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In Defense of Common Sense. Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy
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Jacket art: Colantonio, Saint Gerome in his study with the lion. ©Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY.

“This is by far the best book in any language on Valla as a philosopher. It will immediately take its place on graduate reading lists and in courses on Renaissance humanism and philosophy, and bring Valla into the narrative of Western philosophical history as no book has previously succeeded in doing.”

—JAMES HANKINS,
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

“Tremendously impressive. This is a welcome development in scholarship on Valla. Nauta has written a book that will be consulted for a long time to come.”

—CHRISTOPHER CELENZA,
JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY



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NAUTA

Lorenzo Valla's
Humanist Critique
of Scholastic
Philosophy

LODI NAUTA



One of the leading humanists of Quattrocento Italy, Lorenzo Valla (ca. 1406–1457) has been widely praised as a brilliant and successful debunker of medieval scholastic philosophy. Transcending the disciplinary boundaries that still divide the study of humanism from that of medieval philosophy, Lodi Nauta seeks a more balanced assessment, presenting us with the first comprehensive study of the humanist's attempt at radical reform of Aristotelian scholasticism.

This study first examines Valla's attack on major tenets of Aristotelian metaphysics, showing how Valla employed common sense and linguistic usage as his guides. Next, it explicates Valla's critique of Aristotelian psychology and natural philosophy and discusses his moral and religious views, including Valla's notorious identification of Christian beatitude with Epicurean pleasure and his daring views on the Trinity. Finally, it takes up Valla's humanist dialectic, which rejects the formal approach of the scholastics and seeks to transform logic into a practical tool in which persuasiveness and effectiveness are the prime parameters.

Nauta's work firmly places Valla's arguments and ideas within the contexts of ancient and medieval philosophical traditions as well as renewed interest in ancient rhetoric in the Renaissance. It also amply demonstrates the philosophical relevance of Valla's conviction that, because language is the key to thinking and writing, the philosophical problems of the scholastics are rooted in a misunderstanding of language. Combining philosophical exegesis and historical scholarship, this book offers a new approach to a major Renaissance thinker.