lasting legacy, it gradually declined after the Empire's fall, leading to intellectual regression. According to Valla, philosophy, rhetoric, law, and literature reached their most brilliant periods when Latin was vibrant; as the language weakened, these fields declined correspondingly. For centuries after Rome's collapse, the language was neither properly spoken nor written texts properly understood: philosophers did not comprehend philosophers, orators did not comprehend orators, and jurists did not comprehend jurists. As if with Rome's political collapse it were no longer necessary to speak like a Roman, the brilliance and elegance once possessed by Latin drifted towards oblivion. Yet Valla believed his own age offered a favourable environment for reviving both Latin and the sciences: contemporary generations possessed the capacity to restore the Roman language and with it all the liberal arts, provided sufficient effort was made (Valla, 1541). *Historiarum Ferdinandi Regis Aragoniae Libri Tres* emphasises Valla's contribution to sustaining a language on the verge of decline (Valla, 1521), overlapping with the philological sensitivity of the *Elegantiae*. Valla's rhetoric conveys a strong sense of urgency and presents the restoration of Latin as a broader cultural and intellectual responsibility: Rome is regarded not only as a political capital but also as a centre of literature and learning, while indifference to the condition of Latin is associated with the abandonment of Rome's cultural heritage (Valla, 1541). This assessment shows that language is not merely a tool of communication but a carrier of civilisation and a constitutive element of identity. Valla's perspective represents a nostalgic "return to the golden age" that overlooks the multifaceted nature of linguistic history—including the rise of local dialects, political fragmentation, and oral-cultural influence—yet it provided a powerful impetus for Latin's revival and laid foundations for subsequent philological studies.

Lorenzo Valla's Criticisms of Religious Matters

Valla's engagement with religious questions was closely connected to his broader philological and critical approach. By subjecting ecclesiastical texts, theological concepts, and established traditions to linguistic and historical scrutiny, he challenged claims to authority that rested on inherited interpretations and institutional acceptance. His critiques of monasticism, papal authority, the Donation of Constantine, and the Vulgate demonstrate how philological analysis could extend beyond the study of language to become an instrument for questioning ecclesiastical authority and theological claims.

In *De professione religiosorum*, Valla rejected the view that monastic life represents the highest form of Christian life. Christ's life, for him, is a model to be emulated not only by religious orders but also by lay Christians. Voluntary and sincere actions possess greater moral worth than those imposed by vows. He accused monks who defined themselves as "pious" in a manner that excluded other Christians of arrogance; yet, while opposing asceticism in line with other humanists such as Coluccio Salutati, Giannozzo Manetti, and Poggio Bracciolini, he refrained from recounting obscene tales to disparage them (Benigni, 1915, pp. 257–258; Kale, 2019, p. 765).

Valla also criticised the papacy systematically. In his view, the papacy should be more sensitive to its theological and religious duties and less occupied with political and financial matters. Though seen as a great enemy of the papacy's temporal claims, his criticisms aimed at reforming rather than destroying the institution (D'Amico, 1983, pp. 118–119). More broadly, *De Constantini Donatione*—which questions the historical basis of papal claims—can be read as an attack on the institutional Church's preoccupation with the secular world (Rummel, 1995, p. 65).

Valla's strongest criticism was directed at the Donation of Constantine, one of the texts historically invoked to support papal temporal claims (Brotton, 2006, p. 58). According to the document, when Constantine the Great gained control of Rome, he granted Pope Sylvester sole authority over the Western Christian world and supremacy over all other major episcopal centres. In 1440, Valla critically examined the document and proved it inauthentic: Constantine had no authority to make such a donation, nor the Pope to accept it. He also challenged the

text's claim that all satraps and the Roman people were made subjects of the Church (Güre, 2022, p. 203).

The document purported to be from the fourth century, but historical inconsistencies, philological errors, and logical contradictions revealed it as an eighth-century forgery. Valla issued a forceful denunciation of the Roman Church and its clergy, accusing them of "staining the Christian religion" (Brotton, 2006, p. 58). Posing the question of how one could still defend the papal institution once it was understood to be the cause of such great and contradictory evils, Valla articulated the changing perspectives on Church and religion during the Renaissance (Güler, 2018, pp. 55–56).

Valla's refutation of the *Donatio Constantini* combined historical contextualisation with close linguistic analysis. For example, he challenged the document's reference to Constantinople as a patriarchal see, observing that the city had not yet been founded under that name in the period to which the document purported to belong. He likewise questioned its references to churches dedicated to Peter and Paul, arguing that such public Christian institutions were incompatible with the historical circumstances of Constantine's early reign. At the linguistic level, he drew attention to barbarisms, confused grammatical constructions, and vocabulary inconsistent with the Latin of the fourth century (Coleman, 1922, pp. 93–97; Valla, 1994, p. 40). Valla further supplemented these linguistic and chronological objections with an argument from textual silence. He observes that Jacobus de Voragine, despite his ecclesiastical position and presumed sympathy towards the clergy, did not mention Constantine's Donation in his account of the saints. Since the life of Sylvester circulated widely but contained no trace of the alleged privilege, Valla treats its absence from Voragine's narrative as additional evidence against the document's historical authenticity (Valla, 1994, p. 31).

Valla also tested the document's claims against the practical and legal requirements of transferring political authority. Even granting that authentic and uncorrupted documents demonstrating Sylvester's consent could be produced, he asked: "Where is possession? Where is the formal delivery?" He argued that a written charter alone could not demonstrate that imperial authority and possession had actually been transferred. Such an extensive transfer would have required identifiable ceremonies,

officials, and representatives acting on behalf of Constantine and Sylvester throughout Italy and the western provinces. Yet no historical record identified these persons or described such a transfer (Valla, 1994, p. 23). These examples show that Valla did not merely assert that the document was false; he tested its language, historical claims, and legal assumptions against the context and institutional practices in which it purported to have been produced. His procedure was therefore philological, historical, and comparative rather than experimental in the modern scientific sense.

Valla was not the first to claim the document's forgery. In the Middle Ages, jurists such as John of Paris had rejected its validity, arguing that the emperor was merely the "administrator" of the empire and could not by personal decree transfer it to another. By the mid-fifteenth century, the falsity had already been asserted by prominent figures such as the cardinal Nicholas of Cusa. Yet the impact of Valla's text derived less from the evidence presented than from his sharp, polemical tone against the Papacy and his philological rigour in exposing the forgery (Ginzburg, 1999, p. 55).

As a textual critic, Valla inevitably turned to the Vulgate, comparing it with the Greek New Testament manuscripts and identifying discrepancies and missing sentences (Erbay, 2022, pp. 59–60). He did not produce a new biblical text but sought to identify and clarify errors, ambiguities, and problematic renderings in the Latin translation. In the *Collatio Novi Testamenti*, Valla explicitly describes this philological procedure, observing that when a word-for-word translation renders a passage obscure, it should be clarified (Valla, 1477, fol. 4r). The innovative nature of his work drew harsh criticism. Responding to accusations that he denigrated the Bible by suggesting inaccuracies, Valla distinguished the Bible from the Vulgate, noting that many regarded the Vulgate as Jerome's translation commissioned by Pope Damasus. He replied that if Jerome came back to life he would correct what had been vitiated, and that emending the translation was not emending Scripture but offering a better version—one that should be called authentic rather than the previous translator's (Rummel, 1995, p. 66).

Valla also reflected on Jerome's translation method. Although Jerome generally advocated sense-for-sense translation in the Ciceronian manner, for Holy Writ he chose a literal, word-for-word rendering,

believing even word order carried a sacred "mystery." Valla rejected this approach: literal translation produces an unnatural, artificial, difficult Latin, especially for those without Greek. His aim was a clear, intelligible, solid Latin text that would convey God's message directly and transparently (Hamilton, 2018, p. 39).

Lorenzo Valla's Critique of Aristotle and Scholasticism

From the thirteenth century onward, Aristotelian philosophy became central to medieval European intellectual life with the rise of the universities. Through the translation movements, Aristotle's works—transmitted into Latin via Arabic—emerged as foundational sources of scholastic thought, from logic to metaphysics. Thinkers such as Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas institutionalised this legacy by interpreting Aristotle within a framework compatible with Christian theology (Bruckman, 2011, p. 231; Chen & Hsu, 2020, p. 116). By the fifteenth century, Aristotelian thought still held a strong position in European intellectual life and continued to exert influence even after the Protestant Reformation (Kristeller, 1961, p. 35). Within this dominant tradition, Lorenzo Valla emerged as a dissenting figure whose radical questioning challenged the very foundations of the philosophical learning of his time (Rummel, 1995, p. 64).

Valla accepted only three of Aristotle's ten categories—substance, quality, and action—and attempted to reduce several of the remaining categories, including quantity, relation, time, and place, to these three. For Valla, qualifications such as size, fatherhood, position, time, and place differ in no way from those traditionally associated with quality, such as colour and shape; from a grammatical viewpoint, all are essentially qualitative terms providing information about a substance, its qualification, or its action (Nauta, 2007, pp. 198–199; Perreiah, 2016, p. 48). Valla's own discussion in the Dialecticae Disputationes provides a concrete example of this critique. Questioning the traditional classification of accidents, he argues that they can be reduced to quality and action. Through the example of heat in fire and iron, Valla challenges the scholastic distinction between substantial and accidental forms and states his preference for "words that are customary and not quibbling" (Valla, 2012, p. 201).

As Kraye observes, Valla also questioned Aristotle's assumption that the mean was invariably good, while the extremes were necessarily

characterised by excess or deficiency: "Was it not better to be exceedingly beautiful or wise than moderately so, and minimally rather than moderately malformed or foolish?" (Kraye, 2001, p. 722). This criticism illustrates Valla's tendency to test Aristotelian philosophical principles against concrete counterexamples rather than accepting them as universally valid. By considering whether moderation is desirable in every circumstance, Valla questions the universal applicability of the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean.

Valla directed substantial critiques at Aristotelian logic. In his view, the primary function of thought is to generate knowledge of reality, while language's role is to communicate it. Aristotelian logic fails this aim, since its conceptual framework is detached from the concrete characteristics of actual things and thus distances itself from reality (Daşkaya, 2022). Valla advocated reform in language use and proposed replacing logic with rhetoric—not as eloquent persuasion but as the linguistic articulation of genuine understanding grounded in tangible reality. His redefinition of rhetoric as a tool of epistemological clarity, rather than ornamental speech, marked a turning point in humanist thought. His position was later taken up by humanists such as Rudolf Agricola and Juan Luis Vives (Cevizci, 2015, p. 384).

Throughout his career, Valla maintained that pleasure and self-love constitute the primary motives of all human action. He thus rejected Aristotle's claim that pleasure is the least noble motivation for friendship and argued against the Stoic elevation of virtue and selfless love as supreme values (Allen, 2002, p. 830). In *De Voluptate*, he compares Stoic and Epicurean conceptions of the "true good," emphasising the Epicurean doctrine of pleasure (*voluptas*) against the Stoic teaching that bases virtue on honour (*honestas*) (Herold, 2019, pp. 136–137). Within the Epicurean framework, pleasure is the primary criterion of happiness: since human nature is intrinsically oriented towards seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, both are indispensable to a fulfilling life (Aktaş, 2024, p. 576). In contrast, Stoic philosophy rejects pleasure as inconsistent with the unity of knowledge and action central to human nature (Karabulut & Kaynak Iltar, 2020, p. 275). Valla argues that the only true good for humans, and the sole purpose of human actions, is pleasure (Kale, 2019, p. 765).

Against Stoic views, Valla reinterprets the concepts of utility, pleasure, rectitude, and virtue: what is useful is identical with what is

pleasurable, and what is right with what is virtuous; nothing without pleasure or virtue can be "useful." Goodness cannot simultaneously arise from both pleasure and virtue, since opposing qualities cannot yield a single aim. Virtues are therefore not independent goods, as the Stoics claimed, but means to attaining pleasure (Valla, 1519). Valla further argues that recognising pleasure as "good" rests not only on philosophical authority but on general consensus: people commonly divide "goods" into blessings of soul, body, and fortune. The Stoics, validating only the first, implicitly regard the others as "evil." Valla rejects this, since nature unites spiritual and bodily dimensions; to exclude nature's gifts from the category of "good" would be to accuse nature itself of folly or injustice (Valla, 1519). This argument can be situated within a broader humanist effort to reconsider the relationship between bodily, moral, and social goods.

Extending his critique beyond ethics, Valla also challenges aspects of natural philosophy that, in his view, weaken God's power. In vehement polemic, he attacks Aristotle's "polytheistic" ideas, seeking to reestablish God as sole creator of heaven and earth. As Nauta (2021) notes, thinking of the cosmos as a living animal, or of the heavens as celestial orbs moved by intelligences, is anathema to Valla—as it was to many medieval scholastics. He also rejects the notion of God as First Mover, since movement and rest should not (except perhaps metaphorically) be applied to spiritual beings such as God, angels, and souls.

Valla also criticised scholasticism directly. His attack in a speech honouring Thomas Aquinas on 7 March 1457 was one of the most significant theological arguments made from a humanist perspective. While praising Aquinas's sanctity of life and orthodoxy, Valla rejected the metaphysical foundations of Aquinas's theology and dismissed the idea that philosophical theology and the dialectical methods characterising scholastic thought held any value for a Christian striving to live well (D'Amico, 1983, p. 146).

Valla believed the intellectual corruption of the Middle Ages stemmed not only from the degeneration of Latin but also from the misuse of philosophy. He considered the fusion of theology and philosophy—regarded by medievals as their primary intellectual achievement—a failure (Valla, 1973, p. 15). As Rummel (1995, p. 65) summarises his

view, theologians should not depend so heavily on philosophy as to make it almost a sister of theology, for this implies that religion itself needs philosophy's protection.

Valla's critiques of established authorities extended beyond theology and philosophy. He challenged traditional philological assumptions by arguing that the rhetorical treatise *Ad Herennium*, long attributed to Cicero, was not his. He also questioned central claims of Christian tradition, such as the belief that the Apostles' Creed had been formulated directly by the twelve apostles. His legacy was carried on by figures like Erasmus, who embraced his critical method and pursued historical reform despite significant risks (Külcü, 2018, p. 79).

Lorenzo Valla's Critique of Aristotelian Natural Philosophy

As a Renaissance humanist, Valla adopted a critical stance not only in language and theology but also in natural philosophy, questioning scholastic authorities. His appeal to common sense—or what he perceived as such—shaped his critique of Aristotelian natural philosophy, insisting on ordinary observation and experience as criteria for testing ideas. On this basis, he argued that many Aristotelian claims were inconsistent with empirical facts. Valla rejected or qualified fundamental principles of Aristotelian physics—that motion causes heat, that every motion is produced by another motion, that elements transform into one another, that each element possesses distinctive qualities (heat and dryness for fire, heat and moisture for air), that pure elements exist, and that the combination of heat and moisture suffices for the origin of life. As an argumentative strategy, he frequently employed *reductio ad absurdum*: if Aristotle's theory were correct, we would observe phenomena quite different from what we actually observe. For example, in defending a fiery sphere beneath the Moon, Aristotle claimed that leaden missiles melt in the air from the force of motion. Valla rejected this by appealing to ordinary experience: leaden, iron, or stone balls shot from a sling or cannon are never observed to heat up in flight, nor do arrow feathers catch fire; if movement alone sufficed to produce heat, the spheres would set the air beneath them in motion, but no one has observed this. The significance of Valla's polemic lies less in the substance of his arguments than in the critical disposition it reveals—his awareness that Aristotle's conclusions often did not align with everyday experience. Although he did not develop his critique into an alternative philosophy

of nature, as later thinkers such as Bernardino Telesio (1509–1588) and Francesco Patrizi of Cherso (1529–1597) would, he nevertheless contributed to weakening belief in the exclusive validity of the Aristotelian paradigm (Nauta, 2021). His critique thus contributed indirectly to a more questioning attitude towards inherited Aristotelian authority by appealing to ordinary experience and logical consistency, without constituting a systematic programme of experimental science.

Valla also criticised Aristotle's natural philosophy for undermining God's omnipotence, targeting Aristotle with sharp polemical language for "polytheistic" views and for equating God with nature. His aim was to reestablish God as sole creator. The idea of the cosmos as a living animal and the heavens as celestial spheres moved by intelligent beings was unacceptable to Valla—a view that, in any case, was problematic for many scholastics as well. Similarly, he rejected the conceptualisation of God as First Mover, arguing that notions such as motion and rest should not be attributed to spiritual beings like God, angels, and souls (Nauta, 2021). Valla's project was thus not merely philosophical critique but theological defence: the Aristotelian portrayal of God as intertwined with nature represented, for him, a deviation that undermined God's transcendence and absolute omnipotence. He sought to redraw conceptual boundaries both linguistically and metaphysically to emphasise God's creative, absolute, and independent nature—a humanist-theological manifesto against the dominant Aristotelian-scholastic tradition that contributed to the Renaissance effort to redefine the relationship between God, nature, and reason.

The Renaissance was not only an era of intellectual and cultural renewal but also one of profound transformation in educational philosophy. Humanists such as Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, and Lorenzo Valla emphasised an educational system responsive to human nature. Disciplines such as poetry, history, philosophy, ethics, rhetoric, and politics emerged as foundational fields, encouraging inquiry outside the confines of medieval scholasticism. Humanists also initiated rigorous investigations enabling critical examination of inherited myths and dogmas—the most striking example being Valla's philological analysis of the forged Donation of Constantine. By accessing classical sources directly and developing a critical method extended to historical texts, humanists believed antiquity was more aligned with their own

intellectual identity than the preceding medieval period (Choudhury, 2005, p. 56).

The Intellectual Legacy of Lorenzo Valla: His Influence on Humanists and Reformers

As a leading figure of Renaissance humanism, Valla exerted profound influence on many other humanist thinkers, several of whom adopted his philological analyses, linguistic methods, approach to ancient texts, and critical stance towards medieval dogmas. His influence was particularly strong on Erasmus, who compiled an alphabetical summary of Valla's *Elegantiae* and later wrote a fuller commentary. Erasmus also discovered Valla's *Notes on the New Testament* and drew inspiration from his philological method in his own critical study of the New Testament (Rabil, 1993, p. 11; Sider, 2019, pp. 18–19; Tracy, 1996, p. 57).

Another figure influenced by Valla was Martin Luther. Luther's theses and writings show clear engagement with many of Valla's works. In an early sermon (1514–1517), he referenced Valla regarding the reading of Luke 14:10; in his Heidelberg Disputation theses (1518), he cited Valla's *Dialecticae disputationes*; and in writing on free will, he regarded Valla as an authoritative source. Luther expressed admiration for Valla as a good author and good Christian whom he read avidly (Wright, 2010, pp. 96–97).

Luther's interest was not confined to theological matters; it also reflected admiration for Valla's sharp critiques of the scholastic tradition. Although these critiques were generally appreciated among humanists, some contemporaries considered Valla's tone overly aggressive. Humanists such as Juan Luis Vives (1492–1540) and Johann Eck (1486–1543) found his philosophical grounding insufficient, while still acknowledging the significance of his critique of scholasticism. Valla's ideas thus played a formative role in shaping the intellectual transformation from the medieval period to the Renaissance in Italy (Arnold, 2011, p. 53).

Guided by the reemergence of classical works, scholastic thought and medieval beliefs were subjected to critical examination, and Valla played a significant role in this process. His works marked an important stage in the development of critical humanism and provided methods and

arguments that were later taken up by humanist scholars and religious reformers. From 1431 onward, he directed his critiques at the religious and philosophical systems of his time, emphasising the primacy of faith and thereby challenging aspects of scholastic authority. As a philologist and historian, he demonstrated the falsity of the Donation of Constantine, seriously questioning one of the historical foundations invoked in support of the medieval Church's temporal authority (İnalcık, 2016, p. 62). Although Valla's refutation initially attracted limited attention, its publication and translation during the Reformation helped establish it as an influential polemical text against papal claims to secular authority. Its circulation in Strasbourg, Basel, Cologne, and Leiden, together with its translation into several European vernaculars, demonstrates how Valla's philological critique was later appropriated within reformist debates. Indeed, in 1520, Luther was astonished that so many people had been deceived by the Donation›s falsehoods (De Grazia, 2010, p. 25).

Conclusions

This study has argued that Lorenzo Valla's criticisms of Latin usage, scholastic logic, Aristotelian philosophy, ecclesiastical authority, and religious texts should not be treated as isolated interventions. They were connected by a broader humanist method grounded in linguistic precision, historical contextualisation, rhetorical analysis, and critical comparison of texts. Valla's importance therefore lies not simply in the individual conclusions he reached, but in the way he used philology to reconsider the relationship between language, knowledge, and authority.

The article's principal contribution has been to bring together dimensions of Valla's thought that are frequently examined separately. His programme for the restoration of classical Latin, his criticism of scholastic terminology, his examination of the Vulgate, and his exposure of the Donation of Constantine all reveal a common conviction: claims to philosophical, theological, or institutional authority must remain open to linguistic and historical scrutiny. In this respect, philology became more than the study of grammar and style; it functioned as a critical method through which inherited texts, concepts, and traditions could be reassessed.

Valla should not, however, be presented as a direct founder of modern science or as an immediate cause of the Reformation. His appeals to ordinary language, common experience, and historical

plausibility did not amount to a systematic experimental method, while his criticism of ecclesiastical claims developed within the religious and political conditions of fifteenth-century humanism. Nevertheless, his work provided later humanists and reformers, especially Erasmus and Luther, with influential examples of textual criticism and intellectual independence.

Valla's case thus demonstrates how Renaissance humanism contributed to intellectual reform not by completely rejecting the medieval inheritance, but by developing new standards for examining it. His lasting significance lies in transforming linguistic competence into a means of historical criticism and in showing that the authority of texts and institutions depended partly on the credibility of their language, transmission, and historical context. Seen from this perspective, Valla occupies a crucial position in the development of critical humanism and in the gradual reconfiguration of the relationship between language, truth, and authority in Renaissance Europe.

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