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Remarks on the Medieval and Renaissance 'Contempt of the World' and 'Human Misery' (Lotario – Poggio Bracciolini – Erasmus of Rotterdam)

1. 'Contempt of the world'

Robert Bultot, a Belgian author of a monograph on the 'contempt of the world' in Middle Ages (*La doctrine du mépris du monde*), which has been published as a part of a larger, probably unfinished whole under a telling title *Christianisme et valeurs humaines*,¹ derives the idea of 'contempt of the world' from the Christian concept of a substitute (in a sense) nature of the creation of mankind, expressed first in the fourth century and then repeated in the next century. It is in the penultimate decade of the fourth century that an anonymous author whose commentary on the Epistles of Paul (except for the Epistle to the Hebrews) has been handed down among the works of Ambrosius, and whom Erasmus dubbed

1 R. Bullot, *Christianisme et les valeurs humaines. La doctrine du mépris du monde*, vol. 4: *Le XI-e siècle*, Part 1: *Pierre Damien*, Louvain, 1963; Part 2: *Jean de Fécamp, Roger de Cain, Anselme de Canterbury*, Louvain, 1964. See esp. Part 1, Chapter 1: 'Les corps et la chair', pp. 17-30, where, apart from the quoted here passage from Enchiridion, Bultot refers (p. 17, note 1) to *De civ. Dei* XXII, 1, 2: 'qui [sc. Deus] fecit hominem [...], terrenum quidem animal, sed caelo dignum, si modo cohaereret auctori [...], qui de mortali progenie merito iusteque damnata tantum populum gratia sua collegit, ut inde suppleat et instauret partem, quae ipsa est angelorum, ac si illa dilecta et superna civitas non fraudetur suorum numero civium, quin etiam fortassis et uberiore laetetur'.

depreciatively 'Ambrosiaster' ('false Ambrosius', 'poor Ambrosius' or 'Ambrosian foundling'), expressed a view that humans were created by God in place of the fallen angels, in order to match their initial number, in which they were created, by replacing the fallen angels with humans. The same view was picked up around 420 AD (that is, less than forty years after it had been first expressed) by St Augustine, who wrote in his extremely popular (also in later times) *Handbook for Laurentius, or Faith, Hope and Love (Enchiridion ad Laurentium de fide, spe et caritate)* as follows (Chapter 19, Paragraph 29):

From the other part of the rational creation – that is, mankind – although it had perished as a whole through sins and punishments, both original and personal, God had determined that a portion of it would be restored and would fill up the loss which that diabolical disaster had caused in the angelic society. For this is the promise to the saints at the resurrection, that they shall be equal to the angels of God.

The promise in question is alluded to in Luke 20, 35-36: 'But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection'. The restored ones – or at least a portion of them – were to become angels.

This concept was of a marginal significance in Augustine's doctrine; in early Middle Ages, however, it became important, and its relation to such a great Early Christian authority. Supplemented with other ideas, it served as a base, upon which the doctrine of 'contempt of the world' has been built.

An important source of these supplementary ideas was the Platonic concept of mankind. It accented a duality of a human being, not as much as a being composed of a soul and body, but rather as a soul imprisoned within a body. This meant that it is not the soul and body together, but the soul alone, that constitutes a man. None of Christian thinkers accepted the Platonic anthropology in this very form.² Augustine, who

² See S. Świeżawski, 'Homo platonicus w wiekach średnich (Jan Szkot Eriugena, Alcher z Clairvaux, Wilhelm z Conches i Hugon ze Św. Wiktora jako przedstawiciele platońskiej koncepcji człowieka)', *Roczniki Filozoficzne*, 2-3, 1949-50, pp. 251-97.

was a Platonist and recognised the compliance of the Platonism with the Christianity in a wide scope that raises today severe doubts, said that he may not understand the nature of the connection between the body and the soul, but he states nevertheless that it is this connection that constitutes a man.³ At the same time neither them nor any other Christian thinker claimed that in this incomprehensible combination the body might be more important than the soul. On the contrary, the Bible as well as the Christian thought, actually in line with the philosophical tradition of the Classical Antiquity, including materialists such as atomists, perpetually emphasised the superiority of the immaterial component of a human being. This, however, was, as it seems, an axiological plane, a plane of the value. It is primarily to that plane, that Biblical statements, as well as those of later Christian theologians, on the superiority of the soul and the misery of body, can be referred to. However, it is not an easy task, to isolate the axiological plane from the ontological one; indeed, it could not be clearly separated. There were many reasons for this. One of them, after Bultot, will be addressed here.

The Book of Genesis describes man as a God's image: the act of creation is preceded by words, whereby God announces that he will 'make man in our image, after our likeness'. However, God is not a physical being, and the belief in a non-physical nature of God was almost universal in the Christian thought. Therefore, if a man is a God's image, then this image is to be found in human soul only. The body does not affect this likeness. It may only separate a man from God, being a wall, as it was said, that conceals God from a human soul. The corporeality might (and it did) seem, therefore, to be an obscuration and distortion of the divine image contained in man. In order to clarify and to correct this image, the corporeality had to be rejected or suppressed at least. It was a man's assignment, to live – already during his stay on earth – an 'angelic' life, consisting in contemplation of God. Therefore, since the body conceals God, since it does not belong to the God-like essence of human being, it cannot deserve any respect and it should not be an object of care or awe.

There is also another idea that was of constitutive significance for the contempt of the world, an idea repeated here after Bultot. The concept

3 For example, *De civ. Dei* XXI, 10, 1 (in the context of the nature of the hellfire and feeling of it by spiritual beings): 'iste [...] modus, quo corporibus adhaerent spiritus et animalia fiunt, omnino mirus est nec comprehendi potest, et hoc ipse homo est'.

of the 'nature' was always among highly respectable ideas in the philosophical, but also religious, thought, even if in the Christian thought its respectability has been weakened to a certain degree, as a result of assumption that also the nature (and not only mankind) has been infected by the original sin. Be that as it may, there were enough reasons contained in the Bible (as well as in the system of values developed by thinkers of the patristic epoch), to deem the nature and the world unworthy of any particular respect, whilst recognising them as a God's work, at the same time. It was quite commonly thought, indeed, that the human being has been elevated to a supernatural state already during the act of creation.

This variant of a Christian hierarchy of values, tending towards a version of anti-naturalism or even of Manichaeism turned out to be very imaginative. Here are some of ideas that belittle the nature, based on the fundamental assumption of its being not autonomous or infected with sin (that affected the whole creation, and not only mankind), or both concepts taken together. The nature has no principle of existence in itself; it depends on God. As a result of a God's decision, it is uncognisable for a human being, and it differs from his delusions. It is not worth, therefore, to strive for the cognition of the nature, as such process will always be deceptive and useless. A man cannot find the ultimate truth about the world. All these concepts can possibly be seen as a peculiar variant of anti-philosophicality, as an erroneous variant of the idea of 'things that are naturally secret', or even a scepticism understood in a Christian way.

It is a theoretical, so to say, aspect of such depreciation of the nature and the world. However, there is also a practical aspect of this phenomenon. Mankind cannot rule the world or to seek help in it. Even recognising – after *Genesis* – that mankind was given the power over the world, one has to accept that the purpose of this gift was to direct man towards God. However, it's not that the world, subdued by mankind should be a stage or a way leading to God. The point is that the world is to be completely ignored, despite its being a God's work – in a sense, against the often neglected in this context idea of gaining control over the earth – because the world is not a right place for mankind. In view of such attitude to the world, again various Biblical passages may be quoted. This attitude brings to mind 'strangers and pilgrims'.⁴ On the

⁴ Gen. 47, 9; 1. Chr. 29, 15; Ps. 38, 13; 1. P. 2, 11 ('advenae et peregrini'); Hebr. 11, 13 ('peregrini et hospites').

other hand, it is the New Testament passages describing the world as a place of sin and rejection of God that are fundamental to this attitude toward the world.⁵ Especially interpretations of the former are provided with an additional amplifying thesis. Mankind is seen as belonging to heaven (and not only heading toward it), and condemned to earth by his sin. This view brings to mind the orphic, Pythagorean and Platonic, rather than Judeo-Christian, thought. However, it can be fitted also in the latter, thanks to the vagueness of Biblical stories and symbols. The banishment from Eden may be understood as fall from heaven, but also as remaining on earth that has been degraded by sin, the same way as the character of its inhabitants is degraded. Be that as it may, neither the power over the world nor being absorbed with it in any way does not relieve mankind of worldly worries, as well as of the worries caused by the body itself. This, however, is a sphere of trivial and readily accessible experience that becomes thereby an additional store of arguments in favour of the doctrine of contempt of the world and misery of the human condition.

The man himself was seen in the scope of these tendencies not only dualistically and, so to say, hierarchically (as a set of two components of unequal value), but also as a creature that is incoherent, torn between the two components, and simultaneously between higher, real values and lower, ostensible ones. Moreover, it was thought that, as a result of his own weakness (being, in turn, the result of the original sin, as was the dilemma itself), the man is condemned to choose always a worse rather than a better part of an alternative. A protection against such choice (to a certain degree only, but nevertheless it was the most effective of the solutions available to mankind), can be found by abandoning the world and taking refuge from worries and dangers in a monastery or in a hermitage. However, the protection against one's own nature, that is internally torn and divided, can be gained exclusively through a special divine assistance.

The 'contempt of the world' doctrine, which has been here only briefly and generally outlined, based on the quoted above work of Bultot, was typical of the early Middle Ages, and particularly of the period of the 'struggle between dialectitians and anti-dialectitians', that is, the eleventh,

5 For example, *Io.* 1, 10; 8, 23; 15, 19; *1. Io.* 5, 19 and numerous other passages; see Z. Poniatowski, *Logos Prologu Ewangelii Janowej*, Warsaw, 1970, pp. 183-88.

and partly also twelfth century. The doctrine is contained in works of thinkers who were totally unlike each other. One of them was Pietro Damiani (1007-72), a famous anti-dialectician, that is, an exponent of the opinion that for the Christian faith and life neither a philosophical erudition nor competence are necessary, both being equated in early medieval times with the dialectic, and particularly with the Aristotelian logic. The latter is useless, because its principles (for example the principle of contradiction) concern human rather than divine things. The same doctrine was, however, promoted also by Anselm of Bec (or of Aosta, or of Canterbury, 1033-1109), a great early medieval thinker who did not shun philosophy in his work or declarations. He became famous for his argument for the existence of God, called ontological one, because he tried to demonstrate the existence of God basing on the concept of God as a supremely perfect being who would not be perfect if the perfection of the concept itself were not complemented by the existence of its object. These two, fundamentally dissimilar, personages illustrate how wide was the scope of the doctrine and how different minds accepted it.

Peculiar features of this diversity characterised Lotario (1160-1216), since 1198 Pope Innocent III. He was among the most enlightened persons of his times. Educated in Bologna – after studies in Paris under Peter of Corbeil – he proved himself as a continuator of the legal and theological doctrine of *dictatus papae*. It was founded on the so-called Donation of Constantine, considered authentic at that time. The doctrine has been initiated by Gregory VII, and Innocent III gave to it a very radical form, using the dualistic idea of mankind. Assuming the superiority of the soul over the body, he promoted superiority of the Church (as an equivalent of the soul) over the Empire, being an equivalent of the body. Actually, it is the Church that transferred the imperial power (that is, the authority over the world held, after Alexander the Great, by ancient Romans) from Greece to Germany, by consecrating Charlemagne in 800 AD. Innocent III compared the Papacy to the sun and the Empire to the moon, claiming that an emperor is an advocate of the Church (*advocatus Ecclesiae*) and used the symbol of two swords, a secular (imperial) and a spiritual (papal) one. Moreover, he claimed that due to the human sinfulness (*ratione et occasione peccati*), the Papacy is entitled to interfere in all worldly matters.

The above brief presentation of a few personages of the Middle Ages, intended as an illustration of the formational and convictional differences

between individual proponents of the ‘contempt of the world’ doctrine, has to be supplemented with a general remark. The remark concerns a peculiar form of Christian attitude toward culture and culture’s place among worldly values that were acceptable from the Christian point of view.

Combined with an encouragement to seek refuge from worldly worries in the safety of the monastic life, the doctrine defined the attitude of persons who have chosen such lifestyle toward the cultural achievements of the pagan Antiquity, and at the same time toward any activity aimed at creating similar things within the Christianity. The demand for escape from ‘the world’ concerned also – verbally as well as factually – the said culture, which was transmitted above all through the Classical literature, described (almost stereotypically) as ‘secular’ or ‘worldly’, *saeculares litterae*. It was an important, though probably marginal, problem in the Christian doctrine and Christian life. In assessments related to the monastic lifestyle, that emphasised the importance of renouncing secular values (as ostensible ones), the culture incorporated into the secular writing was not necessarily excluded from the sphere of real values in an explicit way so as to become a clear and unambiguously defined object of monastic renouncements and to be associated with the escape from the world. This resulted above all from the general Christian attitude toward the cultural heritage of the pagan Antiquity. This rather ambiguous attitude combined admiration and fear; the pagan heritage was being condemned and defended at the same time. Even if Christianity was ready to open itself to this heritage, it always tended to assess and to censor it. However, monasticism had apparently its peculiarities in this respect, mainly because it showed no particular tendency to include the pagan *saeculares litterae* in ‘the world’ that should be renounced by a monk. The following examples are particularly meaningful.

St Jerome, a leading figure of the Latin monasticism, describes his entanglement in such ambivalent and dramatic assessments in the famous Letter XXII to Eustochium. The description takes on the form of a dream, being the foretaste of a posthumous judgement of his soul, where he deserves the appellation of ‘Ciceronian, not Christian’ (‘Ciceronianus es, non Christianus’),⁶ because of his passion for the pagan literature, and particularly for Cicero, whom he used to read in his hermitage. It is characteristic, that after relinquishing Classical authors totally for more

6 Hier. *Epist.* 22, 30, PL 22, 416-17.

than ten years, as evidenced by complete absence of relevant quotations in Jerome's letters,⁷ he finally found a non-confrontational, balanced formula, suitable for all Christians, but above all for monks, whom he tried to convince that a sanctity combined with education based on Classical authors is more useful for the society than a crude sanctity, because it is the former only that can defend the Christian faith in an efficient way.⁸

These were theoretical, intra-doctrinal arguments so to speak. Other arguments, of a practical nature and unrelated to any assessments of the pagan heritage, could have been found by theoreticians of the monastic *contemptus mundi* in the fact that the founder of the Benedictine order, St Benedict of Nursia, who ordered his confratres – as two essential points of the monastic rule – to pray and to work, included in the latter also reading and copying books, apart from farming and agriculture. This recommendation, that was put into practice, did not exclude pagan books and, moreover, it did not differentiate between holy Christian books and the legacy of Classical authors as the subject of monks' work. This modest, practical beginning bore fine fruit in later – not only Benedictine – monasticism with its peculiar culture. It resulted in a phenomenon which has been described thirty years ago by an outstanding Benedictine mediaevalist Dom Jean Leclercq as (simultaneous) 'affection for writing and desire for God'.⁹ A contemporary of St Benedict, Cassiodorus, founder of another monastery as well as scholarly and editorial workshop in Vivarium, has rescued a significant portion of the Classical literature and scientific oeuvre of the Antiquity for the Middle Ages, by means of his own work and that of his monks.¹⁰

The people who formulated the doctrine of the 'contempt of the world', intended as an essential framework for rules of the monastic life, in the tenth and eleventh century, were quite familiar with the earlier monastic traditions. The traditions – being ancient and therefore more authoritative – did not allow everything brought by the Classical literature and philosophy to be either assigned to the evil and sinful

7 A. S. Pease, 'The Attitude of Jerome towards Pagan Literature', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, 50, 1919, pp. 150-67, with corrections in H. Hagendahl, *Latin Fathers and the Classics*, Göteborg, 1958, pp. 97-99.

8 Hier. *Epist.* 53, 3, PL 22, 542.

9 J. Leclercq, *L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu*, Paris, 1957, pp. 99-102.

10 J. Pieper, *Scholastyka. Postacie i zagadnienia filozofii średniowiecznej*, transl. by T. Brzostowski, Warsaw, 1963, pp. 36-38.

world or recognised as indisputable values for Christians. The culture incorporated into Classical literature, being so ambivalent, inspiring so dramatic reactions, was in the context of the ‘contempt for the world’ doctrine either criticised (as evidenced by the assessment of dialectics, and of the philosophy in general, by Pietro Damiani, quoted above) or subject to confused attempts at demonstrating that it is acceptable, or – most often – that it merits a practical use, usually in the form of instructive and inspiring quotations from the works of pagan authors.

2. Lotario’s treatise *On the contempt of the world and on the misery of the human condition*

Basing on a single work of Innocent III, written when he was still an unfamiliar monk Lotario, I would like to illustrate some possible results of extreme forms of the ‘contempt for the world’ and related to it doctrine of ‘human misery’.

Written in 1195, the treatise by Lotario di Segni could be seen as a germ and an anthropological basis for his later, papal doctrine of the subordination (desirable) of the State to the Church, if it weren’t for circumstances that seem to weaken its significance. First, there are good reasons to suppose that Lotario has written the treatise as a rhetorical exercise. Secondly, what he has written was only an initial part of an intended larger whole. As a second part, the author planned a similar disquisition on human dignity; it would come into being, if certain conditions were met, that will be discussed below. This is elaborated by Lotario himself in a dedicatory letter, whereby he offers his work to the bishop of Prato:

I used a bit of free time to curb the vainglory being, according to the Book Ecclesiasticus, the gravest of all sins and, as well as I could, I have described the misery of the human condition. I dedicate this work to you, asking and demanding that you attribute to the divine grace anything worth of your dignity that you may find within it. If indeed such is the suggestion of your paternal generosity, I will elaborate also on the dignity of the human nature so that he may experience a joyfulness, being elevated by that description, as he was humiliated by this one.¹¹

11 Lotharii (Innocentii III) *De miseria condicionis humanae sive de contemptu mundi*, Prol., PL 217, 701.

The announcement of the possible second part of the work is formulated as if Lotario only waited for the bishop's words of encouragement and did not dare to take the subject on his own. This suggests that he possibly did not write also the first part on his own initiative. In any case, one can guess that he would not demand discreetly such encouragement, if he did not think it appropriate to balance his work with another one, being not only its complement, but also its retractation, almost a withdrawal. It brings to mind the peculiar, difficult to define atmosphere of philosophical and rhetorical 'exercise' that surrounded not only ancient philosophers in their striving after truth and virtue,¹² but also intellectual exercise of Athenian sophists of the fifth and fourth centuries and later, who were in the habit to praise and then to criticise the same thing, to claim something and then to deny the statement. There is something of the atmosphere of the later scholastic disputations that used to begin with a 'question', that is, questioning an assumed truth, only to accept it finally in a more vigorous way. Among such disputations, there were also such exercises, aimed not at determining some material truths, but rather at enhancing intellectual competence. These were known as dialectic disputations or questions.¹³ When trying to understand the peculiar and unpleasant (when taken at face value) treatise, one has to remember this convention, the philosophical and rhetorical origin of which may have been unknown to Lotario. It was firmly rooted in his own epoch of a great renaissance of the philosophical and humanistic culture, as well as in the preceding centuries of the struggle between dialecticians and anti-dialecticians (both using dialectics).

The analysis should be started with the assertion that – despite of the dichotomic nature of the treatise – it is devoted rather to the misery of the human condition than to the contempt for the world. This in itself sharpens its meaning: not only is the world miserable and not even human body; it is mankind as such that is a one great misery and abomination, for the description of which Lotario used means as much simple as they are strong and explicit. The concepts, examples and quotations used in this description are taken both from the Bible (this source is most often referred to), as well as from Classical authors, mainly Latin poets, as

12 See P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et la philosophie antique*, 2nd ed., Paris, 1987.

13 M.-D. Chenu, *Wstęp do filozofii św. Tomasza z Akwinu*, transl. by H. Rosnerowa, Warsaw, 1974, p. 97.

Horace and Virgil, but also philosophers, for example Seneca. Here is the line of thought of this tripartite, quite skilfully composed (despite of its rather monotonous content) treatise.

The first book is dedicated to the misery (*miseria*) of the human body, that accompanies mankind since its very creation, then also to the misery of his soul and to the futility (*vanitas*) of his spiritual efforts, particularly in the moral sphere, manifesting itself in both evil and good ones being miserable; finally, there is the misery of the social and natural condition of mankind, that is the misery resulting from the ‘environment’:

[...] formed out of earth, conceived in guilt, born to punishment. What he does is depraved and illicit, is shameful and improper, vain and unprofitable. He will become fuel for the eternal fires, food for worms, a mass of rottenness. Man was formed [...] of the filthiest seed. He was conceived from the itch of the flesh, in the heat of passion and the stench of lust, and worse yet, with the stain of sin. He was born to toil, dread, and trouble; and more wretched still, was born only to die.¹⁴

This synthetic description of the misery of the human condition contained in the first chapter is further broken into minor concepts, mainly not original ones, but ingeniously and aptly applied to the subject. This involve often explicit, disgusting details. In some cases the descriptions make up short philosophical treatises of a rather poor quality, that nevertheless impart a sense of gravity to Lotario’s arguments and suggest that they should be considered something more than a rhetorical, literary exercise in finding atrocities and abominations. Here, a following passage from the fourth chapter may be quoted, where a concept of mankind, a miniature anthropological doctrine is sketched:

The soul has three inherent powers: a rational one, to distinguish between good and evil; an irascible one, to reject the evil with contempt; a covetous one, to strive for the evil. The first produces misdeed; the last produces sin, while the second – misdeed and sin. For misdeed is not to do what should be done; sin is to do what must not be done. The source of all these faults is the body polluted as a result of three temptations that are inherent to it. Namely, as a result of communing the body with the soul, the mental acuity is dulled,

14 Lotarii *De miseria*, I, 1, PL 217, 701.

which spreads ignorance; itching of lust is caused, which provokes anger; and desire for pleasure arises that evokes covetousness.¹⁵

A peculiarity of this tripartition used by Lotario (the concept derived ultimately from Plato, but ubiquitous in later philosophical thought) lies in the lack of any valuable part of the soul or – to be more precise – in the lack of any positive function of such part. In Plato's works the logical soul struggles with the appetitive one (that is prone to evil because it yields to the body), while the spirited soul assists it in this struggle. According to Lotario, even the rational soul, that is able to distinguish between good and evil, can only 'produce misdeed'. It is an extremely pessimistic conclusion deduced from the (here not revealed) premise, which Christians acquired by recognising the original sin.

Yet another example of the same extremity is the following thought contained in Chapter 28. It refers to the motif of ageing world:

Day by day, the human nature becomes more and more polluted. Hence many things exist that used to be salutary, but now they are deadly dangerous, as a result of his fall. Both worlds got old: microcosm and macrocosm, that is the larger and the lesser world. The older they get, the more disordered become their natures.¹⁶

Microcosm and macrocosm means the world and mankind, being its image and its synthesis in a sense. This is one of rare passages in Lotario's treatise that refer to the announcement contained in the second part of its title: that it will deal with the world. Therefore we should turn our attention to other, analogous passages; these are peculiar inasmuch as they do not express the 'contempt of the world', but rather glorify it – to all the more humiliate mankind.

It is significant that Lotario ignores all differences between the world and mankind, other than the quantitative one ('microcosm – macrocosm'). He, however, does not content himself with that. He is able to accentuate a qualitative inferiority of mankind to the world, to the natural creation. He achieves it by means of a reflection that may be more serious and deeper than the already discussed, but nevertheless using concepts that

15 Ibid., I, 4, PL 217, 704.

16 Ibid., I, 28, PL 217, 715.

may seem to us disgusting. As an example a passage may be quoted from Chapter 9, entitled 'What kind of fruits yields mankind'. It states that man is the reverse of a tree, because trees and plants in general issue noble and pleasant odours while man emits various foul smells.¹⁷

Similarly ambiguous examples, that is, treated seriously and moderately but drastic at the same time, abound in the second book, which is generally dedicated to disasters and misfortunes of the human behaviour. It can be seen as a satire on human vices, on a false system of values and aspirations. With a few exceptions, it could seem to be a work of some pagan philosopher of the late Antiquity. It is arranged in the order of sins. Discussed as the first one is *cupiditas*, which means here not only carnal desires but avarice generally, and its parallel *avaritia*, here understood as miserliness rather than avarice. Such nuances are typical of the medieval Latin, while the case of *cupiditas* seems to be a Lotario's peculiarity. As the second sin greediness, *gula* is listed (this term is used metonymically, as its basic meaning was 'throat', already in the Antiquity) and its companion drunkenness, *ebrietas*; the two together form a compound that constitutes one of the seven so-called cardinal sins, 'gluttony and drunkenness'. The third sin is *luxuria*, which means here debauchery, or sexual dissipation, rather than luxury, as it did sometimes in the classical Latin. Then follows *ambitio* and its companions, *superbia* and *arrogantia*, considered its variations; they can be expressed as striving for honours (or simply ambition), arrogance and impudence. Moreover, *superfluous cultus* appears here, which means an excessive care of the appearance, or (undue) elegance, supplemented by its synonymic *ostentatio*, ostentation. In three final chapters the content becomes less coherent. In Chapter 41, Lotario discusses the 'impurity of heart', which may be understood as a reference to the nature of sin as such, arising in human's inside, regardless of whether and how it manifests itself on the outside. The next chapter deals with 'suffering that evil ones experience in death', and the final one treats of 'coming of Christ on the day of death', which may indicate an intent to allude to the eschatological result of sin, that is the ultimate death – the Biblical 'second death'. The subject of the final chapter may be seen as a transition to the third book which is entirely dedicated to eschatology. In any case, this makes the composition of the final part of the second book less coherent. As for the above-mentioned ambiguity of

17 Ibid., I, 9, PL 217, 705-06.

the content's levels, it can be illustrated with such serious and elegantly stylised sentences as the following passage from Chapter 8: 'to be rich and to be in need are opposites; however riches of the world do not put off being in need, but rather bring it closer'. On the other hand, there are sentences like this conceit, directed against greediness: 'It demands a precious tribute, but turns it into a bad thing, because the more elaborate the food is, the fouler dung smells'.¹⁸ Similar concepts can be found in works of ancient philosophers, particularly those of Stoics and Cynics.

The third book is dedicated to eschatology, or a human posthumous existence. The first chapter deals with the fate of the body, while the following ones – with the soul after death, which is understood as a violent, forceful separation of body and soul. The first chapter abounds with drastic concepts, like this one: 'It is only natural that matter falls apart into matter. During his lifetime, [a human] produced louse and worms, after death he will produce maggots and flies. [...] It was nice to embrace him when he was alive, dead he will be unpleasant to behold.'¹⁹ Next chapters, however, are no less drastic and disgusting in a way. They display a great ingenuity in the descriptions of posthumous punishments and torments of the soul, and a characteristic feature of this ingenuity is a somewhat masochistic emphasising of the motif of the revenge on the damned as well as of God's vindictiveness and unforgiveness: 'It will be a torment for the evil, to behold the glory of the redeemed. [...] Also the redeemed will see the torments of the damned'.²⁰ 'With those who are doomed to condemnation, God is angry in the earthly mode. [...] With the condemned – in the eternal mode, for it is just that a sin committed by a heathen in eternal things is punished by God also in eternal things' (Chapter X: *Cur reprobi numquam liberabuntur a poenis*; the Latin text is ambiguous here, suggesting that the eternal aspect of the human being should be punished for a sin, which affects his eternal component, that is, his soul).²¹

The work of Lotario-Innocent, summarised here in a brief and fragmentary way (but, hopefully, without omitting anything significant), appears as a pessimistic, depressing and unpleasant description of human – earthly and eternal – misery. It is unpleasant, because it lacks any

18 Ibid., II, 8, PL 217, 720; II, 28, PL 217, 724.

19 Ibid., III, 1, PL 111, 737.

20 Ibid., III, 5, PL 217, 739.

21 Ibid., III, 10, PL 217, 741.

compassion, any sorrow for human misery, displaying instead a vindictive and masochistic satisfaction from the fate of the miserable sinners. The text ends with a formula 'unde liberet nos Deus' – 'from what may God us save', but the whole is contrived so that even God has no chance to save mankind, that is inherently sinful and commits sins constantly, involuntarily in a way. On the other hand, the author shows no kindness toward the human, whose misery he describes so vividly. There can be perhaps only one appropriate word to describe this peculiar work: more than anything, it is nihilistic.

The human, who is polluted and weakened by the original sin, cannot deserve salvation by himself, and his ethical efforts produce no results without a special divine assistance called grace, being given free and not for any achievements. This is an axiom firmly rooted in almost all variants of the Christian doctrine, except for Pelagianism, that was countered first by St Augustine in the fourth century, and occasionally also in later times. But to raise doubts or explicitly to deny that mankind can be saved was close to heresy or simply amounted to it. Lotario did not claim in his treatise that mankind cannot be saved. A mention of the redeemed, whose joyfulness will be enhanced by the sight of torments of the condemned, assumes a possibility or even a certainty of salvation. It constitutes a faintly expressed but nevertheless real basis for an unexpected wish that closes the third book of Lotario's treatise. Obviously, it is not a treatise on how salvation can be achieved or even a Christian treatise on mankind. Mankind is not considered here as a God's creature whatsoever. If Lotario's text is to be examined as anything more than a rhetorical exercise, it should be seen as a peculiar attempt to deride human vainglory. Its peculiarity lies in the assumption that it is not such flaws as imperfection or abomination of human body that humiliate him, or even animal instincts infecting his soul. The vainglory belongs to an entirely different sphere than these, maybe less than beautiful or admirable yet undeserved, flaws of human nature. From the Christian point of view, a more appropriate remedy against vainglory would be perhaps a reminder that there is something that places limitations on mankind, yet without deprecating it. This limiting factor is the contingency of the human being; it guides (or should guide) the man toward such recognition of his own condition that would render the vainglory ridiculous.

When writing his 'exercise' treatise, Lotario made no use of such possibility to suppress human vainglory, possibly as a result of having succumbed to the strong and lasting tendency to 'disdain' or to 'despise the world' (and with this, to deprecate mankind), that was typical of the previous century. Actually, it may have been because of an intention to find some more ingenious ways to overcome vainglory, as invoking the said human contingency appeared too obvious and trivial at that time. Possibly one has to appreciate that Lotario decided to choose such way of writing that does not allow to interpret his work as if it were a serious instruction, suggesting its being a rhetorical exercise. The work, being exercise – in terms of intentions and style – for its author, should constitute a *memento* for readers by showing them – in a drastic, repulsive and exaggerated way – only one aspect of the problem. This is why the book required an opposing counterpart in the form of a treatise on human dignity, of which Lotario was perfectly aware. However, he did not write it himself.

Instead of him, this task has been taken up by some Italian humanists – his compatriots, speaking in modern terms. Both of them, as well as those who showed no inclination to complete the unfinished Lotario's work and to moderate his extreme attitude, had numerous predecessors in early Christianity and in Middle Ages, whence they derived their concepts. The unfinished Lotario's task was taken up not only by those who wrote about human dignity, but also by those who dealt with human misery, usually advising that men should distance themselves from 'the world'. However, in contrast to Lotario, the latter did not deride pathetic flaws of the human nature, for which an individual person cannot be blamed after all. Any serious reflection on mankind must be bidirectional and ambivalent. Human misery, no less than human dignity, is a matter of popular experience.²² We will examine such other ways of revealing human misery and of belittling it, as found in selected works of an Italian humanist and then of a north-European one, both living in fifteenth century.

22 J. Domański, 'Z dawnych rozważań o godności człowieka', in *Na krawędzi epoki*, ed. by J. Rudniański and K. Murawski, Warsaw, 1985, pp. 11-71 (further bibliography – p. 11, note 1).

3. Poggio Bracciolini's *On the misery of human condition* and humane context of the 'contempt of the world'

The dialogue has been written by Poggio Bracciolini in 1455. As Poggio himself states, it was intended as a testimony to an important, landmark event in his life, that was otherwise devoted to literary and philosophic work, as well as to scholarly travels to transalpine monastic libraries in search of Classical texts that were neither read nor copied since twelfth or even eleventh century (a philosophical poem by Lucretius, discovered in 1415 by Poggio, was one of such texts). This fact alone forecasts a work that is to be interpreted in a different way than Lotario's exaggerated and nihilistic picture of human misery. Already before 1455 Poggio, in his seventies at that time, stayed in England, where he studied diligently works of the Church Fathers and the Bible. Such lecture, as he himself confessed, has greatly tamed the humane passions of his youth. Now he decided that literary and antiquarian studies are not satisfactorily rooted in the truth – in contrast to theology, which he resolved to study since then. According to his own words, this change of interests and passions resulted in the dialogue *On the misery of the human condition*.²³

Before scrutinising the content of this work, we should do a brief survey of related motifs in works of other humanists of fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There are numerous humanistic texts that contain such themes; here only the most famous ones will be examined – the ones derived from the works of humanists distinctly different when it comes to axiological options and disposition for writing. Two or three such texts have been written by Francesco Petrarca. These are: *De vita solitaria* (On reclusive life, that is, on the lifestyle adopted by Christian hermits, but also by numerous ancient philosophers, whom Petrarch was able to find and to appraise); *De otio religioso* (On religious leisure) and *Secretum sive de secreto conflictu curarum mearum*, also known as *De contemptu mundi*. Coluccio Salutati wrote *De saeculo et religione* (On secular and religious life). Lorenzo Valla left to posterity *De professione*

23 *Epist.* I, 63: 'Libri sacri, quos legi et quotidie lego, refrixerunt studium pristinae humanitatis, cui deditus fui [...] a pueritia. Nam horum studiorum principia inania sunt, partim falsa, omnia ad vanitatem. Sacri vero eloquii principium est veritas, qua amissa, nihil operari possumus'. Quoted after E. Garin, *La filosofia*, vol. 1: *Dal medioevo all'umanesimo*, Milan, 1947, p. 233, where *refrixerunt* should probably be replaced with *restinxerunt*.

religiosorum (On religious profession). The works are not uniform with respect to their spirit and letter. They present different attitudes toward the monastic life, differing in its criticism as well as in arguments used to praise its virtues. Each of them displays also a different type of humanistic modification of notions and values inherited from the Middle Ages. Taken together, however, they constitute a system of ideas that can be reduced to the lowest common denominator. It is essential for understanding of the change within the themes of human misery and contempt of the world that occurred between the times of Lotario and Poggio Bracciolini.

Actually, Petrarch accepts the reclusive life without reservations, and even extols it, suggesting his disgust and contempt for 'the world' thereby or expressing it explicitly. He recommends an 'escape from the world' into the privacy of a hermitage-monastery as a solution supporting an 'introspection' understood in an Augustinian way – as a spiritual exercise that can change a man internally and improve him morally. Reading and literary work does not hinder such introspection; on the contrary – both can be enormously helpful in this respect provided that they are practised differently to naturalists, which means without 'vain curiosity' of the world, but with enriching interest in the matters of God and mankind. Particularly the latter are bound up with the escape from the world, as described by Eugenio Garin:

Returning to one's own self [...] is not [...] an ascetic negation of the world, but rather discovering the true value of the world. Petrarch's thoughts head in one direction only: into the solitude, where to find a true spiritual *societas*; away from material things, in order to discover the true nature of things and people including Laura, whom he loved first in a sensual frenzy and then in a peaceful atmosphere of the true love.²⁴

Coluccio Salutati presents a more complex attitude toward the monastic life. He would regard it useless, if it meant only an inner peace achieved as a result of the escape from the world. He saw human life as a domain of struggle and hardships, and the monastic life should not be an exception. 'Even speaking of monastic life – writes Eugenio Garin – Salutati tries to emphasise the struggle in this world and human ties of love; he extols

24 E. Garin, *La filosofia...*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

not so much a heavenly triumph as an earthly trial'.²⁵ This fundamental thread of Coluccio reflexions aims at proving that the escape from the world should be done not in an external sense, by seeking refuge in a monastery with its particular lifestyle, but rather internally, by rejecting apparent values in favour of real ones, which is difficult both in monastic and secular life. Intertwined with this thread (but outside the *De saeculo et religione*) is its supplementary variant that implies a need to include education and intellectual activity in this whole set of high inner values independent of the accepted external lifestyle. 'Although the monastic life is considered safer – writes Collucio Salutati in one of his epistles – it is by no means like that; and being devoted to a noble activity in a noble way is perhaps not a holy thing, but nevertheless a more holy one than a monastic idleness. And indeed, holy simplicity [*sancta rusticitas*] is beneficial only for itself, as certain famous author says. On the other hand, the active holiness is an inspiration for many, because many can see it, many are led by it toward heaven and because it is an example to many'.²⁶ The famous author in question is St Jerome, who in his Epistle LIII explained to bishop Paulinus that '[i]n fact want of education in a clergyman prevents him from doing good to anyone but himself and much as the virtue of his life may build up Christ's church, he does it an injury as great by failing to resist those who are trying to pull it down',²⁷ that is by failing to provide the Christianity with adequate means of defence against assaults of pagan thinkers and scholars. Comparing the source of the quotation with its use, as well as with the way it is quoted, may imply that what Salutati wished to see in monasteries, is the same thing that was earlier expected by St Jerome and Petrarch, and namely education and intellectual efforts, although the apologetic postulate of Jerome is no more valid in the case of Salutati. Moreover, Salutati wants both to be practised also outside monasteries and combined with other useful and inspiring activities in secular life.

The attitude of Lorenzo Valla toward the monastic lifestyle has been shaped by a tendency to disregard elevated and privileged professions and social ranks. It is the same aversion that makes him deprecate

25 Ibid., p. 199.

26 *Epistolario*, ed. by F. Novati, vol. 2, Rome, 1983, p. 453, quoted after E. Garin, 'La letteratura degli umanisti', in *Storia della letteratura italiana*, vol. 3: *Il Quattrocento e Ariosto*, Garzanti, 1966, p. 16.

27 *Epist.* 53, 3, PL 22, 542.

achievements of Aristotle (being the personification of philosophy) and appraise those of ancient poets, historians, scholars, statesmen and generals.²⁸ In *De professione religiosorum* he discusses what expresses itself as *religio* – a piety based on a special level of life, that, however, can be reduced in large measure to external rituals. Valla deals with the piety, only agents of which consider themselves monks, and he speaks up for its broader understanding, independent of the religious profession.

Who can endure you patiently – he appeals to proponents of this perception of piety – since you claim that nobody can be pious, neither priest nor bishop or nobody else, except for yourselves? [...] I consider you no better than other people who are your equals in conduct and virtues. And since you tried to inspire aversion for me, so I say in return: there were greater men among those who did not take monastic vows than among those who did it.²⁹

According to Valla, it is the capability to inspire others ethically, that determines the greatness of a man:

Monks are truly those who support the tottering God's church, as it can be seen on your paintings; those who preach to the people – this should be a honourable duty of bishops and priests – and thereby dissuade them from sins; thereby bring them to knowledge and piety. In this particularly, they are followers of the apostles in my opinion; those who fill up our hearts with piety, by means of their splendid ceremonies, hymn and songs!³⁰

It was an attempt to deprive monasticism of its elevated status in Christianity, characteristic of the Renaissance humanism. It is also a peculiar variant of the same ideas and values that were essential for Middle Ages and that were being modified in a similar way at that epoch. Among Renaissance humanists, however, this was a widespread tendency. As its synthesis, a notable sentence from the conclusion of Erasmus' *Enchiridion* may be quoted: 'The order of monkship is not piety, but a kind of living to every man after the disposition of his body and his mind, also either profitable or unprofitable'.³¹

28 L. Valla, *Opera omnia*, ed. by E. Garin, vol. 2, Turin, 1962, pp. 644-45.

29 Ibid., p. 293.

30 Ibid., pp. 321-22.

31 Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus, *Ausgewählte Werke*, ed. by A. Holborn and H. Holborn, Munich, 1964 (hereafter, Holborn), p. 135, vv. 8-9. Polish translation:

Such perspective makes all people equal in terms of ethical competence and the ways of applying it, suggesting perhaps that it depends on the degree and kind of education, which deepens reflection and self-discipline that are essential in this respect. This lessens the 'misery of human condition' and implies much greater ethical efficiency of mankind than it appears from medieval treatises on the misery of human condition, not only from so nihilistic as that by Lotario, but also from more nuanced ones that have been generally characterised in the very beginning. It would be, however, risky to say that there occurred something more than a quantitative change of relationship between the ethical inefficiency and efficiency of mankind. In Lotario's thought, this modest change is more clearly visible than in others; the difference is determined by the very fact that humanists of the fifteenth century consider seriously in their deliberations only things that a man can decide on because of his freedom of choice. The whole of his physical and physiological misery, that is not subject to his will, was left outside the scope of the discussion. However, it is not that a man was created (not always, at least) as a powerful figure, totally autonomic with respect to the possibility to decide on things. Even opponents of the discussed belief in an extraordinary efficiency of the extraordinary remedial measures embodied in the monastic lifestyle did not ignore the imperfection of the human nature, that was corrupted and weakened by the original sin and prone to the evil. A single example should be enough to illustrate this. Coluccio Salutati had no doubts about the Christian view on this problem, when he wrote in *De saeculo et religione*: 'We must not make God feel obligated by our deeds. [...] For if we did it, our salvation would result not from the generosity of God's grace, but rather from a necessity forced by justice'.³² This Coluccio's thought is even more pronounced in his other work, *De fato, fortuna et casu*:

Nobody attains salvation through his deeds, but solely by grace. If salvation were given for achievements, there would be no grace, but justice only; mercy would not be given for free, but obtained through a necessity of justice [...]. The cause of salvation is mercy thorough the faith, and this is not subject to

Erazm z Rotterdamu, *Podręcznik żołnierza Chrystusowego*, transl. by J. Domański, Warsaw, 1965, p. 259.

32 *De saeculo et religione*, II, 206, quoted after: E. Garin, *La filosofia...*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

our power; for it is a God's gift, given not through our deeds. [...] And let us be sure that we will never run short of divine mercy in our activities if we will make efforts to control our will according to reason.³³

This way we reached another great topic in the philosophical work of Italian humanists of fifteenth century, which is the influence of inevitability, coincidence and freedom of choice (that implies an internal independence) on the human condition. These three factors constitute a philosophic *specificum* of the thought of the Italian Quattrocento humanists; they are also the most important philosophical surplus of their work, otherwise consisting of a pure humanities, that is, philology and history that was used for popular moralising and practised in an antiquarian and anecdotic way. For our purposes it will be enough to choose just a few works that deal with this wide subject and to find a single ideological thread that runs through all of them. We will quote works of the same three authors that provided the examples for our analysis of the problem of the escape from the world into monastic life.

Petrarca's *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (Remedies for both fortunes), 1354-66, is an inner dialogue of opposing powers and experiences of a soul. It is modelled after St Augustine's *Soliloquies*, in terms of literary form, as well as ideology. Its first book, being a conversation between Reason (*Ratio*), Joy (*Gaudium*), and Hope (*Spes*), presents 'remedies' for unfavourable cases, commonly considered unhappy. The second book – conversations between Reason, Suffering (*Dolor*), Fear (*Timor*), and Desire (*Desiderium*) – deals with favourable ones, usually considered happy and desirable. In the first book Joy (or rather Delight, *Gaudium*) complains to Reason (*Ratio*, as in *Soliloquies*, where it is Augustine's embodied interlocutor) about various unfavourable events, as, for example, loss of speech ('*usum loquelae perdidit*' – it is indeed a loss that affects the very essence of humanity); in the second book the same emotions relate to reason 'favourable cases' or desires that are noble and commendable, but difficult to realise. All of this is aimed at proving that an external disaster may result in a moral benefit, and in the face of an external propitiousness one can find something that reduces it to the loss or impossibility to achieve an apparent value, while the commendable desires (although one should strive to realise them) can be realised only with divine assistance,

33 *De fato, fortuna et casu*, II, 10, quoted after: E. Garin, *La filosofia...*, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

human powers being insufficient in this respect. *De remediis utriusque fortunae* tries also to immunise a man against good and bad fortune, by relativising the value of everything that fate may bring and by demonstrating that human happiness and unhappiness can be judged only by a reason that is unaffected by emotional states, but keeps an unceasing dialogue with them. Obviously, in its parts dealing with desires and surges that are unquestionable even by rational judgements, the work demonstrates the insufficiency of human rational judgements and human decisions. As a remedy for this insufficiency, supplementing it with the divine assistance is recommended. And thus, responding to Desire's declaration 'I wish I were good', Reason encourages it to increased effort ('Strive, after all you can'), but reminds straight after: 'Believe me that the words of the Scripture "Nobody can be reticent, unless he received it from God" [...] are directed to you personally and should be related to every virtue'.³⁴

The much later (1396-99) *De fato, fortuna et casu* by Coluccio Salutati is philosophically deeper than the pure moralising of Petrarca's *De remediis utriusque fortunae*: it contains not so much advices on how a man can defend himself from the fate, as it investigates the boundaries of necessity and freedom. The tripartite title of this work may be reduced to two concepts: inevitability (*fatum*) and chance (*fortuna* and *casus*). However, it is not these concepts that are the main topic of Salutatio's deliberations, but rather the freedom of decision, which is only *implicite* referred to in the title, and not directly revealed. The small work begins with a treatise on the 'order of causes', where the concept of God as the First Cause seems to imply including of all things into the frames of causal inevitability and the universal rule of *fatum*. Further, the free will is systematically defended against the astrological determinism and geomancy.³⁵ Coluccio Salutati's work constitutes also an attempt to demonstrate that everything regarded as accidental depends ultimately on the providence. At the same time it tries to defend the human freedom against a 'necessitative' vision of the reality. Despite of manifold external limitations, the human freedom of will remains intact for Salutatio. Equally indisputable remains the fact that the first of any human activity is God.

34 *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, II, 104, quoted after: F. Petrarca, *Opera omnia*, vol. 1, Basel, 1554, p. 222.

35 E. Garin, 'La letteratura...', *op. cit.*, p. 20.

'God – wrote Salutati – provokes in us all acts of the will; however, he does it in a way that neither breaks it nor violates'.³⁶ No matter how one assesses the persuasive strength of this general thesis or its detailed explications, both constitute an evidence of an attempt to solve an essential philosophical issue that was approached by ancient philosophers, medieval scholastics, as well as modern philosophy.

However, Salutati was interested above all in the freedom of the acts of human will. As a culmination of the defence of this freedom by ascribing an autonomous area of activity to the will, one can regard (after Garin) the praise of the highly dramatic decision taken by Socrates when he, sentenced to death, waited for his execution:

He was indeed a man worthy to live to see Christ, not that he would delight in the fame and glory that he won through his great virtues, but rather he would be recognised as the first of our martyrs after having experienced the true happiness and died for justice and truth. It seems quite probable that then he would say to himself: "What will you do now, Socrates? Confident of the help and protection of your friends, you could attack the guards and evade the inevitability of death using illegal assistance. You hold your life and death in your own hands". And then he would hear, as we may suppose, these opposing arguments: "Dear indeed is life; and now this dearest life must turn into a prize of a noble death. You will live, Socrates, but in exile. You will be free thanks to your escape, but you will be free even more through your death. A death that comes by the disgrace of a conviction is shameful; more shameful is, however, a life paid with a crime. It is no crime, to escape from injustice and violence that you cannot evade. However, everything done against the law is a crime. You will die unjustly. By dearest gods, would it be better for Socrates to die carrying the stigma of guilt than being not guilty? Is it worth nothing, to die in accordance with the whole course of my life? I have lived innocent and innocent I will die. I have always taught that the disdain for the death is a supreme wisdom and a supreme virtue. I should finally confirm with my deed everything that I claimed in disputations. However, it is a stupidity, to run blindly toward a doom and it is a virtue not to escape from it. Let me die by the gods' will if such decided the authorities and if such is the people's will.

³⁶ After S. Świeżawski, *Dzieje filozofii europejskiej w XV wieku*, vol. 6: *Człowiek*, Warsaw, 1983, p. 344, where the passage is quoted, without a precise reference, after: Ch. Trinkaus, *In our Image and Likeness. Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, London, 1970, p. 355.

Since I am able to escape, let me die a glorious death. Let me take vengeance on judges, who recognise rather violence than law. Since they force me to die and threaten me to kill, let me do voluntarily what they can extort from me neither by force nor by intimidation”.³⁷

Here, the bad fate and the good chance neutralise each other, and the inevitability of fate has no access to an independent decision of a man. A choice to be possible at all, his freedom of choice must decide freely in favour of one of two groups of absolutely positive values.

While Coluccio’s *De fato, fortuna et casu* was aimed primarily at distinguishing and rescuing a sphere of human free will, Valla’s *De libero arbitrio* deals – again, contrary to its title – not so much with the human freedom of deciding, but rather with the impossibility of conciliating it with motives for decisions of God (being also free, but unavailable for reason). Above all, it is an attempt to demonstrate the freedom of irreversible decisions of God, which are undetermined and thus unavailable (in their reasons and causes) for rational examination, and can be only humbly accepted on faith. Thus, Valla’s work presents the issue of inevitability and chance from a perspective that denies any cognitive efficiency of human intellect in this respect.

Valla’s conclusion – writes Garin – is simple: it is a nonsense to try to understand why leads God one man toward the good while another toward sin or – to put it another way – to assume that the relation between God’s will and the human choice can be rationally cognisable. God’s will is, by definition, unavailable for examination. [...] For Valla, the field of activity of human intellect is limited to this world, to things that can be experienced, human and humble. His polemics against Aristotle and scholastics is not directed at the Christian faith; it tries to exclude what is transcendent from the area of philosophy, that is from the human field of inquiries.³⁸

It is therefore, next to Coluccio’s *De fato, fortuna et casu*, another delimitation of the area of human free will, done by pointing out the incapacity of the human intellect to recognise a reason of freedom and free decision in any other field than the human one.

³⁷ *De fato, fortuna et casu*, II, 8, quoted after: E. Garin, *La filosofia...*, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

³⁸ E. Garin, ‘La letteratura...’, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

If one would look in these three works for any common element (as announced in the very beginning of this digression), it would probably be the independence of a man from anything that is external and therefore outside his powers. However, this condition is not to be ignored as the actual state, as an essential and indispensable element of human condition, but rather it should be something to be liberated from by recognising what lies within the limits of human possibilities. As a matter of fact, also in this area it is not only human sense of independence and strength that manifests itself. Not without the influence of Christian notions – such as the concept of sinfulness that of and human nature being polluted by the original sin – but also not without the influence of the common-sense observation ‘this deepened self-cognition was double-edged. Not only it confronted a man with his innate power and magnificence, but it also made him aware of all limitations and endangerments being his share’.³⁹ These are most clearly emphasised in Petrarca’s *De remediis*, and namely as the split of human soul into opposing powers and functions, personified as the interlocutors in the dialogue. They are present, although less distinctly, also in Salutati’s work, where he notes ‘such a great imperfection [of men], such dullness, that, despite being created to rule, they spontaneously serve and succumb to what they should control’.⁴⁰ This imperfection is clearly visible in Lorenzo Valla’s *De libero arbitrio*, where, however, the ethical inefficiency of human will is replaced by the cognitive inefficiency of human reason in the confrontation with God’s will, although arrogant philosophical claims of theologians are described also there with a whiff of moral impropriety. The same common component – the claim that a man should distance himself and become independent from what is outside his powers (though the limits of these powers are hardly emphasised) – can be found in Poggio Bracciolini’s dialogue, to which we will turn our attention after the preceding lengthy digression.

After all that has been said here, it can be assumed *a priori* that if the dialogue fits in any respect into tensions between the inevitability and chance and freedom, that were characteristic of Quattrocento humanists, then the two factors that were of highest importance in Lotario’s works – that is, corporeality and sinfulness – cannot be regarded as essential

39 S. Świeżawski, *Dzieje...*, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

40 *De fato, fortuna et casu*, quoted after: S. Świeżawski, *Dzieje...*, *op. cit.*, p. 334, note 218, where it is quoted after: Ch. Trinkaus, *In our Image...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 353-54, note 64.

in defining human poverty and misery. Actually, here the tension is of a quite different nature: it is a tension between the outer and the inner; between what depends on a man in his freedom and what remains outside his powers. Transferring of the miseries of human condition into this very sphere in order to neutralise and to disarm them – this is the aim of the dialogue that will be analysed in a more detailed way.⁴¹

According to the Ciceronian model, that was commonly accepted among humanists of the time, participants of Poggio's dialogue are two of his friends and he himself. These three persons represent three attitudes toward the subject of the dialogue, that is, the essence and above all the causes of human misery. Cosimo de' Medici, in whose residence the conversation takes place, as a banker and a politician – and thus a man of action takes an affirmative attitude to human life and to the world. He can find their positive aspects and he presents them in a suggestive way, thereby provoking his interlocutors, who are inclined to see mainly dark sides of the world and of human life, into finding numerous examples to illustrate their views. Beside Poggio, Cosimo's other interlocutor is Matteo Palmieri – also a man of action to some extent, but above all the author of philosophical works. One of these, *De vita civile* (On Civic Life), was an affirmation of activity in the world, while another one, *Città di vita* (The City of Life), puts a contemplative life and an ascent of the soul to God before any activity (although without suggesting that the author renounced the earlier affirmation of activity). In the dialogue, Matteo Palmieri represents an extremely pessimistic attitude, seeing the life as a series of troubles. The role of Poggio himself, being close to such pessimism, is to present a viewpoint different from that of Palmieri, but also to suggest finally a formula that can reconcile de' Medici's optimism with Palmieri's pessimism or – to be more precise – to suggest a remedy for human misery, without denying its reality. In the course of the discussion, the issue is modified in such a way that the most dignified of the interlocutors – Cosimo de' Medici – formulates the final conclusion, by agreeing with the pessimism of his colleagues and at the same time adopting the solution suggested by the more moderate in his pessimism Poggio who tried to relieve – or rather to disarm – the

41 Of a significant help in the following analysis was a master's thesis discussing the dialogue, written by Małgorzata Gajkowska-Kurkiewicz under the present author's supervision in the Faculty of Christian Philosophy of the former Warsaw Theological Academy (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University).

miseries of human condition. Apart from several other, also this detail of the dialogue's poetics seems to result from imitating Cicero, who played often a leading part in those of his dialogues where he himself appeared as one of the interlocutors. Sometimes he controls and finally settles the conversation openly (for example, in *Tusculan Disputations*), but in other cases he expresses his opinions through the mouths of other, usually highly esteemed persons. The course of the discussion will be presented here in a detailed way – perhaps more than it deserves for its content – in order to demonstrate some peculiarities of philosophical writing of fifteenth century humanists in general, as well as of Poggio's work that used to be analysed only rarely, at least to my knowledge.

The starting point of the discussion was the recent conquest of Constantinople by Turks, which Cosimo de' Medici found the greatest of all disasters in the history of mankind. Matteo Palmieri disagrees with this opinion: there were greater disasters, but even greatest among them pale in comparison with the misery of human fate, with the fact that men are subject to 'the law of wretched life, that has been brought upon us by the sin of the first parent'.⁴² To this Palmieri's opinion opposes Cosimo de' Medici his own optimistic view on life: admittedly, it is subject to many worries; it is better, however, when a man, instead of torturing himself with pondering over them, thereby making them even more acute, turns his attention to goods that he is equipped with. Among these goods – beside external and accidental ones, as a family or commendable public activity – there is the intellect, being part of the internal equipment of a man. Its 'advices lead us toward a happy life and defend us from any confusion of worries'.⁴³ Poggio, on the other hand, is inclined to approve Cosimo's view, but in a selective way: the problem is that de' Medici transposes his internal virtues as well as his favourable situation on other people, as if ignorant of their uniqueness. 'Favourable fate – says Poggio – falls to a few and it remains with a few permanently. Unfavourable fate, on the other hand, operates widely, openly and can be commonly observed. [...] It is particularly hostile to brave and noble ones: it oppresses them however it likes'.⁴⁴ Even the powers of intellect and virtue are not absolutely effective against the fate:

42 Poggio Florentino [P. Bracciolini], *Opera [...]*, Basel, [no date], Heinrich Petri, p. 89.

43 Ibid., p. 90.

44 Ibid., p. 92.

‘Admittedly – says Poggio – your claim, that we were given the intellect to weaken the overwhelming power of fate, were true, if only one could use his intellect entirely freely. However, there are innumerable obstacles and barriers on the way to virtue, as though deliberately erected’.⁴⁵ Greatest among them are human faults and failings, human vileness and sins. All we are subject to them, ‘and since it is certain, that evil and vile ones are unhappy thence everyone is affected by the misery of life’.⁴⁶

In the next part of the dialogue, the problem of the misery of human condition is discussed at length in more detailed forms: are all humans subject to the unfavourable fate, or only the majority of them? And of this majority, how many can exclude themselves, by finding a remedy for the misery sent by fate? Here, the author takes the opportunity to display his antiquarian historical erudition and to express his views on the present times, including opinions on the value of the monastic life. However, more important than the scope of power of the changeable fortune is what makes possible the liberation from the misery and worries of human condition, both being determined by fortune itself.

The notions of reason (*ratio*) and virtue (*virtus*) are referred to in the introductory statements discussed above. In the course of the discussion, also other terms are used, primarily that of wisdom (*sapientia*), being synonymic in relation to reason. These are human powers or abilities – derived from the ancient Stoicism – that were most often considered as being able to oppose to the cruel (or fickle at best) fate. A long statement of Cosimo de’ Medici summarises a long sequence of ancient personages who could overcome human misery. Thereby, the statement denies Poggio’s claim of universality and unconditionality of the human misery:

It seizes only foolish ones, only the lazy and tiresome common folk that – without the support of reason or virtue – is driven by sensual experiences or fickle, uncontrolled whims, like mindless beasts. Such people, who hold out their hands to fate and obey it, expose themselves to the misery of this world. You know, after all, Aristotle’s dictum that fortune governs nations and it is strongest where wisdom is in deficit. Everything that makes us miserable comes from fortune. Who succumbed to the fear of it, who submitted himself to it, who expects eagerly its gifts, who sets his hopes on it, cannot be happy. On the

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

other hand, who is led by reason and virtue, who obeys their dictates, is safe from any whims and misery of fortune. Sometimes he happens to be hit by its gales; however, shaken by such gale, he stands up to fortune all the stronger, being protected by the armour of virtue, and he emerges victorious.⁴⁷

It is an ancient ideal of happiness (and particularly a stoical one) consisting in an internal independence from the fate which can be achieved through taking control of mindless passions, above all – spontaneous reactions of will and emotions to the external world, by means of the intellect. Poggio, as one of the interlocutors, challenges not only the uniqueness, but also (in a discreet way) the very possibility of realising this ideal. In a response to the quoted above words of Cosimo de' Medici, he says:

I know that some people can be excluded from miseries; this means those who, thanks to God's kindness, stand out by their virtue. They are, however, more rare than black swans or white crows! Everything that is excellent is made rare by the nature. Only a few obey dictates of the intellect, and even more rare are those governed by orders of the virtue. Perhaps one credible example can be found in a century. [...] Therefore I mean neither someone exceptional as the phoenix nor a Stoical sage who was never seen. I mean the mankind that – as can be clearly seen – sometimes succumbs to the power of fate, sometimes gets by itself into trouble. [...] All we are weak by our own nature and we can't oppose any wisdom to the whims of fate.⁴⁸

Poggio finds multiple examples in support of his claims and he formulates a new general formula: nobody is born free of vices (*vitia*) and as the best of all may be regarded who has the smallest number of them.⁴⁹ Thus ultimately 'if one examines the corrupted character and habits of randomly chosen people, nobody can be found free from the miseries of life'.⁵⁰

47 Ibid., p. 95. The referred to Aristotle's dictum is probably *Magn. mor.* II, 8, 1207a 4-5: 'hoû pleïstos noûs kai lógos, entaûtha elachíste týche, hoû dè pleïste týche, entaûtha eláchistos noûs'.

48 Ibid., p. 95. The mention of 'black swans and white crows' is a paraphrase of Juvenal (6, 165: 'rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno'), and the words 'everything that is excellent' derive possibly from Cicero, *De fin.* II, 25, 81: 'optimum quodque rarissimum est'.

49 Ibid., p. 98.

50 Ibid., p. 100.

Cosimo de' Medici suggests that such people free from any vices might be perhaps monks, 'especially those, who publicly demonstrate their poverty and claim to follow evangelical norms', and thus they 'live a life that is not subject to fate'.⁵¹ This remark prompts Poggio, as well as Palmieri, to criticise the alleged perfection of this class. Some of these assaults are modifications of the arguments discussed in the cases of Salutati and Valla, as is the accusation against monks, their piety to be ostensible only, which is a harsher variant of Valla's claim that Christian virtues were (and are) practised – perhaps in a better way – also by other social classes. Palmieri notes that 'their life is condemned to many worries, because they must submit not to their own, but to others' decisions, which only a few can stand calmly'.⁵² And even if there are people among monks, whom God provided with special qualities – as evidenced by such exceptional personage as St Paul the Anchorite – they did not free themselves from that common law of human nature, which is the submission to worries. Thus also among monks, there are only a few really happy ones. It is all the more difficult to regard as happy ones the people, whose behaviour contradicts everything that they have chosen as their aim in life; and regrettably, this is the case of the majority of monks. Thus neither them nor anyone else cannot be excluded from the common misery of human condition.⁵³

Cosimo de' Medici admits again – this time, apparently, more readily – that 'our life is entangled in numerous hardships, because it involves the burden of the fight against vices (*vitia*), and it is difficult 'to defeat fortune by means of intellect'. He repeats that 'wise people are never happy, because a virtue does not ally itself with troubles. On the contrary, it rejects them and drives them away'. Therefore it is not by nature, but as a result of our weakness, that we gained our misery'.⁵⁴ Matteo Palmieri, however, insists that virtue, which guarantees happiness, is an unique God's gift, while 'the seat and foundation of human life is misery'.⁵⁵ Then he enumerates individual varieties of the misery, which affects all people without any exception. Cosimo sticks to his optimism, which he now expresses in a modified form: 'The misery of human life is to be attributed not so much to the nature of things and to our weakness, as

51 Ibid., p. 100.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., pp. 100-02.

54 Ibid., p. 103.

55 Ibid., p. 104.

to our guilt'.⁵⁶ The guilt consists also in our imagination, in the presence of miseries in our thoughts, even when nothing bad actually happens.

This is the train of thought in the first book. In the beginning of the second book, Poggio explains the reasons why he undertook his work: '[...] because, in my opinion, there is nothing more useful than a common awareness of the universal fragility of our human condition, which can more effectively deter idle desire for accidental things, therefore I have taken up a task of discoursing on this, not for an empty fame, but to exercise my intellect',⁵⁷ and to encourage others to write 'more extensively and more eruditely' on this subject. This excuse, being a rather banal manifestation of rhetorical ornamentation, is noted here only because it contains the notion of exercise, which will be addressed to in due course.

It is Cosimo de' Medici who takes up the main subject anew, by reminding that there is another kind of men who can be regarded as excluded from the misery of human condition. He means high dignitaries of the Church – *praelati* – who are free at least of financial privation. Poggio refutes also this argument, suggesting that Cosimo quotes a widely-held opinion, rather than his own view; to his claim, Poggio opposes his experience gained during fifty years of service as a secretary of Roman Curia.⁵⁸ Cosimo, in an equally discreet way, gives up his view, asking Poggio to add what else should be said. Thus Poggio describes again the misery of human condition, illustrating it with historical examples, mainly – with reference to the initial part of the dialogue – those of disasters and decline of great cities-states, ancient and medieval, as well as contemporary ones. This lengthy exemplification does not contribute to the subject of the dialogue and is – like the exemplifications contained in the first book – only a display of Poggio's erudition, a vent given to his humanistic passion for facts in general, and historical facts particularly. Then follows a similar exemplification presented by Palmieri. It seems as if the whole second book was added only to allow such erudite displays, apparently deemed to be not copious enough in the first book. Only the exchange of opinions found at the very end of the second book is of importance to the issues of the dialogue – and even more to its structure, to subtle shading of the role and rank of the interlocutors.

56 Ibid., p. 111.

57 Ibid., p. 112.

58 Ibid., p. 113.

Here, Cosimo de' Medici confesses that everything he claimed about human happiness was not so much an expression of his own views, as rather it was aimed at getting the opinions out of his interlocutors.⁵⁹ Now, while accepting as they do the misery of human condition, he poses a question 'what remedies [*remedia*] could make us safe from so many worries of life'. Poggio has a ready answer: 'It is those means that should be found in the virtue, because all other ones remain outside us and have no support against changing situations [*adversus temporum iniquitatem*]'.⁶⁰ Cosimo agrees and concludes the discussion with a following disquisition:

I think that your view is correct and I agree that in human matters any help should be sought in the virtue. When I pondered, however, over those common worries of life, it appeared to me that adversities affect us so that we remember that we are humans, that is beings of a weak and fragile nature and uncertain course of life, who may be killed by the smallest thing. Moreover, we should divert our desires from transitory accidental goods and direct our minds and thoughts toward striving after better things whereby, following the advices of our intellect, we can gain a true freedom. This, in turn, will come when we compel our mind to contemplate itself, after having rejected the pollution of sins. It will come, if we submit to the power of the intellect, after having ignored temptations of desire; if we follow the virtue as a guide in our deeds and if we obey her as a teacher of a good life. The virtue will divert us from any miseries of life, from any disturbances of mind; she will make us safe in happiness. She will provide us with an armour which allows us to disdain any assaults of fate. She will remind us to despise a redundant wealth; to use accidental goods as if they were not our own, but only lent to us to be returned when such will be the lender's wish. She teaches us that we should own and abandon with equal calm. As you know, there are numerous examples of outstanding personages that may serve as models of good and rational life. If we follow dictates of reason in our activities, we don't care about any blows of fortune. We must always remember this commandment: don't try to do anything that you would rightly regret afterwards. If we are gifted by fortune, let us not get excited about it; if we lack fortune's gifts, let us bear it light-heartedly. Of great help may be for us the awareness that we are given adversities of fate in order to cope with them and

59 Ibid., p. 130.

60 Ibid., p. 131.

thereby to grow up. For it is not in propitiousness that the virtue is tested, but in adversities. When a favourable wind blows, the expertise of a sailor cannot be seen; it manifests itself only during a storm and in the headwind. The fortune's might is not such great that a brave and persistent man can't overcome it. There were many who gained a victory fighting against it. A spirit is free from fortune's power, even when fortune deprives us of our property, strength, health, wife or children. Let us accept quietly the lack of its gifts, being convinced that it is so by the wish of the Providence: God cares for our matters adequately, because He only knows what is for us beneficial. Our misfortunes, on the other hand, are caused and cherished by ourselves. Our desires turn often against us. We request many things to our own undoing, and when received, they become our torment and internal trouble. We wish success, wealth, offices, power and other things governed by fortune. But to many people, these things brought poverty, exile, imprisonment, death and all kinds of disasters. We must escape, therefore, from the ambushes of fortune, and above all we should seek what is in our power, what neither abandons us when we are alive nor will be taken after we die. And with this we are provided by virtue and intellect. Whoever follows their advice and obeys their instructions, will live safely, without fearing the fate and without yielding to any misery or trouble of life.⁶¹

Surely, to express the simple and trite argument, to which Poggio dedicated his dialogue, this very conclusion would be enough, and even this may be abridged to a few final sentences. The whole dialogue amounts to a display of a stylistic proficiency, synonymic, antiquarian erudition and a dexterity in application of typically Roman (borrowed mainly from Cicero) literary devices, characteristic of this genre, so readily used by ancient philosophers and rhetors. With respect to its content, it is, however, bland and idle. It illustrates – in a rather stark way – views of those historians who – like Paul Oskar Kristeller⁶² – refuse to acknowledge the philosophical nature of the writing of fifteenth century Italian humanists.

However, despite of its mental poverty and deft verbosity, Poggio's work is incomparably more amiable than the simple and unassuming Lotario's treatise. Through the stale banality of its stoical content and Ciceronian phraseology, it describes the misery of a man in such a way

61 Ibid., pp. 131-32.

62 P. O. Kristeller, *Humanizm i filozofia*, transl. by G. Błachowicz, L. Szczucki, and M. Szymański, Warsaw, 1985, pp. 26-27, 45-46.

that his dignity remains unscathed. This results only partly from the terminology and criteria of assessment being more secular in their nature than those employed by Lotario. It seems to be rather a result of transferring the problem to the plane of inner life of a man, by defining a clear and sharp borderline between the essence of humanity and what is only accidental in a human being. This increased the polarisation of these two areas, and allowed the miseries of human body to be silently included into the outer area of the 'fate' and excluded from the 'essence' of a human being. It would be difficult to do the same in the case of moral misery, usually described by an ambiguous term *vitium*, which – borrowed from the ancient philosophy by humanists – allowed to blur the borderline between imperfection (philosophically understood as an intellectual and moral weakness at the same time) and sinfulness as defined by Christianity. In Poggio's dialogue, the former is alluded to in discreet Palmieri's statements about the original sin. Other statements remind us that a special divine assistance is necessary to make a man independent from whims and cruelties of fate; a dominating thread is, however, the typical of philosophy, proud sense of absolute sufficiency of intellect and virtue, which stands out by this, rather stoical than Christian, connotation of power. In that case Poggio's confession concerning his change of orientation – influenced by patristic lectures, and mentioned here when discussing the origins of the dialogue – has not been confirmed convincingly enough in the dialogue on the misery of human condition.

Poggio's dialogue does not contain the 'contempt of the world' in its title; it is restricted to the human misery, which is presented as a surrender to the fate, to the whimsy and cruel fortune. And yet, the fate, being the background or even the basis of the human existence, is actually an equivalent of the 'world' of medieval treatises on its 'contempt', and the whole attitude of the defence against the fate, could quite well be called contempt for the fate (as a matter of fact, expressions synonymic to this term are found in the text, as evidenced by the passages quoted above). To other differences between Poggio's dialogue and Lotario's treatise should be added also that – while Lotario discussed only the human misery – Poggio deals mainly with the contempt for the world identified with the fate, and despite of his rather stoical than Christian spirit, his work seems, better than Lotario's treatise, to meet St Augustine's demand

that a man should divert himself from the world to his inside, where the truth abides.⁶³

***Epistola de contemptu mundi* by Erasmus of Rotterdam and Christian humanism**

This early Erasmus' work (written, as assumed by the editor of his works, between 1486 and 1489, when Erasmus was under his twenties⁶⁴) is counted by the author himself among 'declamations', which means exercise and exemplary pieces. Moreover, it has been allegedly written to someone's order. It is not earlier than 1521 that it appeared in print. In a dedicatory letter to readers, Erasmus himself counts it among 'trifles' (*nugae*) which he wrote 'as literary exercises',⁶⁵ and he describes its genesis:

When, being only twenty years of age, at a vile request of a certain Theoderic who is still alive, I wrote a letter, whereby he wanted to urge his nephew Judoc to adopt his lifestyle. To the repeatedly duplicated and widely circulated copies of the letter my own name has been added, though I have not any nephew named Judoc. I have written it for someone else's use and – as the thing itself clearly demonstrates – I have written it without any particular care, amusing myself with stereotypical topics and having no suitable erudition⁶⁶.

Again, we are dealing with a text, the authorship and cogency of which would be much more disputable than those of Lotario's *De contemptu mundi*, were it not for the much complicated semantics of expressions used by Erasmus to classify his work. The semantics is complicated not only in the context of the literary production of Erasmus himself, but also generally in the sphere of former literary and philosophical culture, where describing of a work as an 'exercise' or 'declamation' by its author should almost never be understood simply and literally, and in any case it does not deny its serious and persuasive nature. Because we have already noted this state of things, characteristic of ancient, medieval and renaissance metaliterary terminology, it should only be added that in the case

63 Aug. *Solil.* II, 19, 33.

64 *De contemptu mundi*, ed. by S. Dresden, in *Opera omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami [...]*, Amsterdam, 1969- (hereafter, *ASD*), Series V, vol. 1, pp. 34-35.

65 *Ibid.*, p. 38, v. 3-4 (hereafter, Erasmus' text is referred to by a page and line number in this edition).

66 39, 8-14.

of Erasmus it occurs in a form that does not allow works described by himself as ‘exercise’ or ‘ludic’ to be ignored – if one wants to understand his views, at least. This concerns both *De contemptu mundi*, as well as *Praise of Folly*, *Praise of Matrimony* and – written similarly at an order as an inaugural lecture – *Praise of Medicine* and even epistolary examples in *De conscribendis epistolis*.⁶⁷ Therefore we will not discuss here whether the views expressed in *De contemptu mundi* are those of Erasmus himself or *loci communes* belonging to the tradition of the genre, but – accepting both as a property of this Erasmus’ work – we will simply report as precisely as it is possible its essential elements. Above all, it is outside the scope of this report to decide whether Chapter XII, which concludes printed editions *De contemptu mundi* (added at a later date, according to the majority of scholars), is a personal palinode of the views expressed in preceding chapters, or rather Erasmus’ *ceterum censeo*, possibly even contemporary to them.⁶⁸

Except for the introductory chapter, which opens with an epistolary formula (‘Theodoricus Harlemeus Iodoco nepoti salutem plurimam’), where the fictitious author expresses floridly his desire to draw the addressee away ‘from participating in the noisy confusion of the world’ and ‘to drive him to the monastic, or reclusive and quiet life’,⁶⁹ and the mentioned already Chapter XII, *De contemptu mundi* has a clear dichotomic structure. It consists of six chapters being a warning against ‘the world’ and four chapters describing good points of monastic life. ‘It is dangerous to abide in the world’ states the second chapter, presenting various temptations and threats to the peace and spiritual bliss, that are posed by the world. ‘Wealth is to be despised’ is the subject of the third chapter. ‘Carnal delights are deadly dangerous and repugnant’ and ‘Honours are idle and labile’ – assure two next chapters. Following ones discuss ‘The inevitability of death and transitoriness of everything in the world’ and that ‘The world is miserable and full of misdeed’. This is the first – negative – part of the treatise, intended to provoke disgust and contempt for the world in the addressee. The second, positive part is an elaborated praise of monastic life. It describes ‘Bliss of the reclusive life’ and that ‘Who lives in a hermitage, enjoys a double peace’ (that is,

67 See Dresden, ‘Introduction’ (as in note 64), pp. 3-10; see also J. Domański, *Erazm i filozofia. Studium o erazmiańskiej koncepcji filozofii*, Wrocław, 1973, pp. 48-50.

68 See Dresden, ‘Introduction’, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-31.

69 41, 35-36.

external and internal one). Then follows a discussion on 'The greatest freedom being not in the world, but in retreat from the world'. The closing Chapter XII, without a title, contains not so much renouncing, but rather a rational correction of these claims. It brings to the attention of readers that only a few people are suited to the monastic life and such a choice should not be made without a real inner need.

This clear framework accommodates a multitude of detailed statements (some of them being phrased in the form of a maxim, even aphoristically) that convey both the long – from patristic writings through the Middle Ages and humanism of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – tradition of shaping the ideological themes of 'contempt of the world' and 'human misery' and Erasmus' own opinions in this respect. Already in this early period, germinal forms of what will evolve in time into mature Erasmianism can be found. Some of his views will be discussed below in a way being by no means complete, systematic or synthetic.

The monastic life is not the only way to salvation; also among those living 'in the world', future redeemed ones can be found. 'However, the difference between the two styles of life is such as between a man who has come to a harbour, though did not drop the anchor yet, and a man who is still in the open sea, or rather between one who sails on waves and one who walks on hard ground. A man who abides in the world has not perished yet, but his death is close'.⁷⁰ This detail of the chapter dedicated generally to 'dangers of the world' constitutes a particular variant of the problem of the perfection of monastic life. This brings to mind the problem discussed by Valla, but skilfully transferred to a completely different, one could say Petrarchian, plane.

Dangers resulting from riches has been illustrated by means of an ancient, but readily used in Christianity cliché that possessing them does not satisfy the greed, but increases and strengthens it, and strengthening it causes a permanent privation: 'Whoever wants to gain more, shows that he suffers privation'.⁷¹ Adding another cliché, that nobody takes his riches to the grave,⁷² Erasmus concludes the chapter with a statement that became a favourite topos of Christian moral philosophy, and that can be described as embarrassing Christians by demonstrating the moral

70 44, 119-23.

71 47, 207-08.

72 48, 214-16.

superiority of ancient philosophers over them: ‘What a disgrace for someone who is an educated man and a Christian: risking his salvation to run dishonourably after what even ancient philosophers could despise because of wisdom or fame’.⁷³

What Erasmus says in *De contemptu mundi* on matrimony, is more traditional and conventional than Erasman. ‘I don’t condemn matrimony – writes Theoderic to Judoc – I remember well, who said “it is better to marry than to burn”. Let this refuge stand open for weak ones. [...] I accept a matrimony, but only for those who cannot live without it. However, look, what saint Jerome wrote on these matters (and he wrote a lot). I admit that a matrimony is not bad, it is, however, full of anguish. Celibacy, on the other hand, is both more perfect and infinitely more blissful’.⁷⁴ Erasmus has never disavowed his early adoration for Jerome, however in later times he apparently did not share so eagerly his extreme views on matrimony, passing over or moderating them instead.

As it was in the case of (alleged) allure of the world, Erasmus’ argument against honours refers both to their transitory nature and onerousness. More than anything else, honours are difficult to be gained and easy to be lost.⁷⁵ This is also an ancient philosophical cliché, readily and often repeated by Christian moralists.

Another passage from the same chapter is to be recognised as a medieval, widely circulated topos, usually expressed as an interrogative sentence ‘Where are those who were formerly?’ (‘Ubi sunt, qui olim fuere?’). It refers to the impermanence of great men, who did great deeds. Here, the relevant passage will be quoted and followed by a short remark on the transformation of this topos, or rather on the elaboration of its certain detail in Erasmus’ later writings:

You should clearly understand, my dear Judoc, how fearful, how worrying, finally how prone to a fall is everything which is lofty in the world. [...] Every image of famous deeds dissolves like a dream that disappears together with the sleep. Where are rulers of old? Where is the great Alexander, for whose ideas was the world too narrow? Where is Xerxes, whose navy caused seas to overflow? Where is the victorious Hannibal, who – while alive – crushed rocks and mountains

73 48, 223-26.

74 50, 267-76, quoting 1. Cor. 7, 9.

75 50, 294-96.

with vinegar? Where is Aemilius Paulus, where Julius Caesar, where Pompey, where are so many famous rulers – either Greek, Roman or barbarian, whom to enumerate one by one would be both difficult and redundant? What remains of the glory of their deeds among people, except for some meaningless tales? And even those, they owe to the activity of scribes: unless they handed down their names in writing, they would sink into oblivion and not even a shadow remained of their memory. But whatever it is, it is perhaps us who care, because they feel no more awe for a thing which they admired before.⁷⁶

Erasmus appears to have borrowed this motif from John of Salisbury, a twelfth century Parisian humanist,⁷⁷ and if so, he transformed it to a significant extent. John of Salisbury used this motif to praise the literature and writing as something that immortalises great personages and their deeds.⁷⁸ In the first part of Erasmus' *De contemptu mundi* – corresponding to the spirit of this urge to renounce the world – the unusual power of writing (and also, apparently, of the oral tradition) has been deprecated for the sake of the insignificance of the world. The memory of great men and great deeds, that is guaranteed by literary works, may be valuable only for readers of these works; for their dead heroes it is completely worthless, because the yearning to be remembered, which they displayed being still alive, is in itself one of the vanities of the world. However, in the second part (which will be discussed in due course) Erasmus reminds discreetly – among manifold pleasures provided by the lecture of religious and secular writings – of an aspect of the topos of the literary immortality. And then in 1495, only a few years after *De contemptu mundi*, Erasmus will use the same motif (this time evidently borrowed from Horace) to praise writing, in a letter to Robert Gaguin written on the occasion of his historical work *De origine et gestis Francorum* having

76 51, 309 – 52, 324. Livy relates that Hannibal crushed Alpine rocks by means of vinegar, having them earlier heated up (XXI, 37, 2: 'ardentiaque saxa infuso aceto putrefaciunt'); after him, this sensational information is recounted by Juvenal (10, 153: 'diducit scopulos et montem rumpit aceto'), whose phrase, in a slightly modified form, is quoted by Erasmus, together with Juvenal's ironic reference to the literary fame as an award for virtue (vv. 140-42: 'Tanto maior famae sitis est, quam / Virtutis. Quis enim virtutem amplectetur ipsam, / Praemia si tollas?').

77 See E.W. Kohls, *Die Theologie des Erasmus*, vol. 1, Basel, 1966, p. 219.

78 Ioannes Saresberiensis [John of Salisbury], *Policraticus*, in idem, *Opera omnia*, ed. by J.A. Gilles, vol. 3, Oxford, 1898, pp. 11-12.

been published.⁷⁹ In *Antibarbari*, written most probably also in 1495, the motif of literary immortality is used in the defence of writing and humanist education, and since that time it remained a common topos in Erasmus' works.⁸⁰

The chapter dealing with the transitory nature of honours (and the insignificance of fame) reminds a detail encountered already with Lotario. 'It is the death only that betrays, how miserable is human body'⁸¹ repeats Erasmus after Juvenal (X, 172-73) in a fictitious speech of Alexander the Great, who presents himself as an example of the insignificance of honours and great deeds, and then declares: 'Once an admired friend, a shining diadem a fiery purple lent to me a dignity, but now I lie here as bare bones and dry ashes. What use are splendid insignia now, what use are gilded statues?'⁸² These words bring to mind Lotario's contrast between the beauty of a living body and the abomination of a corpse. In the chapter on the inevitability of death and the impermanence of things, the same concept can be found, repeated in its original, Lotarian form. Here even the youthful beauty is transformed, as a result of death, into something hideous and 'nobody so much loves the beauty of a living man as he recoils in the face of a dead corpse'.⁸³

External goods disappear, but the tutelary powers of the virtue last, also beyond the limits of death – this is the final conclusion of the chapter. It is associated with the omnipresent theme of interiorisation of real values as a counterpoise to the wretched plight, which is established by the external situation of a man. This theme appears here in an eschatological perspective: 'Riches, delights, glory and whatever else benefits may be there (that, by the way, are no benefits at all) are a burden to a dying man. It is only at that time, that the virtue displays its usefulness. Those things, even if they are not taken away from us, we are certainly taken away from them. The virtue never ceases to accompany us or to defend

79 *Des. Erasmi Roterodami Opus epistolarum*, ed. by P.S. Allen, H.M. Allen, and H.W. Garrod, Oxford, 1906-, *Epist.* 45, vv. 14 ff; see also E.W. Kohls, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

80 *Antibarbari*, ed. by K. Kumaniecki, in *ASD*, I, 1, p. 103, vv. 18-28; see also J. Domański, 'Tekst jako uobecnienie. Przegląd idei kilku humanistów starożytności, średniowiecza i renesansu', in *Sposoby istnienia. Działanie wobec siebie i innych*, ed. by J. Rudniański and K. Murawski, Warsaw, 1988, pp. 30-34.

81 52, 341.

82 52, 342-43.

83 56, 455-56.

us'.⁸⁴ Although it is not in every respect that the virtue may be understood exactly like in Bracciolini's *De miseria*, where its eschatological function is completely ignored, its autonomy based on the independence from transitory external goods seems to be identical in both cases.

By analogy, it can be said that 'the world' in the next chapter, dedicated to its misery and perversity, is an equivalent of 'the fate' in Poggio Bracciolini's dialogue. It is composed of 'false, fleeting, destructive goods (if any of them is worth to be called a good)⁸⁵ and blatant examples of evil, commonly regarded as such. In the characteristic of the latter, there appears a temporal factor, and namely the concept of the present time, being a worse one, and of the world that goes through its evil and miserable old age. It is, as we have already seen, a recurring theme in the literature related to the contempt of the world; it is found both with Lotario and – in a peculiar sense (the fall of the Constantinople) – with Bracciolini. 'Formerly – one reads in Erasmus' *De contemptu mundi* – it was no oddity to resent the separation from the world, when it was (so to say) in the prime of life; now, if we are not deceived by our own attachment for it, whatever has the world to delude us with? As many disasters as fell on former centuries, now befall all at once: wars, factional struggles, high prices, poverty, poor harvests, disease, plagues. Is there any disaster that was not seen in our times?'⁸⁶ This list of particular types of disasters and the following exemplification that specifies it bring to mind similar recitals in Poggio's dialogue. However, the young Erasmus is here much more reserved than the old Florentine humanist and his exemplification does not stretch over pages. As a quintessence of the whole argument can be seen these two sentences, composed of phrases borrowed from Cicero and the Bible: 'The world has nothing in common with the virtue! This indeed means a devotee of truth, when he shouts: "The whole world is in Evil's power!"'⁸⁷

There can be no doubt that 'the world' means here the realm of sin and Satan of the New Testament and that it is formed – in its degraded nature or function – at the very moment when a man chooses it rather than God. The virtue is the opposite of such attitude to the world and therefore it has nothing to do with the world defined this way. Such

84 56, 469-70.

85 56, 469-70.

86 56, 471-57, 475.

87 58, 506-07; Cic. *Cato* 12, 42 ('nec habet ullum cum virtute commercium', sc. *voluptas*); 1. *Io.* 5, 9 ('mundus totus in maligno positus est').

interpretation of the world is deeply rooted in the whole tradition of *contemptus mundi* (which I tried to demonstrate when discussing its origins), but it forecasts also the later Erasmian elaborations, as, for example, in *De preparatione ad mortem*: ‘As the world I understand “a man of old” with his deeds and “his desires”. Actually, by the name of the world, people devoted to it may be understood’.⁸⁸

The second, positive part of Erasmus’ *De contemptu mundi* is aimed at presenting those values that can be obtained only with the utmost difficulty in the world, but are readily available through monastic life. The chapter dedicated to the ‘happiness of reclusive life’ begins with a remark that the addressee’s motive for entering a monastery should be not so much a hatred toward the world’s evil, as a ‘yearning for our [that is, monastic] delights’.⁸⁹ The description of these delights (*deliciae*) is the subject of the remaining chapters, with the exception of the twelfth one. Below, the most important of them will be discerned and recounted.

First, there is a peculiar easiness of achieving that, what conditions the Christian ability to reject the world, easiness and ‘sweetness’ of Christ’s commandments: ‘There is no necessity to take a risk of flight on Daedalus’ wings; you have neither to swim through the expanse of seas, to take on the labours of Hercules, nor to jump into flames; nobody forces you to hurt your body or to inflict death on yourself. [...] Look, please, how generous is the kindness of our Lord and how lenient are his commandments’.⁹⁰ This is a recurring theme of later writings of Erasmus, who ceaselessly brings to the foreground this ‘iugum meum suave est’ from the Sermon on the Mount. Its details, that are characteristic of the humanist intellectual revolution, will be discussed in due course. Furthermore, a monastery offers an inner freedom through the liberation from the slavery of the world. The lenient commandments of the Lord come down to a simple instruction: ‘Cease to be unhappy and be happy instead; cease to serve, to enjoy freedom’.⁹¹ Therefore, as it may seem unbelievable to outsiders, ‘hardships of monastic life are by no means severe and sad, but rather cheerful and pleasant’.⁹² And even

88 ASD V, 1, p. 348, vv. 186-88, quoted after Dresden, ‘Introduction’, *op. cit.*, p. 23. Internal quotations from *Col.* 3, 9 and *Gal.* 5, 24.

89 60, 551-54.

90 61, 529-98.

91 62, 608-09.

92 62, 629-30.

if there are some unpleasant aspects of this lifestyle, 'the force of habit relieves one of a significant part of these troubles, and it is so powerful that any unpleasant thing becomes pleasant, or light to do at least, if it is often repeated'.⁹³

The happiness of monastic life is based on three things: freedom, calmness and delight. It is the freedom – the 'greatest freedom' which is found 'not in the world, but in a reclusion' – that Erasmus discusses in a separate chapter.

If the freedom is – as defined by Cicero – a possibility to do what one wants to do, then the monastic life, being subject to the control of superiors in every detail, is a particular inner freedom, which consists in renouncing anything that is not allowed and thus in yearning only for that, what is allowed.⁹⁴ In the world, on the other hand, there is no such freedom. 'The world' means giving in to sins: 'there are as many lords to serve, as the number of sins exists'.⁹⁵ Therefore 'nobody burdened with a crime cannot be free'.⁹⁶ However, it is not only the lack of sins that constitutes such freedom. 'Doesn't it appear a particular kind of freedom, to be outside the power of the fate (if any fate exists, indeed), neither to feel the fear of it, if it is dreadful, nor to desire it if pleasant; neither to be depressed as a result of its adversities, nor to exult at its favours?'⁹⁷ It is a trivial version of the stoical freedom from the fate, identical with that of Poggio, with the only difference that Erasmus' digression challenges the accuracy of the very concept of fate – doubtless for the sake of the Christian concept of the providence.

This freedom, being a freedom from slavery, sin and Satan, provokes a concluding remark on human dignity: 'What can be more disgraceful for a man, what more unworthy of human dignity than to endure such a nasty lord as the devil, having disdained that Lord, whom a man owes himself and everything else?'⁹⁸ The human dignity is quoted here not as a choice between lower and higher values, but as a simple issue of rejecting the evil.

93 63, 649-52.

94 64, 671-75.

95 64, 684-85.

96 64, 700-01.

97 66, 715-18.

98 66, 744-46.

Another value offered by monastic life is calmness. An inner calmness, or order of the soul, cannot be found in the world.⁹⁹ A monastery is helpful in achieving such calmness. It is, therefore, nothing strange that the encounters with God, as described in the Bible, occurred in deserted places, and even Christ himself went to such places to pray, he instructed his followers to pray in ‘a cell of heart’, and finally he has died ‘outside the city walls’.¹⁰⁰ These were examples of momentous events. To these, Erasmus adds examples ‘human and of lesser weight’ (*humana ac leviora*)¹⁰¹ – examples of philosophers, poets and artists who worked in isolation, away from walls and the noise of human gatherings. This brings to mind Petrarchian *De vita solitaria*, and at the same time reminds us Erasmus’ later, distinctly ambivalent attitude toward an escape into the solitude to meditate and to work intellectually.¹⁰² This theme will re-appear in the final part of the work.

After having stated that the essential things – the salvation of the soul and a good Christian life (*salus animi* and *bene vivere*) – cannot be properly cared for in this world, which lacks a real peace, Erasmus says that this is possible in a monastery, where ‘an external peace supports an inner one’, but the external peace without the inner one is harmful.¹⁰³ After everything that has been said about the interiorisation of any real values by Quattrocento humanists, there is no need to emphasise the importance of this otherwise banal distinction, which, actually, is *implicite* contained within that, what will be in later Erasmian works so important for his concept of Christianity as *philosophia Christi*, as well as of any real human values. Here, in the chapter dealing with the joyfulness achieved by monks through their two kinds of calmness (that is, internal and external one) the idea of a peculiar positive feedback between the internal and external peace has been summarised at least twice, in an aphoristic way: ‘Therefore commendable is the reclusive solitude, however only in a commendable man; and in contrast for immoral ones, there is no greater danger than it. There, their thoughts are invaded by sadness, there they devise the most terrible crimes and they are ready to offer the

99 67, 757.

100 67-68.

101 68, 790-800.

102 See, for example, the significant words in *Convivium religiosum*, ASD, I, 3, *Colloquia*, ed. by L.-E. Halkin, F. Bierlaire, and R. Hoven, p. 231, v. 15 – p. 232, v. 25.

103 68, 801-03.

worst advices – to themselves as well as to others'.¹⁰⁴ Next, there follow some examples in a moderate number and another conclusion based on an aphoristic dictum of a stoic philosopher Crates: 'When you live with yourself as your only companion, heed lest you live in a bad company'.¹⁰⁵ Isn't it an extremely interioristic conclusion of earlier humanist attempts at interiorisation of ethical and religious values, and particularly those found in writings of Petrarch and Coluccio Salutati?

The essence of the – based on virtues – internal peace, having been specifically distinguished and extensively discussed by Erasmus, is the lack of remorse, that always accompanies sinners and, 'according to ecclesiastic authors' is a foretaste of future infernal tortures.¹⁰⁶ Erasmus is not satisfied with just an abstract analysis of a mental state which is an anxiety caused by a sense of guilt. He illustrates it with three (only three, as he stresses himself, as if excusing himself for failing to apply a rich exemplification, so characteristic of humanist rhetoric) examples of an ominous, destructive power which is the conscience burdened with the sense of guilt: the mythical example of Orestes, the example of Sulla from the Roman history and the Biblical example of Cain. Moreover, he quotes works of Juvenal, and to describe the freedom from remorse, he uses an aphoristic dictum of Horace ('nil conscire sibi, nulla pallescere culpa'¹⁰⁷). This freedom and clearness of conscience is described not only as filled with calmness and peace (*otium* and *pax*), but also as a 'pleasure' (*voluptas*).¹⁰⁸ Having concluded the chapter with a statement that 'here [that is, in a monastery], the inner peace is greatest, and the external one can be found here or nowhere',¹⁰⁹ Erasmus describes the 'delights of the monastic life'. This is the most remarkable, the most 'humanist', and at the same time the most 'Erasmian' fragment of the early Erasmus' work.

Such agglomeration of special characteristics results from a reference (at the very beginning of the chapter) to the name and views of Epicurus and from an attempt at presenting a monastery as a place

104 69, 816-18.

105 70, 823.

106 70, 829 – 71, 867 (864: 'ecclesiastici').

107 *Epist.* I, 1, 61 ('to be conscious of no fault, to turn pale at no accusation'; 'nie czuć winy do siebie, w oczy patrzeć śmiało' as translated by Czubek or 'nie bliednij wówczas wiedząc, że jesteś bez winy' – by Sękowski).

108 72, 909-10.

109 72, 921.

most suitable for literary and scholarly work. In both these respects the work of Erasmus is original in a limited, but significant way. Especially concerning Epicurus, it daringly enriches the earlier tries to rehabilitate that philosopher, whose doctrine was criticised already in the classical Antiquity, and by Christianity – almost universally disapproved and rejected.¹¹⁰ Concerning monasteries as places for studies, not only theological, but also humanist ones, Erasmus continues above all the line of thought represented in fourteenth century by Petrarch rather than that of Coluccio Salutati (despite of both being inspired by patristic sources) who – after St Jerome – praised the ‘holy simplicity’ of the monastic lifestyle and called for enriching it with an intellectual effort as being socially useful.

Epicurus appears here as an advocate of a regulated and – above all – carefully selected delight. ‘People indeed – writes Erasmus – grow permanently attached to it, and so much that they cannot be scared off by any [resulting from it] miseries or dissuaded by reason. So not without a sense says Epicurus that people are mistaken in their assessment of individual delights, but all men strive after them in different ways’.¹¹¹ Strange though it may seem, Erasmus states (through Theoderic’s mouth) that monastic life is not only the source of the most intense delight, but also fully consistent with Epicurean principles: ‘Tota vitae nostrae ratio Epicurea est’.¹¹² And here is the explanation:

Epicurus states that one must not admit to himself such delights that would result in greater worries. Indeed, we indulge neither in debauchery, adultery nor any revels at all. Being sober we watch sunrises and sunsets, while revellers say that they never see either one. Those things are never such that they cause more troubles than joy. We cannot and we don’t want to grow rich or to seek honours. In this we remain faithful to the teachings of Epicurus. Since there is little pleasure in them, but a plenty of troubles, we act wisely when we don’t want to get lesser benefits at the expense of a great loss. Moreover, Epicurus instructs that sometimes one should even accept a suffering in order to avoid a greater suffering, or renounce a pleasure to experience a greater delight. And us? We endure vigils, fasting, loneliness, silence and other similar tribulations

110 See W. Schmid, ‘Epikur’, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, vol. 5, Stuttgart, 1962, pp. 776-94.

111 73, 928 – 74, 932.

112 74, 934-39.

to avoid greater ones. We do not drink using perfumes, we do not dance, do not run after any whim, do not take the liberty of doing other stupid things, but look, how beneficial are those sacrifices. Did you think that we have lost all pleasures? We haven't lost them, but we have exchanged them for other ones! And we did it so that in return for a few small pleasures we have received many great ones. It is for a long time, I think, that effeminate dandies prick up their ears hoping that they can learn from me some new trick to get a pleasure. I will teach them, indeed, but at the same time I want to divert their attention from those ugly temptations that we have in common with animals. Let them cease to be animals and let them understand that there is a lofty, divine particle in a man, and it is to that particle that the pleasure should be related. Since animals, having nothing better than the body, rightly accept satisfying the needs of their stomachs and abdomens as a measure of their happiness. And the condition of a man is so much dignified that he cannot acknowledge himself being born to the same aims as animals are. He possesses not only a body, but also a soul. With respect to the body he does not differ from animals, except for his posture. The soul, however, is close rather to the divine and eternal nature. The body is earthly, lazy, mortal, prone to disease and falls, numb and miserable, while the soul is heavenly, subtle, divine, immortal, shining and noble. Whoever is perverse enough, to be ignorant that the body cannot be even compared with the soul? As distant is the body from the dignity of the soul as a spiritual delight surpasses pleasures of the body. A spiritual delight, like the soul, is real, everlasting, free from satiety, pure, noble, divine and salutary, while carnal pleasures – false, passing, full of satiety, containing more bitterness than sweetness, shameful and lethal. And it is impossible for a single man to experience both spiritual and carnal delights: one of them has to be rejected. What would Epicurus recommend here, being so expert in advice? Surely, he would advise that the carnal delights should be rejected, not to be a hindrance in obtaining better and more pleasant spiritual ones. And this (as I said) does not mean to lose the delights, but to regain them.¹¹³

It is evident, that the contempt for the world has been united here with human dignity, for the second time in the same Erasmus' work. This, however, is a separate topic that will not be discussed at present.¹¹⁴ Now, it's time to scrutinise delights of the monastic life as listed and described

113 74, 939 – 75, 976.

114 See Domański, 'Z dawnych rozważań...', *op. cit.*

by Erasmus: 'First, as Epicurus states [...], the probably greatest delight is the freedom from the terrible torments of a guilty conscience. Since it is a great reason for joy, to have no cause to suffer. Secondly, is it not a pleasure, to contemplate heavenly and immortal delights that we hope to reach by God's will?'¹¹⁵ Erasmus elaborates extensively this foretaste of the future bliss for redeemed ones; he admits, however – quoting an opinion of St Bernard of Clairvaux – that it is experienced only rarely, though intensely.¹¹⁶ Moreover, he does not conceal that mystical experiences are alien to him (and literally to that Theoderic).¹¹⁷

This part of Erasmus disquisition on the allure of monastic life emphasises in a sense (*avant la lettre*) Bentham's 'felicific calculus', but above all their internalisation and sublimation – all under the banner of Epicureanism. In this, it represents not only a brave, even paradoxical and shocking concept in a work being an expression of the contempt for the world and a praise of the monastic lifestyle, but also an extremely important episode in the history of early-Renaissance reception and rehabilitation of Epicureanism.¹¹⁸ In the literary output of Erasmus himself it marks a beginning of a series of statements that were consistently aimed at proving the Epicurean moral philosophy not to be contrary to the Christian ethics, but rather a closest one to it, in a sense. This series of statement reached its climax in the dialogue *Epicureus* contained in *Colloquia familiaria*.

Two main philosophical 'heresies' were often ascribed to Epicurus – already in Antiquity, but also in later times: that he deprived the world of divine providence and that instead of disinterested ascetic morality he promoted an ethics based on carnal pleasures. The apology of the Epicurean ethics has been initiated by Petrarch who – following the example of Cicero and Seneca – noted noble and sublime details of his moral philosophy, contrary to its common understanding.¹¹⁹ However, the defence of Epicurus, intensified in the 1430's, is associated mainly with

115 75, 978-88.

116 76, 993-96 (Dresden refers to *Liber de diligendo Deo* by St Bernard of Clairvaux, PL 183, 990).

117 76, 5-15.

118 See M. Delcourt and M. Derwa, 'Trois aspects de l'épicurisme chrétien', in *Colloquium Erasmianum. Actes du Colloque International réuni à Mons du 26 au 29 octobre 1967 à l'occasion de la naissance d'Erasmus*, Mons, 1968, pp. 129-33.

119 *Res. memor.*, III, 77 (ed. by G. Billanovich, pp. 166-69).

two Italian humanists. Cosimo Raimondi wrote about 1430 in a letter (to Ambrose Fignosi) that 'Epicurus placed correctly the supreme good in the delight and that the views of academics, stoics and peripatetics in this respect were incorrect'. Shortly after that, Lorenzo Valla entered into the defence of pleasure generally, and of the Epicurean pleasure specifically, in an extensive, rewritten several times dialogue *De vero bono sive de voluptate*.¹²⁰ None of them, however, put so much emphasis on those elements of the Epicurean concept of pleasure that can be transformed into the concept of a clear conscience, as a result of some 'interpretative surplus'. Of a relevance here was the proposed by Epicurus dominance of spiritual pleasures over carnal ones, his statement that one cannot live pleasantly without living honestly and finally his very concept of the peace of soul.¹²¹ While his predecessors tried to rehabilitate the pleasure within the constrictions of a kind of naturalism (Valla, for example, often referred to pleasure as a sort of a natural creative force), Erasmus – following the example of Cicero¹²² – restored the sublime, spiritual and ascetic aspect of the Epicurean pleasure. Thereby, he could perform not only a reconciliation, but also a synthesis and even an identification of the Epicurean and Christian *voluptas*,¹²³ the beginnings of which can be found in *De contemptu mundi* while the mature form – in *Epicureus*.¹²⁴ Although 'the blissful conscience of a honestly lived life' is an important element of the spiritual pleasure also in *Utopia* by Erasmus' friend Thomas More,¹²⁵ it cannot be equated with the originality and audacity of the Erasmian concept – because the former lacks the Epicurean and Christian label, but also because it has nothing to do with monks.

120 See E. Garin, 'Ricerche sull'epicureismo del Quattrocento', in idem, *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano. Ricerche e documenti*, Florence, 1961, pp. 72-98; M. Delcourt and M. Derwa, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-23.

121 See Diog. Laert. X, 128, 131-32, 137 and also 138 (inherence of delight and virtue).

122 Cic. *De fin.* I, 8, 30; 10, 33; 13, 43 (references in *ASD*, V, 1, p. 73); also I, 17, 55.

123 See Dresden, 'Introduction', *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

124 *ASD* V, 1, p. 74, v. 956 – p. 75, v. 980; *ASD*, I, 3, pp. 720-33. On p. 721, v. 44, Erasmus quotes (not exactly) Plautus, *Most.* 544-45: 'Nil est miserius quam animus sibi male conscius' ('Nothing is as miserable as the consciousness of sin'). From this he starts a discussion on a striking similarity between the Epicurean and Christian hedonism.

125 T. Morus, *Utopia*, transl. by K. Abgarowicz, introduction by M. Rode, Poznań, 1947, p. 84.

However, a monastery is in *De contemptu mundi* a place of special pleasures – and namely those that accompany any intellectual effort. A passage discussing these, contained in the concluding part of the work, is worth quoting as a statement characteristic of a continuator of fifteenth century's humanism, and at the same time as a germ of the later, mature form of Christian humanism represented by Erasmus himself:

There is, however, a pleasure characteristic of scholars who experience it when they read works of more distinguished authors or when they write themselves, their writings to be read, or else when they contemplate what they have read. This kind of pleasure is so differentiated, so rich, that it leaves no place for satiety or boredom. How could it possibly do? If one wishes to reach the very origins, he opens the books of the Old and New Testament. Who loves the truth, which, being precious in itself, becomes even more valuable thanks to the glory of excellent style, runs to works of Jerome, Augustine, Ambrose, Cyprian and other writers similar to them. Someone more discriminating, who wants to read works of the Christian Cicero, puts in front of him writings of Lactantius Firmianus. Who finds a pleasure in a less refined tableware and more modest dinner, reaches out for books by Thomas, Albert and others. And if you can't do without your old friends, you may visit them sometimes in a spare time, to be, however, their rival rather than fellow. For it is among them that a woman abides, foreigner but with a noble countenance, whom you will take as a captive; you will trim her fingernails and hair and you will turn her from a harlot into your rightful consort. Thus you have the mysterious and numerous books of the Holy Scripture. You have the writings of prophets, apostles, commentators and doctors; you have the works of philosophers and poets that have not to be avoided by someone who can find medicinal herbs among poisonous plants. So what? To abide in the midst of all these things, experiencing a blissful peace and greatest freedom, being free from any worries – is it not the same thing as to live in a land of delight?¹²⁶

This is – it should be remembered – a vision of intellectual amusement for a young adept of monastic life, adjusted to the tone and topics of the encouragement to 'disdain the world'. In this context, it is significant that a monastic intellectual does not have to renounce works of ancient pagan authors, if he used to commune with them, but he may still, under

126 ASD, V, 1, p. 80, vv. 92-110.

certain circumstances, enjoy reading them. It is those circumstances that constitute essential and lasting components of the (later refined) Erasmian programme of Christian humanism, that have been permanently adopted from the patristic tradition, already in the Middle Ages. These have been expressed using two symbols: a Biblical one (Deut. 21, 10) of a pagan captive, foreign woman, who has to be transformed into an Israelite by means of purifying cosmetic (or rather anti-cosmetic) treatment, and a symbol of finding healing herbs among poisonous – or useless at least – weeds. The latter is remarkably close to an ancient symbol, which was readily used by Classical poets in their theories of literary imitation – and namely that of bees choosing only those flowers, which provide them with the useful nectar. The first of these symbols has been borrowed by Erasmus most probably from Letters LXVI and LXX of St Jerome, who was particularly dear to his heart, already at that time. Actually, Erasmus quoted St Jerome in the same chapter on the delights of monastic life, when enumerating evidence for experiences mystic rather than erudite and literary.¹²⁷ The provenance of the second symbol is not so clearly defined,¹²⁸ but it was – as a matter of fact, just as the first one – *locus communis*, thus it seems not worth discussing its source. In later times, Erasmus developed other symbols and expressions, similarly borrowed from the tradition. In *Ratio verae theologiae* he advised a future theologian to use the pagan as well as Christian literary output in a cautious way, *cum iudicio delectuque*, and only the Bible, being God's word, to accept humbly in its entirety.¹²⁹ It was a kind of synthesis of both symbols from *De contemptu mundi*. In the earlier *Enchiridion*, he repeated – for the use of every Christian, and not only for monks or theologians – the advice to 'be occupied with them [that is, pagan authors] in moderation, only from time to time and so to speak casually, but not to get stuck among them until his old age, as if at siren's rocks'.¹³⁰

To conclude this report on the early work of Erasmus, a few words are due about the twelfth chapter, which contrasts so sharply with the

127 Hier. *Epist.* 67, 8; 70, 2.

128 See, for example, Plat. *Ion* 534a; Hor. *Carm.* IV, 2, 27–32.

129 See Holborn, p. 32, v. 30 ('cautum et cum delectu'); p. 180, vv. 9–11 ('ceteras disciplinas cautim ac sobrie vult Augustinus accipi, libros humanos vult cum iudicio delectuque legi').

130 *Ibid.*, p. 32, vv. 2–3 ('non [...] immoretur et veluti ad scopulos Sireneos consenescat').

preceding it incentive to the monastic life, and, on the other hand, conforms to later Erasmus' reluctance to identify Christian piety and Christian life with monasticism. The chapter in its entirety is a warning against a hasty decision to abandon the world and to enter a monastery, and even against urging somebody too insistently to such decision. Although the chapter may be – and often is – regarded as a retraction or simply a palindrome, it is noteworthy that at least one element of its content is totally consistent with what may be seen as a central idea of the preceding eleven chapters – and an idea being really Erasmian, despite of the authorship of individual statements. It is, namely, the postulated inseparability of 'external' and 'inner' peace in monastic life, as well as the real value of the former being conditioned by the latter. The same idea reappears in the conclusion of the twelfth chapter:

Besides, in vain will you abandon the world, if you take it with you to the monastery. Do not take with you [from the world] not even a single one of Egyptian delights if you are heading toward a land flowing with milk and honey. There are many who consider themselves as Anthonys and Pauls just because they don't abandon themselves to debauchery, revelries and drunkenness; they are, however, filled with hatred or envy, they are tiresome and unapproachable; they flatter their masters for their own benefit and they let the glory of Christ to be shattered for the sake of their own glory'.¹³¹

Also this may be seen as germs of later Erasmian concepts of Christianity and Christian life, that he so often called – after the patristic and later tradition – the philosophy of Christ. The internalisation of all intellectual, ethical and – above all – religious values is the very essence of this concept. Moreover, it is in a perfect harmony with analogous internalisation of virtue, which Petrarch as well as Bracciolini and other fifteenth-century humanists recommended as a remedy for external troubles of fate, that is for the misery of human condition.

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First published as: 'Uwagi o średniowiecznej i renesansowej "pogardzie świata" i "nę-dzy człowieka"' (Lotariusz – Poggio Bracciolini – Erazm z Rotterdamu)', *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce*, 36, 1992, pp. 5-52.

131 *ASD*, V, 1, p. 84, v. 217 – p. 85, v. 224.