Defending the Value of Education as a Public Good

Philosophical Dialogues on Education and the State

Edited by Katarzyna Wrońska and Julian Stern

First published 2024

ISBN: 978-1-032-47169-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-47814-2 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-38610-0 (ebk)

Chapter 5

Becoming, Knowing, and Governing Oneself in Erasmian Educational Theory and Practice

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003386100-8

OA for this chapter has been supported by a grant from the Faculty of Philosophy under the Strategic Programme Excellence Initiative at Jagiellonian University.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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Introduction

Unexpectedly, in his school manual *On the Writing of Letters* (1522), Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466/7–1536), a renowned humanist scholar and philosopher of the Renaissance era, picks up the topic of education and provides us with a philosophical and rhetorical treatment of the premise that 'education is a fine and splendid thing of itself', and 'so much so that even if it should bring no profit in this life, it ought to be sought for its own sake – *sua ipsius causa expetenda*' (1985b, p 37). His appeal to treat education as a good in its own right neatly represents the general principle upon which Erasmus's educational philosophy is founded and opens up a door to a range of philosophical and ethical discourses on the origins and meaning of education. Here I will only touch the tip of the Erasmian philosophical iceberg but hope to melt the rigidities of our modern educational thinking by rediscovering what education means in its philosophy, practices as well as in its historicity. Adopting a micro-historical approach, I offer a self-contained study of Erasmus but drawing on an array of his texts read through a modern lens. The aim is to generate new modes of understanding and engaging with his educational theory and practice, which I contextualise here within the paradigm of self-actualisation understood as an ongoing life process of self-exploration and realisation of one's inherent potential.

The idea of self-actualisation, rooted in humanistic liberal thought (DeNicola 2012) and developmental psychology (Maslow 1943), and aligned with the idea of self-realisation as discussed in Chapter 2 of this volume, can be traced back to Aristotle's metaphysics, wherein a human being is conceived as a repository of potentiality that strives to manifest and actualise itself in the world through the rational activity of the mind (Durrant 2016). Erasmus's approach is eclectic. Synthesising Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical traditions with Christian and Stoic ethics, he redefines the terms and boundaries of man's animal, human and divine nature and underscores the role of rationality, subjectivity, and human agency in individual human growth. Pivotal to Erasmus's perspective is the idea of natality. Coming into the world, the child is nothing more than a neutral entity, a 'crude matter'

DOI: 10.4324/9781003386100-8
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(*rudis massa*) of untrimmed flesh and unrealised mind, yet capable (*capax*) of receiving its form (1985a, p 306). This puerile condition of softness, both in body and mind, implies that the human child is a possibility or potentiality that strives to actualise and recover its authentic self. Empowered by free will and reason, this crude matter of the mental self is capable of being worked on by the educator but also of acting upon itself and actively (in)forming itself. This ongoing metamorphosis, I will argue, entails profound changes in attitudes, behaviours, and cognitive capacities of the learner. Eliciting such a normative change requires deliberate action (education) and the application of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), sound judgement (*euboulia*), and introspection (self-knowledge), ultimately resulting in ethical conduct (self-government). These ideas are explored through three interrelated themes. First, I discuss self-actualisation as a process of becoming and being oneself in the context of Erasmus's philosophy of nature; second, I consider how knowing oneself, as conceived by Erasmus, contributes to this process; and third, how Erasmus's philosophy of ethical self-government (as a continuum of self-knowledge) extends the deeply personal and individualised process of self-actualisation into the social and political realms. Lastly, I examine the ways in which Erasmus construes and implements these ideas as a classroom practice in tandem with his practical pedagogical advice based on Socratic and Sophistic teachings. Within this framework, then, some of the underlying synergies between the idea of education as an end in itself and as a public good are put forward.

Becoming and Being Oneself

Taking as his point of departure the famous opening words of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* that 'all humans naturally desire to know', Erasmus argues that capacity to learn is inscribed in human nature. There is in us an irrepressible desire to know thus even if there were no tangible benefits from learning, men would still be compelled to learn for its own sake:

> Above all else it is in accordance with man's nature to know (*hominis naturam esse scire*), and therefore those ignorant of learning do not deserve the name of man. Moreover, even if learning contributed nothing of importance towards an honourable reputation, pleasantness of life, or the gaining of wealth or esteem, it would still be desirable for its own sake.
>
> (1985b, p 31)

Erasmus situates human need for education philosophically and politically prior to the problem of society, whereby the process of learning carries on irrespectively of the state. So even in a hypothetical world without polis, people would still seek to obtain knowledge for its own sake: 'For, who would not desire perfect knowledge of everything (*perfectam omnium rerum cognitionem*), even if he were never going to live among men?' (1985b, p 37).

This depoliticised and naturalistic account of education aligns with the Aristotelian teleological perspective, positing that all animated beings possess unique faculties and inherent potentialities that must be actualised to fulfil their proper purpose (telos) or function within Nature. For Erasmus, this prompts an inquiry into the crucial role of education in realising or actualising innate human potential, a necessity demanded by the paramount importance allocated to human powers of reason. On this premise, Erasmus articulates his vision of education as a transformative life process of self-actualisation with teleologically defined goals of becoming and being human. This vision acknowledges predominantly naturalistic indices of human flourishing and rests upon three assumptions.

First, Erasmus introduces human capacity and need to learn as a teleologically given imperative for the survival and progress of humanity as a species. Unlike other species, humans are born as incomplete, lacking in physical attributes and instincts of self-preservation but endowed with large capacities for the rational thought.

> To other creatures, Nature has given swiftness of foot or wing, keenness of sight, strength or massiveness of body, coverings of wool or fur, or the protection of scales, plates, horns, claws, or poisons, and has so enabled them to protect themselves, hunt for food, and rear (*educare*) their young.
>
> (1985a, p 301)

But no animal creature has been created as 'weak, naked, and defenceless as man'. To survive and flourish within the complexities of the human world, humans need to acquire knowledge, skills, and values through education. For that reason, in compensation, 'as part of Nature's providence (*naturae providentia*)', man has been endowed with 'a teachable mind equipped for study (*mentem disciplinis docilem*), and an aptitude for learning in the very young' (1985a, p 318).

Second, seeing a human being as a reservoir of potentialities driven to manifest its authentic nature through the rational operations of the mind, Erasmus assigns paramount importance to education in actualising this latent potential thus enabling humanity to fulfil its proper purpose within Nature.

> Nature, the mother of all things, has equipped brute animals with more means to fulfil the functions of their species; but to man alone she has given the faculty of reason, and so she has thrown the burden of human growth upon education.
>
> (1985a, p 301)

Lastly, the pursuit of self-actualisation through learning is not a momentary state but a continuous and profoundly transformative process. Animals and plants do not typically undergo transformative processes or exceed the

limitations of their inherent nature. They exist within the confines of their biological traits and have already achieved the purpose intended by Nature. 'But man certainly is not born but becomes one' (*homines*, *mihi crede*, *non nascuntur*, *sed finguntur*) (1985a, p 304), Erasmus declares, emphasising human capacity for intentional growth and self-actualisation through learning. 'One is not a man by birth, but capable of receiving human nature. What is born is in a way a raw material, education applies the form to it' (1985b, p 33). This is the most fundamental and intense formula, which lies at the heart of Erasmian pedagogy and his philosophy of man (Margolin 1966, p 66; Chomarat 1981, p 68).

Education plays therefore a crucial role in allowing learners to unlock and fully experience their potentiality through a dynamic process of continuous growth and self-improvement, while enabling them to remain in organic relation with Nature and with their own individual natures 'unique to each human being' (1985a, p 316). This constitutes the 'natural history' of human species – 'the beginning, middle and end, indeed the total sum of man's happiness' – towards which all other human endeavours strive (1985a, p 301).

Knowing Oneself

This eudaimonic perspective accentuates the double purpose of education and its intrinsic value: first, the pursuit of knowledge in the quest for a meaningful conception of a good life, and second, the cultivation of that life through the actualisation of one's potentiality that is congruent with one's inner calling. Although humans generally concur that the ultimate purpose of life consists in human happiness, there is a degree of unease and confusion about what a good life is and what might render us happy. If learning for the sake of material well-being and pursuit of pleasure may grant ample bases for pursuing education, it will not be enough to solve the basic predicament of human happiness. For one thing, we are not merely material beings but grow in the body and in the spirit. Ultimately, not all people will yield to the identities and categories imposed by the material existence to live their lives to the fullest. Neither they will look to economic or social success to solve their problems. In any case, Erasmus argues, possessing wealth without wisdom can exacerbate rather than solve our problems.

> What is the purpose of accumulating wealth for the benefit of someone who has not been taught how to make use of it? If you give wealth to a person who has been properly educated, you are handing him the tools for doing good; if you give the same to a person whose nature is savage and uncultivated, however, you are only providing him with the resources for living a wicked and irresponsible life.
>
> (1985a, p 301)

For Erasmus, unlearned people are not capable of ethical self-government, and neither able to take advantage of life and its various goods. 'For why, he asks, 'should you attribute the good of pleasure to one who lacks all self-perception?' (1985b, p 36). Without a clear understanding of one's true self,

one will struggle to identify and actualise those aspects of human nature that will lead to a good life and ultimately render us happy. Self-actualisation entails self-discovery. The way forward, Erasmus tells us, is to know oneself – one's character, beliefs, strengths, and weaknesses – in order to set meaningful goals and make prudent choices of life. The Delphic injunction 'know thyself… bids us not to pursue objects either too great for us or beneath us. For here we have a source of all life's troubles' (1989, p 62). Self-knowledge is essential to embracing our unique strengths and overcoming internal barriers that might impede the path to self-actualisation. It will restore us to harmonious existence in the world and within ourselves. Only through pursuing our studies which 'do not remove us from ourselves but restore us to ourselves' (1985b, p 36), we will accomplish such a balance.

Erasmus believed that the primary purpose of education is to enable individuals to learn how to live a good life, as taught by Socrates and discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume. He invokes Socrates's inner voice or 'learned and knowing' *daimon* – as a source of wisdom and a means of self-awareness guiding one away from harmful actions and decisions (1985b, p 33; Plato, *Apology*, 31c-d). For Erasmus, a Christian thinker, the trajectory of self-actualisation culminates in the spiritual process of self-discovery and ultimately self-transcendence. In the *Enchiridion* (1503), self-knowledge holds redemptive and salvific power as the gateway to transcendental. 'The beginning of this wisdom is to know thyself', we are told, which should be asked of God 'with ardent prayer' and recovered from the 'veins of the divine Scripture' (1988, p 40).

If humans naturally desire to know, this instinct extends beyond our material existence. 'Nature created man upright and implanted in him the desire to know in order that he might contemplate God's creation and at the same time meditate upon God as the maker of all things, and upon himself and the whole fabric of the universe' (1985b, p 32). Thus, education for the sake of academic knowledge and skills alone is not only myopic but ultimately unnatural for humanity, which strives to know itself and to transcend itself by comprehending the larger truths about man, the world and beyond. This is the ultimate promise of education, which Erasmus presents to parents in his treatise *On Early Liberal Education of Children*: 'If you are negligent, you will rear an animal; but if you apply yourself, you will fashion, if I may use such a bold term, a godlike creature' (1985a, p 306).

Governing Oneself in a Polis

If Erasmus withdraws education from the realm of the political by situating it in the order of nature, the fact is that men were created in such a manner that they desire – by nature or by necessity – to belong and live in a community (*societas, civitas*). He goes into great detail to describe the natural, pre-political gifts of sociability, such as reason, free will, speech – the 'chief promoter of friendly relationships', and various psychological qualities like 'mutual good will' and compassion – a 'capacity for tears' (1986b, pp 294–95). It follows that only life in a community holds promise for the actualisation of one's

inherent social potential and the fulfilment of fundamental human needs. For Erasmus, as for Aristotle, 'there is nothing in human affairs which can be self-sufficient' (1986b, p 295). Consequently, the state is an inevitable institution 'because it is necessary for the conservation of society' (1982a, p 81). The Renaissance humanists, as their ancient forerunners, saw the individuals as determined by their political environment and social roles. However, Erasmus was far from being complacent or ready to accept whatever organisation of power happens to exist. 'A philosophic mind neither approves nor rejects a nation, because every nation is a mixture of good and bad qualities' (1947, p 172). Living in a world shaken by social discord and warfare caused by the Reformation, which polarised Europe into a quarrelsome and belligerent spatter of states, principalities, and new confessional churches, Erasmus was sceptical about the effectiveness of the state to secure stable and harmonious social relationships.

If human beings are naturally endowed with the gifts of sociability, he argued, they could hardly rely on their natural capacities for living in peace and concord. In the *Complaint of Peace*, he expressed his bewilderment at the extent of men's destructive behaviour and departure from their true nature. 'Only men, for whom concord was so fitting and who have the greatest need of it, are not reconciled to each other by Nature, so powerful and effective in other respects, or united by education' (1986b, pp 294–5). Thus 'princes are powerful rather than learned and moved more by their desires than by rational judgment', and equally, 'each individual is the slave of his own desires', acting to the detriment of others and of the common good (1986b, pp 297, 311).

Ultimately, Erasmus hinged the fate of the state upon education: 'The chief hope for the state is founded in the proper training of its children' (1986a, p 259). What was needed, Erasmus argued, was a new form of liberal education that would promote a more open, tolerant, and intellectually vibrant society, wherein individuals could develop a deeper understanding of themselves and engage in constructive dialogue with others to further knowledge and promote the good life insight. As he writes to the son of his friend Thomas More, his liberal arts programme was designed not only to guide to personal self-fulfilment but to impart the skills of commonality and solidarity: 'liberal learning assures not only that… we live fully and truly, but also that we live happily and agreeably' (2016b, p 214).

Erasmus elaborates extensively on the benefits that his liberal arts programme could bring to the state and society. While demanding public support and funding for schooling, he promotes education as a public good, which 'ought to be a public responsibility' but also a collective responsibility, for 'if the public authorities are neglectful, everyone should assume this responsibility' (1985a, p 333). Education is a requirement for good governance and proper civic participation, for regulating one's family affairs (1985a, p 301), maintenance of social justice and peace (1986a), and contribution to economic growth. Education plays a key role in socialising process. A well-educated child will grow up 'a son who will be a faithful protector of his family, a

good husband to his wife, and a solid and useful citizen of his country' (1985a, p 302). Equally, he was eager to assert that his curriculum had vocational relevance, preparing future citizens for their civic duties and service to the community. They 'will go on to preach fluently in churches, to guide the senate with wise eloquence, to serve with credit on missions of public importance' (1985b, p 34). These various 'selling points' give us an insight into his understanding of education as a public good – 'the main factor in the progress or decline of the state' (1985c, p 377) and a common good of society which bestows on its members infinite benefits, for 'nothing is more conducive to wealth, social status, influence, and even good health' (1985a, p 302).

At this point, we may ask to what extent his advocacy of education as a public good may be compatible with the enormous emphasis that Erasmus placed on the individual growth as a form of self-actualisation and cultivation of one's subjectivity. The paradigm of self-actualisation constructs the individual as an autonomous entity whose agency operates independently from and sometimes in conflict with the community. Although Erasmus assures his readers that 'by judging everything by the country's interests… they would also have acted properly in their own interests' (1986b, p 311), we must clarify how precisely the process of self-actualisation coincides with his humanist and symbiotic view of the relationship between the individual and state and therefore how education as an end in itself may be dissolved into a public good.

The integration of these two competing aims is found in Erasmus's philosophy of ethical self-government as a continuum of self-knowledge and a cornerstone of personal and social well-being. In general, this philosophy revolved around acknowledging the human capacity for rational thought, self-reflection, and self-determination, a corollary of Erasmus's advocacy of free will. It entailed the internal regulation of one's thoughts, emotions, and actions not merely as a matter of personal endeavour but a step towards prudent self-guidance in the social and political spheres. By improving self-knowledge and judging one's personal experience in relation to the norms and needs of the community, individuals would become better equipped to interact with others and take civic responsibility for the well-being of their community.

From this, Erasmus deduced a social imperative that an individual's self-knowledge anticipates and is paradigmatic for ethical action and engagement with others in the world. This idea finds an empathic expression in the *Enchiridion*, underscoring the significance of self-knowledge as the best way to bring about social reform. 'The beginning of wisdom is to know yourself', but, as Erasmus explains to his readers, 'my intention was to outline a way of life for you' which in the end will 'make your character better equipped for that kind of satisfactory living with others which the ancients call "ethical"' (1988, pp 40, 53, 55). Making a man responsible for his own self-transformation is, for Erasmus, the precondition for making him an agent of the transformation of the social order, and so a good citizen. Erasmus places moral gaze on the practices of governments and church institutions and emphasises the responsibility of every individual to participate in their improvement, either

through personal ethical conduct or through an active engagement in the service of the community. This distinctively ethical understanding of politics is contingent on Erasmus's conceptualisation of the state as a self-governed community.

As a teacher of classical languages and rhetoric, Erasmus based his educational theory on the insights of the ancient Greek paideia and the classical rhetorical teachings of Cicero and Quintilian. In his political thought, therefore, he demonstrates strong democratic sympathies, adopting the model of the Athenian polis and the civic traditions of the late Roman Republic as a universally applicable framework for an ideal form of governance. 'If the state is a necessary evil', we are told, then 'the form in which it is least bad is a republic'. And 'if there has to be a monarchy, it should not be absolute' (2005, p 254). It 'should preferably be checked and diluted with a mixture of aristocracy and democracy to prevent it ever breaking into tyranny' (1986b, p 231). These classical ideas of democracy were rooted in limited citizenship and exclusive education. Nevertheless, despite these constraints, Erasmus articulated explicit constitutionalist arguments in support of popular elections (*populi suffragiis*), active civic participation, and communal forms of authority (*civium consensus*) (1986a, pp 312–3). In doing so, he advocated for a more participatory and consensual model of state leadership and decision-making, underscoring the significance of ethical political self-governance.

This political framework placed strong moral obligations on citizens, advocating for a sense of collective responsibility and commitment to the public interest (*publicam utilitatem*) (1986b, p 313). Similarly, rulers should set a virtuous example for the rest of society and demonstrate self-restraint and a sense of duty towards their subjects, a theme extensively explored in the *On the Education of a Christian Prince* (1516). Education, in this respect, is an antidote to tyranny, for in situations where citizens are deprived of formal institutional safeguards for their freedoms and interests, 'the next best plan would be to improve matters by careful education' of a prince in the principles of liberty and justice because when 'we are not free to choose our prince' at least 'we are free to educate him' (1982b, p 232).

Similarly, the practice of justice was not simply a matter of normative prescriptions and written laws, but a question of equity or fairness (*epieíkeia, aequitate*) exercised by individuals committed to fair and reasonable application of laws and moral principles to diverse real-life situations. This in turn, Erasmus emphasised, requires education as a counterpart, complementation, or even rectification of law. The method of 'making a city or kingdom prosperous is to have the best of laws under the best of princes', he writes. 'Although these laws should conform to the ideals of justice (*aequitas*)' and 'protect everyone, rich or poor, noble or humble, serf or free man, public official or private citizen' (1986a, pp 264, 269), the spirit of law does not guarantee by default the standards of good citizenry and ethical behaviour, nor there is certainty that people will naturally or voluntarily follow the law and choose a better state of being. Furthermore, written laws could not comprehensively

address all individual circumstances and aspect of human life. And neither they should, for that matter, attempt to do so because it would limit the scope of free human action. Man may resist whatever might be imposed on him by force and cannot declare himself free if he acts out of fear of laws. On the contrary, genuine freedom arises when individuals exercise self-government and voluntarily choose the path of right action guided by internalised virtues rather than external constraints. To underscore this point, Erasmus quotes the Cynic philosopher Antisthenes who

> said that the wise man did not live according to laws made by men but according to the standard of virtue. One must not do something or refrain from doing something because the law enjoins it or forbids it, but because reason itself declares that the one is good, the other bad. The law does not cover everything, but the standard of virtue tells one in every situation what is good, what is bad. Virtue which is the result of compulsion is no true virtue.
>
> (2014, p 787)

Refraining from immoral actions and making morally sound decisions through free and rational choices holds a higher, if not the only, moral value. But to be able to make such moral judgements and free choices one must cultivate the virtuosities of the mind through a proper educational process, which consists in 'the teaching of philosophy… casting light on the road ahead and revealing what is the right and what is the wrong path to follow' (1985a, p 311). By following this road, Erasmus declares, echoing Plato's *Republic* (4.425D), the state would eventually run smoothly without the need 'for many laws or penalties, because the citizens follow the right course of their own accord' (1986a, p 259).

If Erasmus sees education as the glue of political and religious communities, he is far from a literal reading of Plato's educational blueprint for making people good through state-controlled education. Rather, he wishes to keep state intervention in social discipline to minimum by emphasising instead the importance of individual responsibility for one's actions and duties of living in a polis. In a private letter, while commenting on governmental interference, he insists: 'It is not their business to see that we are good, but to make us less bad and to reduce the amount of harm that bad men can do to the common weal' (1982a, p 81). It follows that a line must be drawn between the sphere of interference by public authority and the sphere of personal freedom and accountability – the idea which would find its fullest expression in such advocates of freedom as Locke and Mill in England, or Constant and Tocqueville in France.

Somewhat misconstruing Plato's criticism of the tricks of the sophists (*Republic* 6.493B), Erasmus denounces coercive indoctrination and manipulative brainwashing organised by the state:

> It is the mark of the tyrant, indeed an underhand deception, to treat the people at large in the way that animal trainers customarily treat a wild

> beast; for their prime concern is to observe what pacifies it or what arouses it, and then they provoke or soothe it to suit their own convenience, as Plato has forcibly remarked.

This kind of mental manipulation implies 'not taking popular feeling (*plebis affectibus*) into consideration, but abusing it' (1986a, p 259).

But what kind of a deranged institution would find satisfactory ordering men like a herd of animals? – Erasmus asks in defence of his idea of liberal education. 'While there is no great accomplishment in giving orders to cattle and mules, imparting a liberal education to children is a challenge that is as difficult as glorious' (1985a, p 325). Alas, 'the method of these bunglers' – as Erasmus calls scholastic teachers – 'is no different from that of tyrannical princes, who prefer to retain their people by force rather than by fairness (*aequitate*), not because the first alternative is better, but because the latter is more difficult' (1985b, p 42).

Erasmus's political thought has been often dismissed for its lack of specificity and unremitted idealism, in the same way that his educational theory has been seen as unrestrainedly optimistic. The fact is that his political theories can be seen largely as part of his educational thought and of his teaching of classical rhetoric carved for the educational needs of a democratic polis. To modify this view, we need to shift the perspective from these theoretical models to more practical aspects of Erasmus's teaching and consider the ways in which the ideas of self-actualisation, self-knowledge, and ethical self-government are built into his curricular advice and practical pedagogy. Here my specific aim is to show how Erasmus construes and implements these ideas as a classroom practice.

The Self-Actualising Classroom

The somewhat elusive idea of self-actualisation will hardly appear as a core learning objective on curricula. It must be correlated at best with subsidiary purposes such as philosophical reasoning, the study of ethics, development of communication skills and critical thinking, or other means of enhancing personal self-development. Furthermore, the transformation of the individual is not simply dependent on what one learns but on what happens during the learning process and on how communities of learners interact and produce knowledge in the classroom. Erasmus argued that the content of classical and Christian texts, upon which humanist curriculum was founded, could positively contribute to shaping one's character, but its wisdom could only be imparted through the cultivation of certain habits of thought and discursive practices acquired through the methods of the liberal arts. As he writes, the study of languages and rhetoric is not merely an appendage to knowledge but contributes to it 'for it enables a person to acquire not only fluency in speaking but also intellectual judgment and a mastery of all the branches of knowledge' (1985a, p 320).

In his school manuals on rhetoric, Erasmus outlines the educational path from the acquisition of basic linguistic and rhetorical skills to more advanced exercises in oral and written compositions. Roughly speaking, these exercises taught students how to treat classical oratorical themes or any given topic in a rhetorical, logical, and critical (argumentative) manner. The roots of these exercises can be traced back to Greek Sophistic practices of debating on both sides of a case (*disputatio in utramque partem*) or exploring multiple claims in dispute (*multiplex ratio disputandi*) (Sloane 1997). In deliberations on a given topic, Erasmus recommends, students should compile 'a compendium of advantages and disadvantages' and 'match these points antithetically' (1985b, p 81), or produce opposing speeches and argue, for example,

> in support of love, as Socrates and many others argue in Plato's dialogue [*The Symposium*], and against love, as does Lysias in the same author [*Phaedrus*]; for and against learning, for and against wealth, for and against the monastic life, in favour of [vernacular] languages and against them, for matrimony and against matrimony, for the monarchy and against the monarchy.
>
> (1985b, p 43)

These protocols were not simply mechanical drills in constructing countless arguments and counterarguments but reveal their critical potential for the cultivation of critical thinking, persuasive communication, and argumentative prowess, enabling pupils to not only embrace diverse viewpoints but also to articulate and defend their own ideas with eloquence and precision. They offered an important discursive space for students to make claims, form opinions, challenge dogmatic preconceptions, handle disagreements, and engage in reflective thinking about themselves and others. It can be argued therefore that Erasmus not only provides a philosophical framework for his ideas of self-actualisation, self-knowledge, and self-government, but suggests a range of classroom practices required to effectively engage and practise these ideas.

Erasmus considered self-reflection as an essential component of the educational process that allowed individuals to embark on their paths of self-actualisation. In his textbooks on rhetoric, Erasmus suggests how we can gain a valuable epistemic access to ourselves through the Socratic and Sophistic techniques of introspection. An epideictic praise and vituperation of a given position enables the individual to mediate between competing self-constructs thus improving self-knowledge. Indeed, the divided and multivocal self is central to Erasmus's way of thinking, underlying the structural dynamics of many of his writings in which he polemicises with various avatars of himself. 'I quarrel with myself now and again', to quote him just in one instance (1979c, p 177). In this vein, he asks his students to ventriloquise the taking of sides in the Socratic manner by means of interior soliloquy with one's divided or conflicted self (1979a, p 679). The pupil, Erasmus recommends, might address his younger self (*adolescens*), his 'second self' or *alter ego*, a hypothetical friend or opponent

'who is in doubt about which kind of life he wishes to embrace' (1985b, p 146). This mode of discursive thinking about oneself was bound to trigger internal moral conflicts that could lead to developing one's sense of a good life, while being pushed to continually reassess one's intellectual, ethical, and political commitments. Such an ongoing process of introspection and critical examination of one's life and character was intrinsically linked to the process of self-actualisation.

The concept of self-actualisation entails development of the whole individual rather than solely focusing on academic training. By taking a detour through the philosophical dilemmas, concrete rhetorical situations, and the passions and mindsets of classical literary figures, these instructional strategies contributed to a holistic development of students by nurturing their emotional, social, ethical as well as intellectual dimensions. The pupils would be asked to impersonate various characters, which were put forward as examples for imitation, and characterise them 'in all [their] colours… make them say things that they probably would say if they were really here', accurately representing their state of mind and emotions (1979b, p 586). For example, the boys (unfortunately it is always boys in Erasmus's times) would be asked to write a dialogue in which they ventriloquised the voices of weeping Trojan mothers Hecuba and Andromache from Homer's *Iliad*, or to portray internal strive of a tragic and conflicted figure like Phaedra, undecided in her desires for her stepson Hippolytus and 'arguing with herself and changing her mind, now willing, now unwilling', or 'Medea too, before she murders her children, swayed by different emotions' (1979b, pp 649, 645). In this manner, the boys would experience the alterity of different points of view and feelings for and as an 'other' and, indeed, develop cross-gender empathy through emotional immersion in female characters. As Erasmus suggests, the mind formed by this kind of learning, 'is made more vigorous in dealing with all sorts of problems and is more congenial in dealing with other people' (2016a, p 211). 'Nor should we neglect', we are told, 'the universal emotions, the feelings of father for children, husband for wife, citizen for country, prince for people, people for nobles' (1979b, p 584). In Erasmus's self-actualising classroom, learning did not only involve intellectual debate about controversial issues but developing emotional intelligence about how to deal with them and redirect to virtue. This, in turn, was contingent upon the capacity of students to govern their thoughts, emotions, and actions by means of rational judgement.

In tandem with his philosophical teaching on ethical self-government, a significant portion of Erasmus's rhetorical instruction promotes the use of fair and self-regulatory judgement in personal conduct and collective decision-making. A model here is Protagoras, the Sophistic educator who promises to teach his students 'sound judgement' (*euboulia*), that is the art of good deliberation in both civic affairs and private matters (*Protagoras* 318e-319). Like Protagoras, Erasmus believed that he was teaching essential life skills of critical judgement, problem-solving, and intellectual self-reliance, enabling students to be 'competent on any matter both in judgment and in speech'

(1985b, p 34) and navigate the challenges of everyday existence. These skills would equip them for 'every activity and function of life', and could be applied in real-life debates, whether presenting 'forensic arguments' in judicial courts or deliberating 'in popular, military, or civic assemblies', as he advertises in the preface to his edition of Seneca (Seneca 1529, p 485).

In these self-advertisements, great claims are made for the power of rhetoric to offer non-violent modes of managing conflicts that potentially could curb the detrimental effects of social and political discord in the real world. Competition can play a constructive role in educational practice, as Erasmus recognised, and is argued in Chapter 6 of this volume. His classroom exercises were often turned into agonistic and competitive affairs. The best results, Erasmus instructs, will be obtained 'if a group of students competes together orally or in writing on a common theme' and stimulate each other's spirits by 'a state of mutual rivalry' (1979a, p 679, 682). If adversarial rhetoric, with its ability to provoke confrontation, had in general negative connotations, Erasmus believed that the habituation in these eristic and competitive modes of learning would instil intellectually and ethically sound disputation habits and in turn eliminate vicious or socially dysfunctional behaviour in real-life controversies.

This socially constructive idea of disputation presupposed that conflicts of will and emotions that we experience when forming opinions or making decisions can be mitigated and objectified through the process of rigorous argumentation and rationalisation, especially when arguing on both sides of a given question, which required a degree of emotional detachment from the subject-matter debated. As a result, properly trained students would refrain from resorting to violence in contentious situations and consistently demonstrate self-control and discernment. 'While the learned use discrimination and restraint', he writes, 'the unlearned… rant on wildly, unchecked by any rules, following their own blind impulse… The result is not forcefulness of speech but violence since they wish to appear eloquent without toil, method, or systematic training' (1985d, p 262). In some respect, these modes of learning are also a way of considering the relationship between education and democracy. As we have seen, Erasmus's understanding of a democratic politics depends on communal (consensual) and deliberative forms of authority. Likewise, in the classroom environment, Erasmus seeks to instil the culture of deliberation and cooperative action as a way of socialising would-be citizens in the virtues of democratic citizenry.

The teaching of these skills was not removed from a consideration of genuine human needs and ends. If we were to open a small window on some of the big moral and philosophical dilemmas that Erasmus raises in his classroom, we would find students deliberating on good governance, ethical demands of citizenship, social justice, poverty, tyranny, war, exile, the merits of public and private life and the responsibilities of childrearing – vital moral and political questions that were as urgent in Erasmus's age as they are today (1979b, pp 598–9, 680; 1985b, p 43, 145). Ultimately, the argumentative energies of pupils must be redirected towards the good, and the proposed topics have a

paradigmatic value for acculturation of the young in principles of Christian ethics and precepts of moral and political philosophy.

Like all Renaissance humanists, Erasmus was keen to design educational programme that would turn students into better Christians and citizens. Yet his choice of methods and classroom practices was far from creating prescriptive rules or controlling practices of coercive pedagogies that simply imparted on students the models of virtuous behaviour. Instead, by bringing multiple points of view and values into classroom discussion he permits the possibility of a critical relation to such an acculturation process. This underscores the difference between Erasmian model of liberal education in political wisdom and politicised forms of education which he so vigorously denounced for treating the learners as passive recipients of knowledge and moulding them according to some blueprints of the good society.

The classroom which Erasmus portrays in his writings was in many ways highly unconventional even for his humanist peers. Certainly, his transformative pedagogy cannot be simply conflated with the transmission of encyclopaedic knowledge, vocational training, or political socialisation. Instead, it appears congruent with his philosophy of self-actualisation, self-knowledge, and ethical self-government. Far from merely utilitarian and narrowly conceived techne of crafting linguistic abilities, his teaching reveals his nuanced understanding of the transformative potential of rhetoric for both self-formation and social formation. We may argue that implicitly and ultimately his liberal arts programme transcends any underlying tensions between these two competing aims of education. Harnessing the practical wisdom of Socratic self-knowledge and Sophistic teaching on deliberative rhetoric, he offers a pedagogical opportunity to bring together and reinforce a symbiotic relation between the processes of self-formation and social formation. At the heart of this symbiotic relationship lies the idea that education, when viewed as a form of self-actualisation, heightens sense of agency and self-awareness of the individuals, enabling them to learn more about themselves and their place within the world and consequently to become more informed and engaged members of society. It holds a critical potential for creating a public good of educationally enfranchised virtuous citizenry that is willing or even anxious to accept the responsibilities of living in a state. At the same time, while mobilising public authorities to invest in a more inclusive and accessible educational system (1986a, p 259), Erasmus underscores the state's potential in providing greater access to knowledge – and therefore opportunities for individuals to embark on their paths of self-actualisation. These interdependent dynamics highlight the reciprocal benefits and synergies between education as both an end in itself and a public good, thereby unlocking its full potential.

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