

Epicurean Ethics of Pleasure in Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*

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[Abstract]

Desiderius Erasmus employed in his *Praise of Folly* the Epicurean doctrine of pleasure for the Christian cause, which represents one of his commitments to reconciling Christian tradition and pagan ethics. Erasmus believes in the value of making use of Epicurean ethical doctrine for the cause of Christianity, which is clearly addressed in his two writings, the *Epicurean colloquy* and *On Disdaining the World*. He tries to divert attention from the obsession with salvation toward the pursuit of happiness by equating piety with pleasure and stressing that happiness arises only from a clear conscience. His advocacy of pursuing happiness through piety is exemplified well in the *Praise of Folly* as well. Keen awareness of the adverse consequences that would result from the preoccupation with afterlife, coupled with his robust optimism and gaiety, led him to incorporate the Epicurean creed of pleasure into Christianity and ultimately to have human folly elevated into Christian folly and thus into eternal bliss.

Key Words: Epicurean ethics of pleasure, happiness, laughter, conscience, despair, folly, madness

1

It has been well-known for a long time that Italian humanists constantly exerted a great endeavor to reconcile pagan classical learning and Christianity. Desiderius Erasmus was no exception; indeed he was one of the leading humanists who attempted to achieve the amalgamation of classical tradition and Christian tradition. Of course, he was aware that the group of people who he called barbarians felt antagonistic toward pagan writings, but he was not deterred by them from his own conviction that pagan classical learning was to be of great service in cultivating Christian piety. Erasmus took it as his mission “to open the eyes of his generation, to convince them that the classics, far from being pagan, was a magnificent inheritance to be used in the cause of Christ” (Phillips 4). Myron P. Gilmore claims that characteristic elements of Erasmus’ religious opinions are presented in Erasmus’ colloquy *The Godly Feast*, one of which is the use of pagan classics in the service of Christian morality. He points out the scene in which the host Eusebius, who invites eight guests to come to dinner at his house, gives them four manuscripts as a present when they depart: the Book of *Proverbs*, the *Gospel of Matthew*, the Pauline *Epistles*, and Plutarch’s *Moralia* (505-06). The inclusion of *Moralia* in this group points to Erasmus’ firm belief in the compatibility of classical literature and Christianity. Although Erasmus clung to his belief that it is worthwhile to integrate pagan thoughts and Christian thoughts, it seems very difficult, if not impossible, to combine these two perspectives implicitly or explicitly contradictory to each other; in fact, it seems more so when putting together Epicurean ethics among pagan philosophies which put a great deal of stress on pleasure of this life and Christianity that stresses hope of salvation in the future to come at the expense of pleasure in the here and now.

Erasmus' commitment to combining classical values and Christian values, however, can be better understood in connection with the ascendancy of secularism in Christianity in early modern Europe. Eugene F. Rice, Jr. notes that "a new synthesis of the Christian and antique" emerges in the writings of Erasmus in the years 1495-1499 and gives special attention to the Erasmian way of working out the synthesis in spite of the contradiction between paganism and Christianity. "A moralized secularism and Christianity drained of its mysticism may meet comfortably on the common ground of ethics" (387). An ethic, the finest achievement of secularism that implies "a hope for the present" rather than for the future, Rice claims, may correspond with or even be supported by the imitation of Christ, an ideal of Christianity when recommended as an ethical injunction. Erasmus' inclination for secularism should have easily found, among other pagan literature, Epicureanism to be the most suitable vehicle through which to deliver his Christian cause, especially because its doctrine stresses pleasure and happiness in the here and now.

There was a considerable degree of excitement in the Epicurean fold of Italian humanists when Poggio Bracciolini discovered the manuscript of Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*) in 1417. Yet, it was not that Poggio's discovery reawakened the interest in Epicurean doctrines. Rather, the excitement about the discovery should be understood as an indicator that there had already been an interest present among the humanists (Jones 142-43). According to Howard Jones, it is not appropriate to regard Lorenzo Valla's *On Pleasure* (*De Voluptate*) as a serious exposition on the Epicurean teaching, but it is the case that Valla believed that, of the pagan schools, the Epicurean thought had the most value concerning human nature (148). Don Cameron Allen locates the rehabilitation of Epicureanism, especially the first genuine defense of Epicurean ethics in *On Pleasure*, not in the seventeenth century as agreed in general. When considering the influence that Valla

had on Erasmus, Epicureanism becomes a very important reference point when reading Erasmus' works. In a broad view, Erasmus is similar to Valla in making an audacious attempt to incorporate in his edification of Christianity the pagan ethic that regards pleasure as the supreme good, and celebrate pleasure as a medium through which man can get closer to God. Erasmus' defense of Epicurean philosophy is well demonstrated in his two works, *On Disdaining the World (De Contemptu Mundi)* written in 1486 and the colloquy the *Epicurean* which "first appeared in the edition of March 1533" (Surtz 93). This convinces us that he was consistent throughout his life in his defense of Epicureanism and that the *Praise of Folly*, written in 1509, might also have been under the influence of Epicurean philosophy. Devotion to the secular or a hope for the present, to use Rice's term, is remarkable in the *Praise of Folly*, and it manifests itself particularly as a pursuit of Epicurean ethics.

While Epicurus identifies the true good as spiritual pleasure, Erasmus, christianizing the Epicurean principle of pleasure, redefines pleasure as piety. The pith of Dame Folly's argument is steeped in Epicurean perspectives in the first part and the third part in particular.¹⁾ Therefore, Erasmus' praise of folly, when separated from or discounting Epicurean ethics, might even sound tenuous. It is only when supported by Epicurean pleasure that his own 'Philosophy of Christ' can be delivered with more vigor and succinctness. Nonetheless, there have been few studies that have shed a light on his Epicureanism, and even less in the case of other works including the *Praise of Folly*.²⁾ This essay aims to examine how Erasmus incorporated the Epicurean pleasure principle into his Christian thoughts in the *Praise of Folly*, and this should be preceded by an examination on how Epicurean ethics of pleasure is christianized in his two works, *On Disdaining the World* and the *Epicurean* colloquy. This analytical work will give its deserving but ever neglected prominence to the significant role that the Epicurean vindication of pleasure, associated with folly, plays

not only in correcting the traditional supernatural inheritance in Christianity, but also in presenting a contemporary Christian ideal.

2

Rice's claim that Erasmus laid particular stress on the ethical aspects of Christianity in order to vitiate the inherited supernatural elements in Christianity highlights Erasmus' fundamental conviction (411), which is delivered through Hedonius, a defender of Epicurus in *The Epicurean*, that "there are no people more Epicurean than godly Christians" (1075). Into this short sentence is condensed Erasmus' Christian perspective that a pious life leads to pleasure, and that Christians are the ones who enjoy the greatest pleasure. Hedonius again boldly asserts that:

Completely mistaken, therefore, are those who talk in their foolish fashion about Christ's having been sad and gloomy in character and calling upon us to follow a dismal mode of life. On the contrary, he alone shows the most enjoyable life of all and the one most full of true pleasure; but let the Tantalean rock be far away. (1086)

Contrary to the conventional image of Christ described as suffering pain, Christ who "shows the most enjoyable life of all and the one most full of true pleasure" becomes an exemplar of the Epicurean. This claim not only inveighs against the conventional image of Christ who sacrificed his blood in wretchedness and agony. It also offers a new vision of Christ which implies that, if Christ enjoyed the true pleasure the most, then everyone should follow in his footsteps and become a so-called Epicurean. Hedonius brings to attention the pleasant aspect of Christ as

opposed to Christ who was “sad and gloomy in character.” The association of Christ with an Epicurean as well as of piety with pleasure neatly illustrates how Erasmus successfully incorporates the pagan ethic, especially the Epicurean one, into his Christian ideal, and at the same time invalidates “a dismal mode of life.”

Erasmus could, with great dexterity, derive from pagan ethics useful precepts for living and apply them to Christianity. That is, he seemed to believe that the very problems of Christianity that were working against the well-being of lay people—the supernatural religious practices and the threat of hell, which result from focusing on afterlife—were able to be resolved by Epicurean focus on pleasure in the here and now. It is evident in *On Disdaining the World* written in his twenties that Erasmus wholeheartedly agreed with Epicurus’ teaching. This work takes a form of a hortatory letter in which Theodoricus of Haarlem persuades his nephew Jodocus to enter the monastery. Theodoricus preaches to Jodocus:

Pleasure is the one thing to which all men are so earnestly devoted that no evil can deter them from its pursuit and no argument tear them away from it. And perhaps Epicurus is right when he says that men may misjudge what constitutes pleasure, but that they are unanimous in pursuing pleasure in one way or another. (165)

To pursue pleasure is a natural instinct. And it even comes before religious practices. As mentioned above, Epicurus in his life time, knowing very well that his doctrine of pleasure was widely misunderstood as carnal desires, made it clear that true pleasure comes from the soul, not from the body. Erasmus also puts forth in detail the difference between the soul and body, and announces that spiritual pleasure is superior to that of body, saying that Epicurus advised us “to reject those vulgar physical pleasures lest they keep us from obtaining the preferable and sweeter

pleasures of the spirit" (*On Disdaining the World* 166).

Erasmus did subscribe to Epicurus' doctrine that the principal pleasure is spiritual to the extent that he eagerly exalted monasticism for the peace of mind and pleasure that its monks can enjoy—secluded from the busy and restless secular world. Erasmus, however, as a pious Christian, could not accept all of the Epicurean hedonism without qualification, particularly because of the three fundamental truths that Epicurus believed should be denied for man to be happy: "the immortality of the human soul, the providence of God over men, and retribution in a future life for good and evil." The most serious threats to a happy life are superstitious fears and the dread of death. It would be impossible to live a happy life if these two hindrances were not eliminated. So, Epicurus made the gods indifferent to human concerns in order to destroy superstitious fears, and declared that human souls are not immortal in order to eliminate the dread of death (Surtz 93).

Although he, as a pious Christian, could not accept Epicurus' resolution altogether, Erasmus at least must have found in Epicurus' teaching a good inspiration for how to make men happy. Also it seems that he agreed with Epicurus on the cause of unhappiness: superstitious fears and the dread of death, for he was the one who was trying to undermine the supernatural elements of Christianity for their harmful influence on laymen. It is not important or cannot be proved that the perception of superstitious or supernatural elements as hindrances to the happy life of lay people could be Erasmus' own ideas or that it was influenced by Epicurus' ideas. What is important is that Erasmus concurred somewhat with Epicurus on the sources of unhappiness, but he as a Christian sought his own way of making Christians happy rather than pagans.

It is obvious in the *Praise of Folly* that Erasmus had a strong aversion to the traditional Christian practice of constantly reminding laymen of the Judgment in the

future and God's retribution, thus instilling in them the fear of death and hell, which will be referred to later in this essay. Rather than reject the providence and retribution of God altogether, he simply stressed "the existence of God as man's greatest good and happiness and the joys of reward in a future life, both of which Epicurus had denied" (Surtz 102). This approach of eclipsing the dark side of religion is especially pronounced in *The Epicurean*. Hedonius states that "wherever God is, there is paradise, heaven, happiness" (1083) and that "where God, the fount of all joy, is present, there insuperable happiness exists" (1082). Faced with the Christian practice that he thought was hindering people from finding pleasure and happiness, Erasmus just brought into the foreground God as a source of joy and happiness, thus overshadowing God's judgment and retribution in the afterlife.

Of course, Erasmus suggested not only the main source of happiness, but also how to prevent the main cause of unhappiness. Just as Epicurus opposed pleasure to pain, so Erasmus drew a clear line between a good conscience and a bad conscience. "If nothing is more wretched than a bad conscience, it follows that nothing is more blessed than a good one" (*The Epicurean* 1075). There is an obvious parallel between Epicurus regarding pleasure as chief good and pain as chief evil, and Erasmus viewing a good conscience as the most blessed and a bad conscience the most wretched. Good and evil, which for Epicurus were gauged in terms of pleasure and pain, are christianized into a good conscience and a bad conscience for Erasmus the Christian.

A good conscience and a bad conscience are expounded at greater length in *On Disdaining the World*. Before stressing the importance of having a good conscience, Theodoricus warns Jodocus of the great harm that a bad conscience might do to a person, and urges him to keep a long distance from a bad conscience by giving three examples. Here, his erudite exposition on conscience, which does not differ from the

early modern discourse on conscience at all, reveals the great extent to which Erasmus was interested in conscience.³⁾

But let us grant them a span of life: bad conscience within them exacts the punishment for their evil deeds here and now. So harsh is its punishment that no crime can bring satisfaction great enough to make the torture worth while. Has anyone ever weighed up the terror of a seething heart, the violent uprising that rends the heart, the factions that pull it this way and that, shaking it up, plucking and tearing it apart? (163)

The torment of a bad conscience is graphically described as being as harsh and as harrowing as possible, just as severe as God's punishment itself. While God's judgment and retribution come after death, a bad conscience is the punishment here and now, imposing in this life the punishment to come in the future. Theodoricus, taking Cain as a case in point, describes how excruciatingly he was tortured by a prick of conscience. "He [God] scolded Cain, or rather, pleaded with him to elicit a confession and, at the same time, make him repent, but the wretched man thought his sin was too great to be pardoned" (164). During the Renaissance, the torment of conscience was equated with despair, and Cain was often considered as a typical victim of despair, a hopelessness of salvation.⁴⁾ A guilty conscience is paradoxical: if one, pricked by conscience, becomes penitent, it is likely to lead to salvation; if a person, in repentance, feels so sad and depressed as to think, just like Cain, that his sin is too great to be absolved by God, he falls into despair and usually takes his own life. Thus, despair or a torment of conscience has a double meaning: it can not only be regarded as a stage leading to repentance but also as the consequence that the wicked have to pay in this life. Erasmus, a passionate champion of Epicurean pleasure, would never have wanted any Christian to become a victim of despair.

After giving a lengthy explanation about three examples of victims of a bad conscience including Cain, Theodoricus states briefly about a good conscience: “To have a good conscience, never to blanch with a feeling of guilt” is “a feeling of complete equanimity, peace, and enjoyment” (164). Given that preachers and religious writers at Erasmus’ time mainly turned to a bad conscience in order to instill religious faith in laymen, Erasmus also seems, writing in his twenties, to go with the tide to some degree, allotting a considerable portion of his writing to the cases of a bad conscience rather than to those of a good conscience. In *The Epicurean* written in his sixties, Erasmus still sticks to the belief that a bad conscience is the main source of unhappiness; Hedonius suggests that “nothing is more wretched than a bad conscience” (1075). Like Theodoricus, Hedonius contrasts a blessed life that one may extract from a clear conscience with the misery and distress of a tormented conscience.

The way in which he gives a warning against a wicked life lest one should be oppressed by a guilty conscience and be a victim of despair indicates that Erasmus follows the tide and puts a stress on the torment of conscience and God’s retribution. More importantly, however, what separates Erasmus from the majority of the religious writers and preachers is that he always struggled to spotlight the other side of a coin: a good conscience and God’s existence as a fountain of joy that was always neglected and overshadowed by its opposite. Going against the trend of merely threatening laymen with the fear of death and God’s judgment after this life, Erasmus chose to promote the blessed and happy life that a good conscience can bring, and replaced God’s judgment and retribution with God as a supreme good. This was possible because Erasmus applied to Christian thoughts the Epicurean ethics that all human beings should be devoted to pursuing pleasure and happiness.

Erasmus, in the *Praise of Folly*, employs the conventional frame of Christianity

that embraces human folly as a fateful result of the Fall while condemning the pursuit of wisdom. He recommends the pursuit of happiness or pleasure in an implicit and indirect manner by adding it to or closely associating it with humbling human folly. In a sense, it is like Erasmus hides a pagan ethic of Epicurean pleasure under the façade of Christian folly. His allegiance to Epicurean pleasure, however, is evident; happiness becomes a standard by which to measure everything, and everyone by nature pursues happiness. Moreover, the dichotomy between a good conscience and a bad conscience, which was shown above in the two works, is also continued in the *Praise of Folly*, but this time a good and bad conscience are turned into a beneficial madness and a harmful madness. It is clear that Epicurean creed, among other pagan thoughts, takes up a position of great significance in preaching Erasmus' innovative perspective on Christianity. Only when it is considered in relation with his motive of instructing lay people does Erasmus' advocacy of pleasure make more sense.

Behind Erasmus' goal of basing Christian tradition on a principle of pleasure lies a keen awareness of the sheer impropriety of the pastoral convention of preaching the gospel by mainly depending on the 'fire of hell' rather than on the 'hope of salvation' which was quite a prevalent practice in his time. It not only disturbed the lay person as well as clergyman, but also could have led them beyond their control into melancholy, madness, and ultimately religious despair. Most pastoral duty was, in effect, to threaten people with the punishment of eternal damnation. Almost all the Christians from the lay and religious writers to the clergy and the pastors were obsessed with the matter of salvation or damnation. This excessive emphasis on 'after death' has the risk of making the present or this life a matter of triviality. Pastors also provoked the fear of damnation when preaching emphatically enough to the extent that lay people tended to be preoccupied with the matter of salvation, be

convinced of their own damnation, and then fall into religious despair. It was a kind of irony that the emphasis on hope for salvation usually led to despair of salvation. Erasmus casts a satirical jab on the theologians who are obsessed with depicting hell in great detail to which he attributes a major problem of the church.

Who could have freed the church from the dark error of its ways when no one would ever have read about these if they hadn't been published under the great seals of the schools? And aren't they perfectly happy doing all this? They are happy too while they're depicting everything in hell down to the last detail, as if they'd spent several years there, or giving free rein to their fancy in fabricating new spheres and adding the most extensive and beautiful of all in case the blessed spirits lack space to take a walk in comfort or give a dinner-party or even play a game of ball. (*Praise of Folly* 94-95)

The Church cannot be freed from its “dark error of its ways” when every one reads only those that were published on an approval from the schools. And those who contribute to the “dark error of its ways” in Church are the ones who offer a highly detailed description of hell. Erasmus urges theologians and scholars to stop depicting what hell might be like and seeking the truth about sin, salvation, and other things. Hell, sin, and salvation were hotly debated in early modern Europe, and were frequently employed by preachers to stimulate the fear of hell and thereby threaten their congregations into repentance and blind faith. The pursuit of knowledge about the mystery of salvation, the detailed description of hell, and the debate about sin, at least for Erasmus, seemed to constitute a dark error often committed by theologians, preachers, and pastors. Moreover, these erroneous discourses are related with the obsession with ‘afterlife.’ Thus, to shift the focus from afterlife to the present might be one of the ways to lift Church from its error.

It is no wonder that Erasmus introduces a barometer of happiness in judging what

is right and wrong or good and bad in order to disprove those wisecracks. Rather than articulating in detail what a grave error they committed in their practice, he classifies people who strive after wisdom as those who are “the furthest from happiness” (54). On the other end of ‘happiness spectrum’ are foolish people who “come nearest to the instinctive folly of dumb animals and attempt nothing beyond the capacities of man” (54). Those who conform to the instinct of animals follow nature and thus are among “the happiest group of people” (54). Contrary to those who seek knowledge about ‘afterlife’ and thus “try to adopt the life of the immortal gods” (54), foolish people such as idiots, fools, nitwits, and simpletons are the ones who have no truck with death.

To begin with, these people [foolish people] have no fear of death, and that surely frees them from no small evil. They’re also free from pangs of conscience. Tales of the dead hold no terrors for them, and they’ve no fear of ghosts and spectres. They are neither tortured by dread of impending disaster nor under the strain of hopes of future bliss. (54)

The happiest group of people just do not care about whether they would be damned or elected. They are “free from pangs of conscience,” which means that they do not despair of salvation, nor know “fear of death.” In short, these people are the ones whose conscience is clear, which both Theodoricus and Hedonius claimed must lead to a blessed life. This viewpoint in turn throws into relief the so-called religious craze over damnation and salvation as well as how people with a guilty conscience must have been tortured in despair. Given the preoccupation with ‘afterlife’ of his time, it is highly plausible that of the classical literature and philosophy Erasmus saw in the Epicurean thoughts that put emphasis on the pleasure a possibility of leading Christianity in a more appropriate direction.

It is not that Erasmus extols a pagan ethic of ‘pleasure’ itself, but only that he tries to assimilate into Christianity a ‘pleasure principle.’ For pleasure was overshadowed by grief and fear in Christianity, especially because of its overwhelming preoccupation with death and eternal torture. He blends his emphasis on pleasure of life with his main concern, human folly. Erasmus’ emphasis on human folly is closely linked with seeking happiness, for the former leads necessarily to the latter. It seems happiness is only the reward for being faithful to human nature, folly. On the surface, Epicureanism seems to be a primary means of censuring Stoicism and their digging deeply into knowledge. On a profound level, however, Erasmus’ preference of Epicureanism over Stoicism serves as a perfect platform on which to uncover the harmful effect of the supernatural elements on Christians and to associate religious practice with joy and happiness.

Christianity, from the very early stage of its history, has been a religion that hinged primarily on the life to come, rather than on this life, for its ultimate hope is in salvation after death, inevitably at the expense of this life. The ecclesiastical insistence on salvation to the extreme, in the course of preaching itself throughout history, has resulted in an ethos of grief and fear—the former by urging them to imitate suffering of Christ; the latter by threatening the unbelievers with eternal punishment in hell. Both grief and fear go against the grain of Erasmus’ adherence to happiness and to pacifism. It was only by incorporating into Christianity the Epicurean advocacy of the present and its primary creed—pleasure in this life—that Erasmus seemed to find a new direction for the Christianity of his time. His approach had a risk of undermining the very base of what had sustained Church for a long time: grief and fear of hell.

The title *Praise of Folly* itself conveys too obvious an intent that he would guard against the wisdom which belongs only to God by attributing folly to humans and

that it is a homiletic work that would serve as a useful guide to the devotional practice. The way Erasmus takes a stance toward folly or ignorance in inspiring religious piety can be compared to that of Petrarch's, who not only introduces himself as "a good man without learning," but also acknowledges his "humility and ignorance" (65). Petrarch states that his ignorance enabled him to attain a more sincere piety. For him, ignorance leads to more pious devotion, which reflects the Renaissance idea of wisdom. Petrarch ascribes ignorance to his fate, and this directly stands in the tradition of Christianity of associating people's innate ignorance with the Fall (Chaudhuri 35). Erasmus does agree that human folly is the sign of the Fall, yet, unlike Petrarch, he never laments that humans are destined to be folly. What is more noteworthy is that "sorrowfully and tacitly I [he] recognize[s] my [his] ignorance" (66). The adverbs "sorrowfully and tacitly" that modify the recognition of his ignorance serve to evoke the Fall and that is why, for Petrarch, acknowledging his ignorance entails sorrow. Erasmus must have known too well for himself this association of human folly with the Fall and the sadness that went with it. In a gesture of reacting against this association, Erasmus, from the very start, focuses on happiness, the opposite of sadness conventionally implied in human folly.

Erasmus' focus on life and happiness in this world is even suggested in the Prefatory Letter. Erasmus reveals his intent of writing the *Praise of Folly* in the Prefatory Letter to his intimate friend, Sir Thomas More, saying that he needed something to do in order not to idle away the time that he was obliged to be seated on horseback while he took a journey from Italy to England, and something to share with his dearest friend (3). He wanted to please More and had an urgent need to distract himself from the pain he was suffering. He finished this work in only a week and the manuscript produced great amusement among his coteries including More. What entertained them the most was, however, the very stinging satire on all

of humankind: poets, grammarians, rhetoricians, teachers, monks, princes, bishops, popes, and others (Seebohm 194).

Erasmus was also sensitive enough to match the content of the pursuit of happiness with the form of satire that is modeled on Lucian's satires. Erasmus and More worked together on translation of Lucian's works from Greek into Latin. Although the satiric tone at some point changes into sarcasm or vitriolic criticism, it plays an important part in communicating what Erasmus meant by "amusing himself." It might not be a coincidence, then, that Erasmus presents a garrulous, cheerful character, Dame Folly, who, just like an orator, appears on the stage to greet and address the crowd. What Dame Folly says about herself first and foremost is that her reputation is poor among the mortal men, which is a mere gesture of modesty, and more importantly, that she is the only one "whose divine powers can gladden the hearts of gods and men" (9). She focuses on how her appearance itself will prove a tremendous boon to everyone's happiness. Immediately, she supports her argument with the following. "Proof enough of this is in the fact that as soon as I stepped forward to address this crowded assembly, every face immediately brightened up with a new, unwonted gaiety and all your frowns were smoothed away" (9). Addressing her votaries, she puts an emphasis on the happiness and the warm smile as the most favorable boon that she gives away to people. She almost comes close to comparing herself to the Sun itself, hinting at the impression that she is on a par with Mother Nature. She radiates the natural vital energy and her benevolence is natural, spontaneous, and generous just like that of the Sun, which means that she is the goddess of life, and not of afterlife as God is.

What lies behind her claim that she gives laughter to mortals is that she represents life and also that the essence of life is pleasure. She articulates this succinctly, saying that "What would this life be, or would it seem worth calling life at all, if its

pleasure was taken away?" (21). There is no point of living a life at all if there is no pleasure, she argues. Pleasure is what makes life meaningful and it is an essential part. This affirms the Epicurus' pleasure principle mentioned earlier. She even goes on to claim that she is able to give eternal youth only "if mortals would henceforth have no truck with wisdom and spend all their time with me [her]" (24). She is the very fountain of eternal life for those who keep away from wisdom. The underlying idea must be the biblical reference that men were fallen after Adam and Eve ate the apple of the forbidden tree of knowledge. Yet she manages with nimbleness to avoid evoking this allusion by bringing full attention to life itself.

That she is able to give her devotees not just a smile but eternal youth only if they stay away from wisdom sounds like the familiar Christian counsel that one should not pursue wisdom. This, however, implies something much more of significance and novelty. It is an ingenious strategy to get around the conventional Christian belief that the act of acknowledging folly should be accompanied by the acute awareness of the Fall and its subsequent sadness and human misery. If Dame Folly admitted, like Petrarch did, that humans should accept sorrowfully human folly, it would have been helping to reinforce the conventional belief that human folly is the sign of the Fall as well as the punishment for the folly of Adam and Eve. Instead, Dame Folly ascribes folly to being human and asserts that to live in folly is nothing to lament about. "Now I believe I can hear the philosophers protesting that it can only be misery to live in folly, illusion, deception, and ignorance. But it isn't—it's human" (50). Folly is only the result of human nature. Philosophers, who pursue knowledge beyond that allotted portion, Dame Folly argues, see human folly as the source of human misery. But Dame Folly proves them wrong, ascribing folly to human nature. "A foolish man is not unfortunate," Dame Folly claims repeatedly, "because this is in keeping with his nature" (50).

On the whole, Dame Folly prompts people to be happy by sticking with human nature. She does not regret that folly belongs to human nature as the stoics did. They argued that humans are evil and foolish just because nature made them that way. Just as Valla not only acknowledges the value of nature but also accepts it in a positive term, so does Erasmus in praising human folly. Human nature is not of wisdom but of folly just because Mother Nature intended them to be so. Thus man feels happiest when he follows nature and acts foolish. Erasmus does not negate nature nor tries to overcome what nature allotted to mankind. It follows, then, that anyone who tries to seek out knowledge beyond his or her limits is going against human nature, and that they are most unhappy merely for refusing to follow nature, “since for the most part happiness consists in being willing to be what you are, my Self-love has provided a short cut to it by ensuring that no one is dissatisfied with his own looks, character, race, position, country, and way of life” (36). Dame Folly first starts off with an illusion which can make men happy by blinding them to the reality of what they are. That one of her nine attendants is Self-love insinuates that humans can be happy by being what they are. This association of self-love with folly, however, is more significant in that it clears the human folly of the sign of the Fall and thus suggests that foolishness is not something to feel miserable about.

What Dame Folly stresses first is that human folly inevitably leads to happiness, which can be seen as an innovative way of stripping human folly of the implication of the Fall and the sadness ingrained within it. Folly went further to establish human folly as just human nature, not as a result of the Fall. The willingness to embrace folly as human nature contributes to happiness, the logic of which implies that wisdom, the opposite of folly, only makes people miserable. Her exaltation of human folly above wisdom not only must be taken into consideration in connection with the stoic misery but can also be supported by discrediting the attempts by the stoics to

strive for knowledge. Of course, the stoics refer not only to Stoics but also to those who engage in various branches of learning such as theology, science, dialectics and so on. Dame Folly, when excoriating them for their futile “attempt to acquire knowledge outside his allotted portion” (51), strongly emphasizes how deprived they were of bodily pleasure. They are not only most unlucky “particularly when it comes to procreating children” (39), but also the least happy people as mentioned above. It is no wonder that among the nine attendants and followers of Dame Folly are bodily pleasures such as *Tryphe* (Sensuality), *Comus* (Revelry) and *Negretos Hypnos* (Sound Sleep), which the stoics and philosophers tend to stay away from while absorbed in their study of wisdom. Those stoics that refuse to indulge their carnal desires must be far removed from the happiest lot since carnality brings an extreme degree of ecstasy. Thus “the least unhappy are those who come nearest to the instinctive folly of dumb animals and attempt nothing beyond the capacities of man” (54).

What humans can obtain from being foolish ranges from a happy smile, self-love, and self-deception through to sensual pleasure and “eternal youth” (24). Even the fact that Dame Folly is the daughter of Plutus, god of riches and Freshness suggests that whatever boon Dame Folly bestows on men may help them to flourish and procreate well while relishing youth, pleasure, and riches. In the works examined earlier, Theodoricus and Hedonius defended Epicurean hedonism by maintaining that true pleasure is not physical but spiritual, but Dame Folly is willing to embrace even carnal pleasures. This is not the whole picture of what she calls human folly; she also manages to evolve bodily pleasure into spiritual pleasure by equating folly with madness.

Dame Folly at one point embarks on transforming folly into madness by declaring that “exceptional folly is near insanity” (57). Before explaining the close kinship between folly and madness, she draws a distinction between the two kinds of

madness: harmful madness and harmless madness. These two types of madness correspond to two kinds of conscience: a good conscience and a bad conscience. The harmful madness, described in the following, has all the traits of a bad conscience.

The nature of insanity is surely twofold. One kind is sent from hell by the vengeful furies whenever they let loose their snakes and assail the hearts of men with lust for war, insatiable thirst for gold, the disgrace of forbidden love, parricide, incest, sacrilege, or some other sort of evil, or when they pursue the guilty, conscience-stricken soul with their avenging spirits and flaming brands of terror. (58)

The madness sent from hell is divided again into two: one is released when people who are infused with ferocious desire for whatever they want through wickedness and vileness are tormented by the vengeful furies; the other is when men who are “guilty and conscience-stricken” are chased by furies. The portrayal of madness chasing after “the guilty, conscience-stricken soul with its avenging spirits and flaming brands of terror,” is an typical allegory of Conscience or Despair that was prevalent throughout the Middle Ages through to the Renaissance. The victim of despair starts by repenting their own sin, and then suffers from the prick of conscience, which, if it grows so severe as to torment the repentant uncontrollably, drives them to lose the hope of salvation and finally commit suicide. Those who fell into despair showed typical symptoms such as melancholy, madness, depression, and the like. The first kind of madness—the whole imagery surrounding hell and despair—must have conveyed to the Renaissance contemporaries the fear of punishment in hell and religious despair which was dominant at that time. This implies that the first kind of insanity is not his own conception but rather drawn from the previous literary and religious convention and that Erasmus’ new, affirmative vision of

madness might have been possible by breaking boldly with the previous, dismal view of madness. Erasmus' vision is novel enough to overcome the negative, forbidding aspects of madness that his contemporaries attached to despair or a guilty conscience.

Aside from the second part of the *Praise of Folly* where Dame Folly hurls a barrage of abrasive invective at people who are engaged in various jobs, it seems that the first and the third part of the work is, to some degree, designed to save the faithful from succumbing to all the harrowing torments and tortures that the imagery of hell and punishment might trigger in the feeble mind. A. H. T. Levi points this out in the following:

The frankly superstitious religious practices attacked by Folly were those of the kind that looked to the Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues for support. The four books are chiefly devoted to miracle stories, to other extraordinary supernatural phenomena and to heroic feats of religious edification. They were intended to reinforce in the faithful the salutary fear of hell. (xxv)

As Levi suggested, the superstitious religious practices that Dame Folly is berating are the ones that try to kindle "the salutary fear of hell" in the devotees. The so-called fear, in fact, is the madness from hell that was commonly employed to make the faithful more faithful, only to bring them into despair. That Dame Folly tries to distinguish her own madness from madness from hell not only condemns it but also, more importantly, insinuates Erasmus' intention to correct the religious practices that ended up driving the faithful into despair.

Erasmus was well versed in the madness derived from the then contemporary religious practices and, thus, its harmful effects on the devotional acts and faith. This familiarity with the dismal aspect of Christianity may have motivated Erasmus to progress in the opposite direction and to adhere to Epicurean hedonism. His vigorous

affirmation of life that was observed even in his youth, combined with his inclination toward the Epicurean ethics, may have prevented him from falling into the abyss of despair as his contemporaries did. While in the cloister, Erasmus in some poems wrote of death that might take away the beauty of the body and life, and the sadness, grief and the transience of life. Rather than losing himself in melancholy, he concluded that it is essential “to seize, sweet friend, the days of our youth” (Christ-von Wedel 23). In spite of having a fear of death and fleeting life, he suggested that one should embrace life with more fervor and passion rather than submit to the fear of death. This buoyant optimism toward life continued into his later life even when he was forced into an argument with Luther. It seems, Christ-von Wedel suggests, that Erasmus was one of those exceptional people who, supported by an untroubled trust in God, did not have to pass through the crises of faith experienced by Luther and others (173). It is well known that Luther fell intermittently into the depth of despair of salvation, for he was skeptical over his earning eternal salvation.

Michel Foucault in his work *Madness and Civilization* properly points to Erasmus’ peculiar optimism when he argues that Erasmus, unlike Bosch, Brueghel, and Dürer, all of whom noticed the emerging threat of madness, kept a distance from the dismal and malicious madness. Erasmus “observes it from the heights of his Olympus, and if he sings its praises, it is because he can laugh at it with the inextinguishable laughter of the Gods” (24). Foucault’s observation was quite insightful and revealing. “His Olympus” and the plural “Gods” might possibly refer to the enthusiasm with which Erasmus turned to classical Greek and Roman thoughts throughout his life. Indeed, the description of the other madness that is attributed to Dame Folly shows what Foucault means.

The other is quite different, desirable above everything, and is known to come from me. It occurs whenever some happy mental aberration frees the soul from its anxious cares and at the same time restores it by the addition of manifold delights. This is the sort of delusion Cicero longs for as a great gift of the gods in a letter to Atticus, for it would have the power to free him from awareness of his great trouble. (58-59)

This madness that stems from Dame Folly is similar to a good conscience. The phrase “desirable above everything” corresponds to a good conscience’s being “the most blessed of all” and its ability to relieve cares also hints at a clear conscience that is free of guilt and fear. But Dame Folly transforms what Theodoricus and Hedonius would have called a clear conscience into a delusion and then into madness. Shortly after mentioning the celebrated Roman orator Cicero, she summons another Roman writer, Horace and elaborates on how madness, which turns out to be a sort of delusion, helps make humans happy. The madness that Dame Folly champions as a ‘virtue’ is none other than self-delusion whose primary function is to make people happy by blocking them from seeing dismal reality.

This new vision of madness is what Erasmus drew from the Roman orators such as Cicero or Horace. Rejecting the immediate medieval religious conventions and turning to the pagan classical Greek and Roman literature is not new but typical of Renaissance humanists. Yet the extent to which Erasmus took recourse on them is quite exceptional. What made Erasmus “laugh at” madness unlike the other contemporaries, Foucault argued, was that he willingly embraced “the inextinguishable laughter of the Gods.” This is because he had faith not only in classical “gods” but more importantly in the power of the laughter itself.

Laughter, as Foucault put it, commands more significance than madness itself when examined against the period in which the work was written. Although the

Praise of Folly was, in its content, a kind of religious tract, Erasmus did not depend on the mysticism that had been widely practiced in his time, nor frightened laypeople with the fire of hell and God's inescapable punishment that would await them in the other world. He, breaking away from the previous tradition that usually based their preaching on salvation or damnation, took a whole new different approach: to make laughter and happiness the supreme good in the world. The way that Erasmus, in inspiring new piety, appeals to the here and now is strikingly opposed to the contemporary convention of menacing people with the fear of God's judgment. By applying the Epicurean pleasure principle to Christian practice, he intended to inspire hope for life.

Erasmus' emphasis on laughter manifests itself as an infinite commendation of happiness and culminates in his transformation of folly into the Platonic frenzy of lovers. In fact, it is not different from literary convention when Dame Folly transforms folly into madness and then to a lover's frenzy among Plato's four frenzies.

First consider how Plato imagined something of this sort when he wrote that the madness of lovers is the highest form of happiness. For anyone who loves intensely lives not in himself but in the object of his love, and the further he can move out of himself into his love, the happier he is. . . . Moreover, the more perfect the love, the greater the madness—and the happier. What, then, will life in heaven be like, to which all pious minds so eagerly aspire? (132)

For Plato, "the madness of lovers is the highest form of happiness." This may have sounded profane and even vulgar to the ears of Christians, so Erasmus was careful not to strike a jarring note to the pious christians by first stating emphatically that "the happiness which Christians seek with so many labours is nothing other than a

certain kind of madness and folly" (128). Also, Dame Folly describes the "supreme reward" for the pious as "no other than a kind of madness" (132). She draws a parallel between a lover's frenzy and happiness and the pious' madness and eternal bliss. This is not only the supreme pleasure but also the ultimate goal of all Christians.

Although this perfect happiness can only be experienced when the soul has recovered its former body and been granted immortality, since the life of the pious is no more than a contemplation and foreshadowing of that other life, at times they are able to feel some foretaste and savour of the reward to come. It is only the tiniest drop in comparison with the fount of the eternal bliss, yet it far exceeds all pleasures of the body, even if all mortal delights were rolled into one, so much does the spiritual surpass the physical, the invisible the visible. (133)

The pious man is at times given an opportunity to savor the equivalent of "the eternal bliss." Only when humans are pious enough to "withdraw from the things of the body and are drawn towards what is eternal, invisible, and spiritual" (132) can they reach the level of madness that is comparable to the eternal bliss. The vivid description of the eternal bliss seems a sort of deliberate act of counteracting the same vivid description of hell.

If Erasmus had failed to metamorphose human folly that brings pleasure—even bodily pleasure—and happiness into Platonic frenzy that allows one to get a foretaste of heavenly bliss of the days to come, he, just like Epicurus himself, could have been subject to some of the malicious charges that were levelled at Epicurus. Of course, this does not mean that he was free from some of spiteful calumny. Luther had a misunderstanding over the Epicurean concept of pleasure and libeled him for being an Epicurus' ally (Jones 163-64). Considering that Erasmus did not pursue

Epicurean moral doctrines for the sake of themselves, but only made use of them in promoting the Christian piety, Luther's slander cannot be justified.

3

Erasmus' firm belief in the worth of incorporating Epicurean teaching into the Christian cause as well as his optimistic view about life must have contributed to his converting folly and madness into Christian folly and Platonic frenzy. However, he did not offer a simple, linear concept of folly; his concept of folly is multifaceted and goes through a gradation that starts from human folly and elevates toward a Platonic madness, the frenzy of lovers. Erasmus does not stop at praising human folly but goes on much further to lavishly eulogize the madness and illusion that contributes to happiness in this world, and then ultimately glorify Platonic frenzy that might facilitate in the pious the union of man with God in the other world. Erasmus could free himself from the contemporary antagonism toward madness by giving special tribute to the role that madness played in making people happier. He also achieved what he considered his peculiar mission: the fusion of the classical ideal and the Christian ideal by dignifying madness—pure illusion or human folly—into Christian folly, which is none other than the Platonic frenzy.

“The Erasmian philosophy of Christ is a religion of joy, not of sorrow, and it makes of pleasure a virtue, not a vice” (Kaiser 81). His praise of folly, indeed, is a praise of life instead of death, and happiness instead of sorrow. Possibly the only single key word that could encompass much of what Erasmus hoped to convey in the *Praise of Folly* might be “happiness” in this world and ultimately “eternal bliss” in the next world. Erasmus' celebration of Epicureanism can be interpreted as his

emphasis on the present, this world, not on afterlife as conventionally emphasized in Christianity. Of course, this Epicurean vein has a great risk of undermining the foundation on which Christianity had depended in establishing itself as a religion of great prominence. But Erasmus had an adroit craft to swerve around the Scylla and Charybdis to reach a safe port where to trumpet his own gospel of hope for the present by metamorphosing it into a foretaste of blessing to come. Happiness, at least for Erasmus, was at once a supreme good to be sought in this life and a bridge that leads to eternal bliss in the future.

Notes

- 1) It is generally recognized that *Praise of Folly* is “divided into three quite distinct sections: a long opening section comprising almost half of the work where the most outrageous of women holds forth with the most complex irony; a shorter middle section characterized by severe, straightforward invective; and a few concluding pages devoted to Christian folly” (Rebhorn 463).
- 2) Among these few studies are B. J. H. M. Timmermans’ “Valla et Érasme défenseurs d’Épicure,” *Neophilologus* XXIII (1938): 414-19, and Edward L. Surtz, “Epicurus in Utopia,” *ELH* 16.2 (1949): 89-103.
- 3) On medieval and Renaissance discourse on conscience, see Jerome W. Hogan, “The Rod and the Candle: Conscience in the English Morality Plays, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, and Tourneur’s *The Atheist Tragedy*,” diss., The City U of New York, 1974; John S. Wilks, *The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy* (London: Routledge, 1990); Wesley R. Kisting, “Authority and Inwardness: The Power of Conscience in Early Modern England,” diss., The U of Iowa, 2007.
- 4) For the survey of religious despair in literature, see Mary Louise Bringle, “Despair, The Irascible Passion: A Confessional Phenomenology,” diss., Emory U, 1975; Kilbee Cormack Brittain, “The Sin of Despair in English Renaissance Literature,” diss., U of California, Los Angeles, 1963; Susan Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair: Studies of the Despair Theme in Medieval and Renaissance Literature,” diss., Columbia U, 1963.

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국문초록

에라스무스의 『우신예찬』에 나타난
에피쿠로스의 쾌락 윤리

조혜영 (한국외대)

데시데리우스 에라스무스(Desiderius Erasmus)는 이교도의 고대 그리스 및 로마의 고전 학문을 기독교적 전통을 위해 사용하는 것을 자신의 사명으로 여겼으며 『우신예찬』에서 기독교적 대의를 위한 에피쿠로스 쾌락 윤리설의 활용은 대표적인 사례이다. 에라스무스는 그의 두 저서 『에피쿠로스주의자』 (*The Epicurean*)와 『속세의 경멸에 관하여』 (*On Disdaining the World*)에서 에피쿠로스의 쾌락 윤리가 기독교 철학에 통합 및 활용될 수 있음을 잘 보여준다. 그는 진정한 쾌락이 영혼의 쾌락에서 비롯된다는 에피쿠로스의 주장에 착안하여 어떠한 죄책감도 느끼지 않는 깨끗한 양심이 인간의 진정한 행복의 원천임을 주장한다. 쾌락이 삶의 근간을 이루며 인간은 독실한 믿음을 통해 행복을 추구할 수 있다는 이러한 신념은 『우신예찬』에서도 명징하게 드러난다. 지혜를 멀리하는 우매한 인간이야말로 진정한 행복을 누릴 수 있으며, 이 우매함은 다름 아닌 광기이다. 에라스무스는 인간의 우매함, 광기, 행복을 기독교적 우매함, 플라톤의 광기, 천상의 행복으로 승화시킴으로써 독실함과 행복을 관련짓고 기독교의 관점을 내세의 구원에서 현세적 행복의 추구로 바꾸고자 시도했다. 절망을 비롯하여 당대 기독교의 내세에 대한 집착에서 비롯되는 병폐를 잘 알고 있었을 뿐 아니라 그 스스로 낙천적인 기질의 소유자였기에, 에라스무스는 기독교적 가치관 안에 에피쿠로스의 쾌락 윤리를 편입시킬 수 있었다.

주제어: 에피쿠로스의 쾌락 윤리, 행복, 웃음, 양심, 절망, 우매함, 광기

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