On His Own Ignorance

Petrarch (1304–1374)

Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca) lived through most of the major upheavals of the fourteenth century: the great famine of 1315–1317, the opening phases of the Hundred Years’ War, the Black Death and several of the subsequent outbreaks of plague, and the Avignonese papacy. A voracious reader of the classics from a young age, he developed many of the ideas that came to characterize Italian humanism, a literary movement that emphasized the study of subjects associated with human interaction, such as rhetoric, ethics, and history, as opposed to the theological and metaphysical concerns of the scholastics.

After discovering the private letters of Cicero in the cathedral library in Verona in 1345, Petrarch came to recognize in the Roman statesman and philosopher a man like himself, subject to error and human frailties, rather than the timeless authority whose works earlier thinkers mined for the bits of truth that might be found in them. He wanted to communicate with this Cicero across the intervening centuries, bemoaning the gulf—the dark age—that separated the two of them. In acknowledging that the ancients were humans who lived in a particular time and place separated from his own, Petrarch reasoned that to understand them fully, one had to study all their works in their entirety, in the original languages; taking statements out of context and reading works in translation introduced distortions that prevented the original authors from making themselves heard across that gap. He saw their works as offering a way forward out of the disorder that characterized his time. Cicero had argued that rhetoric should be studied with ethics so that eloquence might promote virtue by moving the will of the hearer; for Petrarch, this combination was essential, since the problems of the day required learned men to take action rather than to isolate themselves to ponder eternal truths.

Petrarch wrote On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others in 1367. His pride had been stung by the patronizing comments of four second-rate scholastics who had criticized him for his failure to show proper reverence for Aristotle. In this, his response to their charges, he illustrated a number of these important differences between the humanist and the scholastic approaches to the works of the ancients.
...As had come to be their custom, there called on me these four friends whose names you need not be told, since you know them all. Moreover, an inviolable law of friendship forbids mentioning the names of friends when you are speaking against them, even if they do not behave like friends in a particular case. They came in pairs, as equality of character or some chance bound them together. Occasionally all four of them came, and came with astonishingly winning manners, with a gay expression on their faces, and started an agreeable conversation. I have no doubt they came with good and pious intentions. However, through some cracks an unfortunate grudge had crept into hearts that deserve a better guest. It is incredible, though it is true—if only it were not too true! The man whom they wish not only good health and happiness, whom they not only love but respect, honor by their visit and venerate, to whom they try with greatest effort to be not only kind but obedient and generous—this very same person is the object of their envy. So full of patent and hidden frailties is human nature.

What is it that they envy me? I do not know, I must admit, and I am amazed when I try to find out. Certainly it is not wealth, for every single one of them surpasses me as much in wealth as “the British whale is bigger than the dolphin,”\(^1\) as that man has said. Moreover, they wish me even greater wealth. They know that what I have is moderate, not my own property but to be shared with others. It is not magnificent but very modest without haughtiness and pomp. They know that it really does not deserve any envy. They will not envy me my friends. The greater part of them death has taken from me, and I have the habit of sharing them willingly, just like everything else, with other friends. They cannot envy me the shapeliness of my body. If there was ever such a thing, it has vanished entirely in the course of the years that vanquish all. By God’s overflowing and preserving grace it is still quite satisfactory for my present age, but it has certainly long since ceased to be enviable. And if it were still as it was once, could I forget or could I then have forgotten the poetic sentence I drank in as a small boy: “Shapeliness is a frail possession,”\(^2\) or the words of Solomon in the book in which he teaches the young: “Gracefulness is deceitful and beauty is vain.”\(^3\) How should they then envy me what I do not have, what I held in contempt while I had it, and what I would despise now to the utmost were it given back to me, having learned and experienced how unstable it is?

They cannot even envy me learning and eloquence! Learning, they declare, I have absolutely none. Eloquence, if I had any, they despise according to the modern philosophic fashion. They reject it as unworthy of a man of letters. Thus

---

\(^1\)Juvenal, *Satire* 10.12  
\(^2\)Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* II.113  
\(^3\)Proverbs 30:31
only “infantile inability to speak” and perplexed stammering, “wisdom” trying hard to keep one eye open and “yawning drowsily” as Cicero calls it, is held in good repute nowadays. They do not call to mind “Plato, the most eloquent of all men,” and—let me omit the others—“Aristotle sweet and mild,” but whom they made trite. From Aristotle’s ways they swerve, taking eloquence to be an obstacle and a disgrace to philosophy, while he considered it a mighty adornment and tried to combine it with philosophy, “prevailed upon,” it is asserted, “by the fame of the orator Isocrates.”

Not even virtue can they envy me, though it is beyond doubt the best and most enviable of all things. To them it seems worthless—I believe because it is not inflated and puffed up with arrogance. I should wish to possess it, and, indeed, they grant it to me unanimously and willingly. Small things they have denied me, and this very greatest possession they lavish upon me as a small gift. They call me a good man, even the best of men. If only I were not bad, not the worst in God’s judgment! However, at the same time they claim that I am altogether illiterate, that I am a plain uneducated fellow. This is just the opposite of what men of letters have stated when judging me, I do not care with how much truth. I do not make much of what these friends deprive me of, if only what they concede me were true. Most gladly should I divide between me and these brothers of mine the inheritance of Mother Nature and heavenly Grace, so that they would all be men of letters and I a good man. I should wish to know nothing of letters or just so much as would be expedient for the daily praise of God. But, alas, I fear I shall be disappointed in this my humble desire just as they will be in their arrogant opinion. At any rate, they assert that I have a good character and am very faithful in my friendship, and in this last assertion they are not mistaken, unless I am.

This, incidentally, is the reason why they count me among their friends. They are not prevailed upon to do so by my efforts in studying the honorable arts or the hope ever to hear and learn truth from me. Thus it comes plainly to what Augustine tells of his Ambrose, saying: “I began to love him, not as a teacher of truth, but as a man who was kind to me”; or what Cicero feels about Epicurus—Cicero approves of his character in many passages, while he everywhere condemns his intellect and rejects his doctrine.

Since all this is the case, it may be doubtful what they envy me, though there is no doubt that they do envy me something. They do not well conceal it and do not curb their tongues, which are urged by an inward impulse. In men otherwise neither unbalanced nor foolish this is nothing but a clear sign of undisciplined passion. Provided that they are envious of me as they obviously are, and that there is no other object of their envy—the latent virus is expanding by itself at any rate. For there is one thing, one empty thing, that they envy
me, however trifling it may be: my name and what fame I have already won within my lifetime—greater fame perhaps than would be due to my merits or in conformity with the common habit which but very rarely celebrates living men. It is upon this fame that they have fixed their envious eyes. If only I could have done without it both now and often before! I remember that it has done me harm more often than good, winning me quite a few friends but also countless enemies. It has happened to me as to those who go into battle in a conspicuous helmet though with but little strength: they gain nothing from the dazzling brightness of this chimera except to be struck by more adversaries. Such pestilence was once but too familiar to me during my more flourishing years; never was there one so troublesome as that which has now blazed up. I am now an anvil too soft for young men’s wars and for assuming such burdens, and this pestilence revives unexpectedly from a quarter from which I do not deserve it and did not suspect it either, at a moment when it should have been long since overcome by my moral conduct or consumed by the course of time.

But I will go on: They think they are great men, and they are certainly rich, all of them, which is the only mortal greatness nowadays. They feel, although many people deceive themselves in this respect, that they have not won a name and cannot hope ever to win one if their foreboding is right. Among such sorrows they languish anxiously; and so great is the power of evil that they stick out their tongues and sharpen their teeth like mad dogs even against friends and wound those whom they love. Is this not a strange kind of blindness, a strange kind of fury? In just this manner the frantic mother of Pentheus tears her son to pieces and the raving Hercules his infant children. They love me and all that is mine, with the single exception of my name—which I do not refuse to change. Let them call me Thersites or Choerilus, or whatever name they prefer, provided I thus obtain that this honest love suffers not the slightest restriction. They are all the more ablaze and aglow with a blind fire, since they are all such fervent scholars, working indefatigably all night long.

However, the first of them has no learning at all—I tell you only what you know—the second knows a little; the third not much; the fourth—I must admit—not a little but in such confused and undisciplined order and, as Cicero says, “with so much frivolity and vain boasting that it would perhaps be better to know nothing.” For letters are instruments of insanity for many, of arrogance for almost everyone, if they do not meet with a good and well-trained mind. . . .

As the first point, they said that public renown supported me, but replied that it deserved little faith. So far they did not lie, since the vulgar mass very rarely sees the truth. Then they said that friendship with the greatest and most learned men, which has adorned my life—as I shall boast before the Lord—stood against their verdict. For I have enjoyed close friendship with
many kings, especially with King Robert of Sicily,⁴ who honored me in my younger years with frequent and clear testimonials of my knowledge and genius. They replied—and here I will not say their iniquity but their vanity evidently made them lie—that the king himself enjoyed great fame in literary matters but had no knowledge of them; and the others, however learned they were, did not show a sufficiently perspicacious judgment concerning me, whether love of me or carelessness was the cause. They then made another objection against themselves, saying that the last three Roman popes had vied with each other in inviting me—in vain, it is true—to a high rank in their intimate household, and that Urban⁵ himself, who is now at the head, was wont to speak well of me and had already bestowed on me a most affable letter. Besides, it is known far and wide and doubted by no one that the present Roman Emperor⁶—for there has been no other legitimate emperor at this time—counts me among his dear familiars and has been wont to call me to him with the weight of daily requests and repeated messages and letters. In all this they feel that some people find some proof that I must have a certain value. However, they resolve this objection too, maintaining that the Popes went astray together with the others, following the general opinion about me, or were induced to do so by my good moral behavior and not by my knowledge; and that the emperor was prevailed upon by my studies of the past and my historical works, for in this field they do not deny me some knowledge.

Furthermore, they said, another objection against them was my eloquence. This I do not acknowledge altogether, by God not. They pretend that it is a rather effective means of persuasion. It might be the task of a rhetor or an orator to speak oppositely in order to persuade for a purpose, but many people without knowledge had succeeded in persuading by mere phrases. Thus they attribute to luck what is a matter of art and bring forth the widespread proverb: “Much eloquence, little wisdom.”⁷ They do not take into account Cato’s definition of the orator, which contradicts their false charge. Finally, it was said that the style of my writing is in opposition to their statement. They did not dare to blame my style, not even to praise it too reservedly, and confessed that it is rather elegant and well chosen but without any learning. I do not understand how this can be, and I trust they did not understand it either. If they regain control of themselves and think over again what they have said, they will be ashamed of their silly ineptitude. For if the first statement were true—which I for my

⁴Robert the Wise (1277–1343), King of Naples (1309–1343), sponsored Petrarch’s 1341 coronation as Poet Laureate in Rome.
⁵Urban V (r. 1362–1370)
⁶Charles IV (1316–1378), Holy Roman Emperor (1355–1378)
⁷Sallust, Catilina 5.4
part would neither assert nor make myself believe—I have no doubt that the second is wrong. How could the style of a person who knows nothing at all be excellent, since theirs amounts to nothing, though there is nothing they do not know? Do we so far suspect everything to be fortuitous that we leave no room for reason?

What else do you want? Or what do you believe? I think you expect to hear the verdict of the judges. Well, they examined each point. Then, fixing their eyes on I know not what god—for there is no god who wants iniquity, no god of envy or ignorance, which I might call the twofold cloud-shrouding truth—they pronounced this short final sentence: I am a good man without learning. Even if they have never spoken the truth and never shall speak it, may they have spoken it at least this once!

O bounteous, O saving Jesus, true God and true Giver of all learning and all intelligence, true “King of Glory” and “Lord of all powers of virtue,” I now pray to You on the knees of my soul: If You do not wish to grant me more, let it be my portion at least to be a good man. This I cannot be if I do not love You dearly and do not adore You piously. For this purpose I am born, not for learning. If learning happens to come along, it inflates, it tears down; it does not build up. It is a glittering shackle, a toilsome pursuit, and a resounding burden for the soul. You know, O Lord, before whom all my desires and all my sighs are expanded. Whenever I have made a sober use of learning, I have sought in it nothing but to become good. It was not that I was confident that learning can achieve this or that anyone can achieve it beside You, although Aristotle and many others have promised just this. I believed that the road on which I made my way would become more honorable and more clearly marked, and at the same time more pleasant with the aid of literary erudition, under the guidance of You and no one else. “You who looks into the hearts and reins,” You know that it is as I say. I never was such a youth, never eager for fame to such a degree—though I do not deny I coveted it occasionally—that I should not have wished to be good rather than learned. I desired to be both, I confess, since human longing is boundless and insatiable until it comes to rest in You, above Whom there is no place to which it could still rise.

I desired to be both good and learned. Now that the latter is wrenched from me or denied me, I am grateful to my judges for leaving me the better of the two, provided they have not lied on this point also and granted me what they are not, intending to rob me of what they wanted to have. I was to find a comfort for my loss, though an empty one. They dealt with me after the fashion of envious women. When a woman is asked whether the woman next door is beautiful, she says that she is good and has good and decent manners. All good

8Psalm 7:9
qualities—just such as are not true—she allows her, because she wants to spoil her of the single and perhaps even true title, beauty. But You, my God, “Lord of Learning,” “besides Whom there is no other god,” You Whom I must and will prefer to Aristotle and all the philosophers and poets and all those who “boastingly make many haughty words,”9 to learning and doctrines and to all things whatsoever. You can grant me the true name of a good man which these four grant me untruly. I pray to You, grant it to me. I do not ask so much for the good name which Solomon prefers to “precious ointments”;10 I ask for the thing itself. I want to be good, to love You, and to deserve to be loved by You—for no one repays his lovers like You—to think of You, to be obedient to You, to set my hope in You, and to speak of You. “Let all that is obsolete shrink back from my mouth; let all my thoughts be prepared unto You.” For it is true: “The bow of the mighty man has been overcome and the weak have been girded with strength.”11 Happier by far is one of these feeble ones who believe in You than Plato, Aristotle, Varro, and Cicero, who with all their knowledge did not know You. “Brought before You and put next to You Who are the Rock, their judges are overthrown and their learned ignorance has become manifest.”

Therefore, let learning be the portion of those who take it away from me, or since it cannot be their portion, unless I am mistaken, let it be the portion of those who may have it. Let them keep their exorbitant opinion of everything that regards them, and the naked name Aristotle which delights many ignorant people by its four syllables. Moreover, let them have the vain joy and the unfounded elation which is so near to ruin; in short, let them have all the profit people who are ignorant and puffed up earn from their errors in vague and easy credulity. My portion shall be humility and ignorance, knowledge of my own weakness, and contempt for nothing except the world and myself and the insolence of those who are condemning me, and, furthermore, distrust in myself and hope in You. Finally, may God be my portion and what they do not envy me, illiterate virtue. They will burst into loud laughter when they hear this and will say that I speak piously without learning like any old women. People of their kind, tumid as they are with the fever of literary erudition, know nothing so vile as piety; truly and soberly literate men love it above all things. For them it is written: “Piety is wisdom.” However, my talking will confirm the others more and more in their opinion that I am “a good man without learning.”

What shall we say now, my most faithful Donato? I speak to you, since the sting of their grudge has wounded you more than myself, whom it actually stung. What shall we do, my friend? Shall we appeal to fairer judges or shall we keep silent and confirm their decision by our silence? I prefer the latter course.

9 Ecclesiastes 7:1
10 Ecclesiastes 7:1
11 I Samuel 2:4
I want you to know that I do not in the least refuse to await the tenth day. This very moment I acquiesce in the verdict of any judge whomsoever. I implore you and everyone whom it may concern, all you who have passed a quite different sentence on me, to hold your hands up as I do and let their verdict become right by patiently accepting it. I wish it were right on the point they concede me. Willingly I confess and freely I declare their verdict is right in what they deprive me of, though I emphatically deny that they are the right judges. Perhaps they will seek support in the law of which their god Aristotle speaks when he says: “Everybody judges well of what he knows and is a good judge in that matter; it would not seem likely that anything can be better known than that in which he that judges abounds.” Under such a pretext the most ignorant men would be best able to judge of ignorance. But it is not so.

It is the wise man who is entitled to judge of ignorance as well as of wisdom and of anything whatsoever—wise, of course, he must be in the specific matter of which he is judging. Not as musicians judge of music and grammarians of grammar do the ignorant judge of ignorance. There are things of which it is extreme destitution to have plenty. Such things are better judged by anyone else than by him who is most affluent in them. None understands less of deformity than the deformed, who has become intimate with it and does not see what must offend the eye of the beautiful. The same is true with all other defects. Nobody judges worse of ignorance than the ignorant. This I do not say because I intend to reject the court but because I want those who are ignorant to be ashamed of having pronounced a verdict—provided they can be ashamed. As for the rest, I accept the sentence in this matter, not only the verdict of friendly envy, but just as readily that of hatred.

To sum up: Whoever calls me ignorant shares my own opinion. Sorrowfully and tacitly I recognize my ignorance, when I consider how much I lack of what my mind in its craving for knowledge is sighing for. But until the end of the present exile has come and terminated this our imperfection by which “we know in part,” I console myself with the consideration that this belongs to our common nature. I suppose it happens to all good and modest minds that they learn to know themselves and then find just this same consolation. It will certainly happen even to those who have obtained a vast knowledge—vast according to the character of human knowledge, which in itself is always trifling small and becomes vast only when we take into account in what straits it is conceived and compare it with the knowledge of others. How infinitely small, I beseech you, is the greatest amount of knowledge granted to one single mind! Indeed, what a man knows, whosoever he may be, is nothing when compared—I will not say with God’s knowledge—but with his own ignorance. The very men who know most and understand most possess, I presume, in the highest degree this
knowledge of themselves and of their own imperfection, this knowledge which I have called their consolation. My judges are happy in their errors; they do not need such a consolation. They are happy, I say, not in their knowledge, but in their error and arrogant ignorance. They believe they lack nothing of having angelic knowledge, while without doubt much of human knowledge is lacking to everyone, and too many it is entirely lacking....

I come back to my censors, of whom I have said so much already and must say more now; for I want nothing to remain hidden from you. I should not like to be called silly and stupid after having been called illiterate. Learning is an adventitious ornament; reason an inborn part of man. I should not be so much ashamed of lacking erudition as of lacking reason. I had enough reason to have avoided their snares. It would not have been so easy for them to catch me by their tricks. I was trapped in my own purity and caught in the most decent veil of friendship, which I believed to be true. It is but too easy to deceive one who is confiding in you.

I have told you before and now repeat it: Like many other citizens of that very beautiful and very great city, they used to come and see me, very often two at a time, occasionally also all four of them together. I was delighted and received them as though they were angels of God. I forgot everything besides them, since they occupied my mind entirely, cheering me up wonderfully. Without delay we started long and various talks, as is the custom among friends. I paid no attention to what I said or how I said it. I had nothing else in mind than to show a joyful face and a still more joyful heart at the arrival of such guests. At times it was joy that forced me to keep silent; at times it was also a kind of reverence which told me not to block their strong desire to speak by interrupting them, as happens in such cases, and from joy I said either nothing or mere commonplaces. I have not been taught to dress up or dissemble or feign anything in the company of friends. I am wont to carry my mind on my tongue and face and never to speak to friends in any other way than I would to myself. “Nothing is more pleasant,” as Cicero says.

Why ought we to display ostentatiously our eloquence or our learning before friends who see our hearts, our affection, and our entire personality, provided they do not question us with the intention of putting us to the test but of learning from us? In the latter case no ostentation or embellishment is needed but a trustful sharing of knowledge and all other things, free from reserve and envy. I therefore often wonder why so great a prince as the Emperor Augustus could take so much pains with trifles, amid such concern for important matters, that he never said a word without thorough deliberation and frequently preferred to address in written form, not only the people and the Senate, but even his wife and friends. Perhaps he did so in order to avoid letting slip by chance from
his mouth a superfluous or foolish word for which his heavenly speech could be denounced or criticized. He may have been justified in so acting when from the highest peak he was addressing his subjects in written form, in oracles as it were. I prefer a casual way of talking with friends and no elaborate sentences. Goodbye to eloquence if it must be obtained with such constant effort! I had rather not be eloquent than always on my guard and pedantic. This was always my intention when with dear friends and intimates, especially when they were familiar with my powers.

Lately I have practiced it more than ever in the company of these four friends, and in my friendly faith I inadvertently fell into the trap of hostile calumny. I said nothing that was carefully polished, nothing that was anxiously prepared. Whatever came to my mind sprang from my mouth before it even got there. They trapped me according to a pre-concerted plan and tested every single word of mine, taking whatever I said as if I had nothing better to say and could not say it more elegantly. This they did once and again and again, until they found themselves easily confirmed in a sentence they wished to be true. Nothing is easier than to persuade people who want to be persuaded and already believe. This made them speak to me all the more confidently as to an ignorant fellow and to laugh at my ignorance, as I now believe. At the time I did not suspect it in the least. As I took no precautions and was but a single man, I was entangled by the artifices of many and herded into the crowd of the ignorant without being aware of it.

They used to raise an Aristotelian problem or a question concerning animals. Then I was either silent or made a joke or began another subject. Sometimes I smiled and asked how on earth Aristotle could have known something for which there is no reason and which cannot be proved by experience. They were amazed and felt angry at me in silence. They looked at me as though I were a blasphemer to require anything beyond his authority in order to believe it. Thus we clearly ceased to be philosophers and eager lovers of wisdom and became Aristotelians, or, more correctly, Pythagoreans. They revived the ridiculous habit of allowing no further question if “he” had said so. “He,” as Cicero tells us, “was Pythagoras.” I certainly believe that Aristotle was a great man who knew much, but he was human and could well be ignorant of some things, even of a great many things.

I should say more if those who are as much friends of truth as they are of sects permitted. By God, I am convinced and I have no doubt that “he went astray,” as the saying goes, “the whole length of the way,” not only in what is of little weight, where an error is unimportant and by no means dangerous, but in matters of the greatest consequence, and precisely in those regarding supreme salvation. Of happiness he has indeed said a good deal in the beginning
and at the end of his *Ethics*. However, I will dare to say—and my censors may shout as loud as they please—he knew so absolutely nothing of true happiness that any pious old woman, any faithful fisherman, shepherd or peasant is—I will not say more subtle but happier in recognizing it. I am therefore all the more astonished that some of our Latin authors have so much admired that Aristotelian treatise as to consider it almost a crime to speak of happiness after him and that they have borne witness of this even in writing.

It may perhaps be daring to say so, but it is true, unless I am mistaken: It seems to me that he saw of happiness as much as the night owl does of the sun, namely, its light and rays and not the sun itself. For Aristotle did not establish happiness within its own boundaries and did not found it on solid ground, as a high building ought to be founded, but far away in foreign territory on a trembling site, and consequently did not comprehend two things, or, if he did, ignored them. These are the two things without which there can be absolutely no happiness: Faith and Immortality. I already regret saying that he did not comprehend them or ignored them. For I ought to have said only one of the two phrases. Faith and immortality were not yet comprehended: he did not know of them, nor could he know of them or hope for them. The true light had not yet begun to shine, which lights every man who comes into this world. He and all the others fancied what they wished and what by his very nature every man wishes and whose opposite no one can wish: a happiness of which they sang as one sings of the absent beloved, and which they adorned with words. They did not see it. Like people made happy by a dram, they rejoiced in an absolute nothing. In fact, they were miserable and to be roused to their misery by the thunder of approaching death, to see with open eyes what that happiness really is like, with which they had dealt in their dreams.

Some may believe that I have said all this out of my own imagination and therefore but too frivolously. Let them then read Augustine’s thirteenth book on the Trinity. There they will find many weighty and acute discussions on this subject against those philosophers who—I use his words:—“shaped their happy lives for themselves, just as it pleased each of them.” This, I confess, I have said often before, and I will say it as long as I can speak, because I am confident that I have spoken the truth and shall speak it in the future, too. If they consider it a sacrilege, they may accuse me of violating religion, but then they must accuse Jerome too, “who does not care what Aristotle but what Christ said.” I, on the contrary, should not doubt that it is they who are impious and sacrilegious if they have a different opinion. God may take my life and whatever I love most dearly before I change this pious, true, and saving conviction or disown Christ from love of Aristotle.

12John 1:9
Let them certainly be philosophers and Aristotelians, though they are neither, but let them be both: I do not envy them these brilliant names of which they boast, and even that wrongly. In return they ought not to envy me the humble and true name of Christian and Catholic. But why do I ask for this? I know they are willing to comply with this demand quite spontaneously and will do what I ask. Such things they do not envy us; they spurn them as simple and contemptible, inadequate for their genius and unworthy of it. We accept in humble faith the secrets of nature and the mysteries of God, which are higher still; they attempt to seize them in haughty arrogance. They do not manage to reach them, not even to approach them; but in their insanity they believe that they have reached them and strike heaven with their fists. They feel just as if they had it in their grip, satisfied with their own opinion and rejoicing in their error. They are not held back from their insanity—I will not say by the impossibility of such an attempt, as is expressed in the words of the Apostle to the Romans: “Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor?” Not even by the ecclesiastical and heavenly counsel: “Seek not what is above you and search not out things above your strength; the things that God has commanded to you, think thereupon always and be not inquisitive in His many works; for it is not necessary for you to behold what is hidden.” Of all this I will not speak: indiscriminately they despise whatever they know has been said from Heaven—yea, let me say, what is actually true—whatever has been said from a Catholic point of view. However, there is at least a witty word not ineptly said by Democritus: “No one looks at what is before his feet,” he said; “it is the regions of the sky they scrutinize.” And there are very clever remarks Cicero made to ridicule frivolous disputants who are heedlessly arguing and arguing about nothing, “as if they just came from the council of the gods” and had seen with their eyes what was going on there. And, finally, there are Homer’s more ancient and sharper words, by which Jupiter deters in grave sentences not a mortal man, not any one of the common crowd of the gods, but Juno, his wife and sister, the queen of the gods, from daring to investigate his intimate secret or presumptuously believing it could be known to her at all.

But let us return to Aristotle. His brilliance has stunned many bleary and weak eyes and made many a man fall into the ditches of error. I know, Aristotle has declared himself for the rule of one, as Homer had done before him. For Homer says thus, as far as it has been translated for us into our prose: “Multidominion is not good; let one be the lord, one the supreme commander”; and Aristotle says: “Plurality of rule is not good; let therefore one be the ruler.” Homer meant human rulership, Aristotle divine dominion; Homer was speaking of the principate of the Greek, the other of that of all men; Homer made

13Romans 11:34
Agamemnon the Atride king and ruler, Aristotle God—so far had the dazzling brightness of truth brought light to his mind. He did not know who this king is, I believe, nor did he know how great He is. He discussed the most trifling things with so much curiosity and did not see this one and greatest of things, which many illiterate people have seen, not by another light, but because it shed a very different illumination. If these friends of mine do not see that this is the case, I see that they are altogether blind and bereft of eyesight; and I should not hesitate to believe that it must be visible to all who have sound eyes, just as it can be seen that the emerald is green, the snow white, and the raven black.

Our Aristotelians will bear my audacity in a more balanced mood when I say that this is not merely my opinion of a single man, though I mention him alone. However ignorant I am, I do read, and I thought I understood something, before these people discovered my ignorance. I say, I do read; but in my more flourishing years I read even more assiduously. I still read the works of poets and philosophers, particularly those of Cicero, with whose genius and style I have been particularly delighted since my early youth. I find much eloquence in them and the greatest elegance and power of words. What he says regarding the gods themselves, on whose nature he has published books under this title, and religion in general, sounds to me all the more like an empty fable the more eloquently it is presented. I thank God in silence that He gave me sluggish and moderate gifts and a mind that does not saunter wantonly and “does not seek things above itself,” not curious in scrutinizing what is difficult to investigate and pestiferous when discovered. I am grateful that I love Christ all the more and become all the firmer in the faith in Him, the more I hear sneering at His faith. My experience has been like that of one who has been rather lukewarm in his love for his father and hears people now raise their voice against him. Then the love which seemed to be lulled to sleep flames up immediately; and this must necessarily happen if the son is a true and genuine son. Often, I call Christ Himself to witness, blasphemies uttered by heretics have turned me from a Christian into a most ardent Christian. For while the ancient pagans may tell many fables about their gods, they do not, at any rate, blaspheme; they have no notion of the true God; they have not heard of Christ’s name—and faith results from hearing. The voices of the Apostles were heard all over the earth, and their words spread unto the end of the world; but, when their words and doctrines were resounding all over the globe, these men were already dead and buried. Thus they are to be pitied rather than culpable. Then envious soil had obstructed their ears, through which they might have drunk in the saving faith.

Of all the writings of Cicero, those from which I often received the most powerful inspiration are the three books which, as I said before, he entitled On the Nature of the Gods. There the great genius speaks of the gods and often
ridicules and despises them—not too seriously, it is true. It may be that he was afraid of capital punishment, which even the Apostles feared, before the Holy Ghost came to them. He ridicules them with very effective jokes, of which he has always so many at hand, to make it clear to everyone who understands how he feels with regard to what he has undertaken to discuss. When I read these passages, I often have compassion for his fate and grieve in silent sorrow that this man did not know the true God. He died only a few years before the birth of Christ. Death had closed his eyes when, alas, the end of the error-stricken night and darkness, the first rise of truth, the dawn of true light and the sun of justice were so near. In the countless books he wrote, Cicero, indeed, often falls short and speaks of “gods,” engulfed by the torrent of vulgar error, as I said before; but at least he ridicules them, and even in his youth, when he wrote his book *About Invention*, he said that “those who have devoted their energies to philosophy do not believe there are gods.” Now it is a fact that it is true and supreme philosophy to know God, not “the gods”—always provided that such knowledge is accompanied by piety and faithful worship.

When the same Cicero in his later years, in the books he wrote *About the Gods*—not about God—gains control of himself, how is he lifted up by the wings of genius! At times you would think you were hearing not a pagan philosopher but an Apostle. Thus he says, for instance in the first book, opposing Velleius, who is defending the doctrine of Epicurus: “You have censured those who beheld the world and its limbs: heaven, earth, the seas, and their insignia—the sun, the moon, and the stars—and found out how the seasons bring about maturation, alteration, and all kind of vicissitudes, and who thereupon began to suspect from the magnificent and wonderful works produced that there is some excellent and outstanding nature that makes, moves, rules, and governs all this.”…

His argument can be summed up more or less in this way: he puts before us almost all heavenly and earthly things, the spheres of heaven and the stars, the stability and fertility of the earth, the usefulness of the sea and the streams, the variety of the seasons and the winds, herbs, plants, and trees and animate beings, the wonderful nature of birds, quadrupeds, and fishes, the manifold advantages derived from all these things, like food, handicraft, transportation, remedies against illness, hunting and fowling, architecture and navigation, and innumerable arts—and all this devised either by ingenious minds or by nature. Furthermore, he points out the miraculously coherent structure and disposition of body, sense and limbs, and finally reason and sedulous activity. Everything he displays with great care and eloquence. I wonder whether any writer ever treated these matters with greater heed and keener insight. And all this he does merely to lead us to this conclusion: whatever we behold with our eyes or perceive with
our intellect is made by God for the well-being of man and governed by divine providence and counsel. And even when he descends to individuals, when he mentions, if I am right, fourteen outstanding Roman leaders, Cicero adds: “We must believe that without the aid of God none of them was the man he was,” and soon afterward: “Without divine inspiration no one was ever a great man.” And by inspiration a pious man can doubtless understand nothing but the Holy Ghost. Therefore, not to speak of his eloquence, which was unequaled among men, what would any Catholic author change in this sentence?

What shall we conclude from all this? Shall I count Cicero among Catholics? I wish I could. Were I but allowed to do so, if He who gave him such gifts had but permitted him also to know Himself, as He granted permission to seek Him! Though the true God does not need our praise and mortal speech, we should now have hymns to the glory of God in our churches that would not be more true and holy, I presume—for this can neither be nor is it to be hoped for—but perhaps more melodious and more resounding.

However, far be it from me to espouse the genius of a single man in its totality because of one or two well-formulated phrases. Philosophers must not be judged from isolated words but from their uninterrupted coherence and consistency. This I have learned from Cicero himself and from inborn reason. Who is so uncouth that he does not occasionally say a graceful word? But is that enough? Often one word hides for the moment much ignorance; often bright eyes and fair hair veil ugly defects of the body. He who wants to be safe in praising the entire man must see, examine, and estimate the entire man. It happens that, side by side with what is pleasing, something else is hidden that offends as much or even more. Thus Cicero himself returns to his “gods” to the point of nausea, in the very same book in which he has discussed many subjects most seriously and in a manner very closely resembling piety. He gives an account of the names and qualities of each of these gods, no longer intent on dealing with the providence of “God” but with that of “the gods.” Listen, please, what he puts in: “We must venerate and worship these gods,” he says, “and the best and at the same time the most chaste form of worshiping the gods, that which is overflowing with piety, is adoring them with unabatedly pure, unpolluted, and uncorrupted mind and voice.”

Alas, my dear Cicero, what did you say? So quickly have you forgotten the one God and yourself. Where did you leave that “outstanding Nature” and “that

---

A significant difference between medieval and Renaissance humanists was their approach to classical authors. Medieval humanists viewed them as timeless authorities and looked for the truths contained in their works, whereas Renaissance humanists saw them as fellow human beings with whom they wished to communicate, albeit across a wide gulf. This meant that Medievals often took passages out of context, while Renaissance humanists saw the context as crucial to their understanding of what the author was trying to say.
Divine Being of most outstanding mind”? Where is now “the God who is better than man,” and “the Maker of whatever cannot be made by human reason,” “the Maker of all that is in heaven, and of the everlasting order we behold?” Where did you leave “the Inmate of the heavenly and divine mansion,” moreover “the Ruler and Supervisor and, as it were, Architect of this huge work”? You have almost driven Him out of the starry mansion you had allotted Him in that beautiful confession by giving Him such mean and unworthy companions, though He disdains them and proclaims through the voice of a prophet: “See ye that I alone am, and there is no other god besides me.” Who are these new, these recent and infamous gods whom you try to smuggle into the house of the Lord? Are they not those of whom another prophet says: “All gods of the nations are demons; it is the Lord who makes the heavens.” Just now you spoke of that Maker and Creator of the heavens and all things, pleasing with good reason the ears and heart of a pious hearer. Thus quickly you group Him with rebellious creatures and impure spirits. With one word you tear down whatever you seemed to say wisely and soberly….

If I have said all this of my Cicero, whom I admire in many ways, what do you expect me to say of others? Many men have written many things in a subtle manner, some even in grave, pleasant, and eloquent form. But they have blended some false, dangerous, and ridiculous things with their words, as if they were mixing poison with honey. A discussion of all this would take too much time and is not to the point here. Not in every case should I have the excuse Cicero had: not everyone is so alluring; and, though their subjects may also be sublime, they have not all his sweetness of speech. It happens often that one and the same song sounds pleasant or annoying according to the different persons who sing it, and a different voice produces the same song very differently….

But let me now at last, though late enough, return to where I started. For I have been driven off my course by the chain of related subjects. In this whole field Aristotle must be most carefully avoided, not because he committed more errors, but because he has more authority and more followers.

Forced by truth or by shame, they will perhaps confess that Aristotle did not see enough of divine and eternal things, since they are far removed from pure intellect. However, they will contend that he did foresee whatever is human and temporal. Thus we come back to what Macrobius says when he is disputing against this philosopher either jokingly or in earnest. “It seems to me that there was nothing this great man could not know.” Just the opposite seems to me true. I would not admit that any man had knowledge of all things through human study. This is why I am torn to pieces, and though envy has another root; this is what is claimed to be the reason: I do not adore Aristotle.

But I have another whom to adore. He does not promise me empty and frivolous conjectures of deceitful things which are of use for nothing and not
supported by any foundation. He promises me the knowledge of Himself. When He grants this to me, it will appear superfluous to busy myself with other things that are created by Him—one will see that it is easy to grasp them and, consequently, ridiculous to investigate them. It is He in whom I can trust, whom I must adore; it is He whom my judges ought to worship piously. If they did, they would know that philosophers have told many lies—those I mean who are philosophers by name, for true philosophers are wont to say nothing but what is true. However, to their number Aristotle does not belong, nor even Plato, of whom our Latin philosophers have said that “he came nearer to truth than any one of the entire set of ancient philosophers.”

These friends of ours, I have already said, are so captivated by their love of the mere name “Aristotle” that they call it a sacrilege to pronounce any opinion that differs from his on any matter. From this position they derive their crucial argument for my ignorance, namely, that I said something of virtue—I do not know what—otherwise than he did and did not say it in a sufficiently Aristotelian manner. It is very possible that I said something not merely different but even contradictory. I should not necessarily have said it badly, for I am “not bound to swear to the words of any master,” as Horace says of himself. It is possible, too, that I said the same thing he said, though in other words, and that these friends of mine who judge of everything without understanding everything, had the impression that I said something else. The majority of the ignorant lot clings to words, as the shipwrecked do to a wooden plank, and believe that a matter cannot be better said and cannot be phrased otherwise: so great is the destitution of their intellect or of their speech, by which conceptions are expressed. I must confess, I have not too much delight in that man’s style, as we have it; though I have learned from Greek witnesses and from Cicero’s authority, long before I was condemned by the verdict of ignorance, that it is sweet and rich and ornate in his own tongue. It is due either to the rudeness or to the envious disposition of his interpreters that his style has come down to us so harsh and shabby. It cannot fully please our ears and does not stick to our memory. For this reason it is occasionally more agreeable for the hearer and more convenient for the speaker to express Aristotle’s mind not in the words he used but in one’s own.

Moreover, I do not dissemble what I have said very often to friends and must now write down here. I am well aware of the great danger threatening my fame and of the great new charge of ignorance brought against me. Nevertheless, I will write it down and will not fear the judgment of men: Let all hear me who are Aristotelians anywhere. You know how easily they will spit at the lonely

15 Philosophy = phil + sophia = love of wisdom. “True philosophy,” then, is the love of true wisdom, i.e., the love of God.
stranger, this tiny little booklet; they are a lot prone to insult. But for this the little book may take care itself. Let it look for a linen cloth to wipe itself clean; I shall be content if they do not spit at me. Let all the Aristotelians hear, I say, and since Greece is deaf to our tongue, let all those hear whom all Italy harbors and France and contentious Paris with its noisy Straw Lane.  

I have read all Aristotle’s moral books if I am not mistaken. Some of them I have also heard commented on. I seemed to understand something of them before this huge ignorance was detected. Sometimes I have perhaps become more learned through them when I went home, but not better, not so good as I ought to be; and I often complained to myself, occasionally to others too, that by no facts was the promise fulfilled which the philosopher makes at the beginning of the first book of his *Ethics*, namely, that “we learn this part of philosophy not with the purpose of gaining knowledge but of becoming better.” I see virtue, and all that is peculiar to vice as well as to virtue, egregiously defined and distinguished by him and treated with penetrating insight. When I learn all this, I know a little bit more than I knew before, but mind and will remain the same as they were, and I myself remain the same. It is one thing to know, another to love; one thing to understand, another to will. He teaches what virtue is, I do not deny that; but his lesson lacks the words that sting and set afire and urge toward love of virtue and hatred of vice or, at any rate, does not have enough of such power. He who looks for that will find it in our Latin writers, especially in Cicero and Seneca, and, what may be astonishing to hear, in Horace, a poet somewhat rough in style but most pleasing in his maxims.  

However, what is the use of knowing what virtue is if it is not loved when known? What is the use of knowing sin if it is not abhorred when it is known? If the will is bad, it can, by God, drive the lazy wavering mind toward the worse side, when the rigidity of virtue and the alluring ease of vice become apparent. Nor ought we to be astonished. Aristotle was a man who ridiculed Socrates, the father of this kind of philosophy, calling him—to use his own words—“a peddler in morals, and despised him” if we believe Cicero, “though Socrates despised him no less.”  

No wonder that he is slow in rousing the mind and lifting it up to virtue. However, everyone who has become thoroughly familiar with our Latin authors knows that they stamp and drive deep into the heart the sharpest and most ardent stings of speech, by which the lazy are startled, the ailing are kindled, and the sleepy aroused, the sick healed, and the prostrate raised, and those who stick to the ground lifted up to the highest thoughts and to honest desire. Then earthly things become vile; the aspect of vice stirs up

---

16 Most classrooms of the University of Paris were located on Straw Lane.  
17 This remark is chronologically difficult; Socrates died in 399 BC and Aristotle was not born until 384. Perhaps Petrarch meant Plato.
an enormous hatred of vicious life; virtue and “the shape, and as it were, the
face of honesty,” are beheld by the inmost eye “and inspire miraculous love”
of wisdom and of themselves, “as Plato says.” I know but too well that all this
cannot be achieved outside the doctrine of Christ and without His help: no one
can become wise and good who has not drunk a large draught—not from the
fabulous spring of Pegasus in the folds of Mount Parnassus—but from the true
and unique source which has its origin in heaven, the source of the water that
springs up in eternal life. Those who drink from it no longer thirst. 18 However,
much is achieved also by the authors of whom I have just spoken. They are a
great help to those who are making their way to this goal.

This is what many a man has thought of many of their writings, and
Augustine professes such an opinion, explicitly naming Cicero’s Hortensius, in
grateful remembrance of what he experienced while reading it. 19 For though
our ultimate goal does not lie in virtue, where the philosophers locate it, it is
through the virtues that the direct way leads to the place where it does lie; and
these virtues, I must add, must be not merely known but loved. Therefore, the
true moral philosophers and useful teachers of the virtues are those whose first
and last intention is to make hearer and reader good, those who do not merely
teach what virtue and vice are and hammer into our ears the brilliant name
of the one and the grim name of the other but sow into our hearts love of the
best and eager desire for it and at the same time hatred of the worst and how
to flee it. It is safer to strive for a good and pious will than for a capable and
clear intellect. The object of the will, as it pleases the wise, is to be good; that
of the intellect is truth. It is better to will the good than to know the truth.
The first is never without merit; the latter can often be polluted with crime and
then admits no excuse. Therefore, those are far wrong who consume their time
in learning to know virtue instead of acquiring it, and, in a still higher degree,
those whose time is spent in learning to know God instead of loving Him. In
this life it is impossible to know God in His fullness; piously and ardently to love
Him is possible. This love is a blessing at all times whatsoever; this knowledge
sometimes makes us miserable—as does that knowledge the demons have, who
tremble below in hell before Him they have learned to know. Things that are
absolutely unknown are not loved; but, for those to whom more is not granted,
it is sufficient to know God and virtue so far as to know that He is the most
lucid, the most fragrant, the most delectable, the inexhaustible source of all
that is good, from which, through which, and in which we are as good as we
are, and to know that virtue is the best thing next to God Himself. When we
know this, we shall love Him for His sake with our heart and marrows, and

18John 4:14
19Augustine, Confessions, VIII.17
virtue we shall love for His sake too. We shall revere Him as the unique author of life, virtue we shall cultivate as its foremost adornment.

Since this is the case, it is perhaps not reprehensible, as my judges think, to trust our own philosophers, although they are not Greek, particularly in matters of virtue. If following them, and perhaps my own judgment too, I said something, even if Aristotle has said it otherwise or said something different, I hope not to lose my good reputation before fairer judges. Well known is the Aristotelian habit, as it is expressed by Chalcidius in Plato’s *Timaeus*: “In a manner peculiar to him he picks out from a complete and perfect dogma what appears to him to be right and neglects the rest in disdainful lack of interest.” I may therefore have said that he disdained to treat or neglected some matters or perhaps did not think of them. I may really have said so; it is not incompatible with human nature, though, if we follow our friends, that it does not agree with the fame of the great man—provided I said something of the kind—for I do not remember well what it was, and these men assail me with accusations that are not all too sincere and not definite enough and make use of suspicions and murmured hints instead. Is this, then, a sufficient reason for plunging me so deep into the floods of ignorance and charging me with every error, because I was mistaken on one single point—on a point on which I was perhaps not even wrong while they were? Must I be condemned as always in error and knowing nothing whatever?

Here someone might say: What does all this mean? Do you snarl at Aristotle too? At Aristotle not in the least but in behalf of the truth which I love though I do not know it. I snarl at the stupid Aristotelians, who day by day in every single word they speak do not cease to hammer into the heads of others Aristotle whom they know by name only. He himself, I suppose, and their audience will at last become sick and tired of it. For recklessly these people distort his words into a wrong sense, even those which are right. Nobody loves and respects illustrious men more than I. To genuine philosophers and particularly to true theologians I apply what Ovid says: “Whenever poets were present, I believed gods were there in person.” I would not say all this of Aristotle if I did not know him to be a very great man. He was a very great man, I know, but, as I have said, he was human. I know that much can be learned from his books, but I am convinced that outside of them much can be learned also; and I do not doubt that some men knew a great deal before Aristotle wrote, before he studied, before he was born. I will mention only Homer, Hesiodus, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Diogenes, Solon, and Socrates, and the prince of philosophy, Plato.

And who, they will say, has assigned this principate to Plato? I answer, not I, but truth, as is said—that truth which he saw and to which he came nearer than all the others, though he did not comprehend it. Moreover, there are many authorities who assign this highest rank to him: first of all Cicero and Virgil—who
does not mention his name, it is true, but was a follower of his—then Pliny and Plotinus, Apuleius and Macrobius, Porphyry and Censorinus, Josephus, and among our Christian authors Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome, and many others still. This could easily be proved if it were not known to everybody.

And who has not assigned this principate to him except the crazy and clamorous set of Scholastics? That Averroes prefers Aristotle to all others comes from the fact that he undertook to comment upon his works and made them, as it were, his own property. These works deserve much praise, but the man who praises them is suspect. For it comes back to the old adage: “Every tradesman praises his own merchandise.” There are people who do not dare to write anything of their own. Eager to write, they become interpreters of the works of others. Like those who have no notion of architecture, they make it their profession to whitewash walls. They attempt to obtain the praise they cannot hope to acquire by themselves, not even with the help of others, unless they praise above everyone else those authors and their books—the objects of their efforts—in an excited and at the same time immoderate tone and always with great exaggeration. There are a great many people who comment upon the works of others—or, should I say, devastate them?—especially nowadays. More than any other work, the Book of Sentences would bear witness to such devastation in a clear and complaining voice if it could speak: it has been the victim of thousands of such craftsmen. And was there ever a commentator who did not praise the work he had adopted as though it were his own, or even more profusely than he would have extolled his own, since it is a token of refined manners to praise the work of another, while it betrays vanity and haughtiness to praise one’s own product?

Let me omit those who chose entire books: one of them, or the most prominent of them, is Averroes. It is well known what Macrobius, an eminent commentator, but an eminent writer too, added at the end of his commentary, in which it was his purpose to interpret not even all the books of Cicero’s Republic but only a part of one of them: “I must indeed declare,” he says, “that there is nothing more perfect than this work: it contains the whole philosophy in its complete and perfect state.” Imagine, now, he spoke not of a part of a book but of all the books of all philosophers. Even with more words he could not have said more, for to a complete and perfect state only superfluous things can be added. Can therefore more than this complete perfection be contained in all the books that ever have been or will be written by philosophers—always provided that even all books taken together could ever contain or will contain this perfection and that something is not missing in the first of them just as it will be missing in the very last?

---

20 Peter Lombard’s major work, *Four Books of Sentences*, served as the standard theological textbook in the Middle Ages.
So much for this matter. I know—as I have said before—that I am striking the hard rock of fame in not only mentioning such great philosophers but attempting to compare them with one another. The ignorance laid to my charge and never rejected will excuse my style, for ignorance is in the habit of making people bold and loquacious. Orators are usually kept in check by the fear of losing their reputation or seeing it belittled. Of such fear I am relived by the verdict of my friends. What should I still fear? What I have lost cannot be lost a second time and can no longer be diminished. However I appraise it, it will amount to just what my friends figure it in their decision, or perhaps to a little bit more: nothing can be less than nothing.

Having reached this point under the impulse of whatever kind of inspiration it may be, I shall at last try to find my way out as well as I can. I shall say what I remember having answered often enough to great men who asked me. If the question is raised, “Who was the greater and more brilliant man, Plato or Aristotle?” my ignorance is not so great—though my friends attribute to me so much of it—that I should dare to pronounce a hasty judgment. We ought to keep our judgment under control and ponder it scrupulously even in matters of minor importance. Moreover, it does not slip from my memory how often a great dispute has broken out among learned men about learned men, for instance, about Cicero and Demosthenes, or the same Cicero and Virgil, about Virgil and Homer, or Sallustius and Thucydides; finally about Plato and his schoolfriend Xenophon, and many others. In all these cases an inquiry is difficult to make and an appraisal would be questionable. Who will then sit in court and pass a judgment in the case Plato versus Aristotle? However, if the question is asked, “Which of the two is more praised?” I would state without hesitation that in my opinion the difference between them is like that between two persons of whom one is praised by princes and nobles, the other by the entire mass of common people. Plato is praised by the greater men, Aristotle by the bigger crowd; and both deserve to be praised by great men as well as by many, even by all men. Both have come as far in natural and human matters as one can advance with the aid of mortal genius and study. In divine matters Plato and the Platonists rose higher, though none of them could reach the goal he aimed at. But, as I have said, Plato came nearer to it. No Christian and particularly no faithful reader of Augustine’s books will hesitate to confirm this, nor do the Greeks deny it, however ignorant of letters they are in our time; in the footsteps of their forebears they call Plato “divine” and Aristotle “demonious.”

On the other hand, I know quite well how strongly Aristotle has the habit of disputing against Plato in his books. Let him look to it, how honestly he does so and how remote from suspicion of envy he is. It is true that in some passage he asserts that “Plato is his friend, but truth his better friend still,” but
at the same time he ought to take to himself particularly the saying: “It is easy to quarrel with a dead man.” Moreover, many very great men took up the defense of Plato after his death, especially on account of his Ideas, against which this eminently passionate disputant exerted every nerve of his genius so powerfully. Best known and very effective is the defense made by Augustine. I should believe that a pious reader will agree with him no less than with Aristotle or Plato.

Here I should like to insert only a word to refute the error of my judges and whoever agrees with them. It is their habit to form an opinion following closely the footsteps of the vulgar mass and insolently and ignorantly as well claiming that Aristotle wrote much. Not that they are wrong in saying this. There is no doubt that he wrote much, even more than they think; for there are some works which the Latin language does not possess as yet. However, they assert that Plato, whom they hate, whom they do not know, and whom they dislike, did not write anything except one or two small little books. This they would not say if they were as learned as they declare me to be unlearned. I am not versed in letters and am no Greek. Nevertheless, I have sixteen or more of Plato’s books at home, of which I do not know whether they have ever heard the names. They will be amazed when they hear this. If they do not believe it, let them come and see. My library, which I left in your hand, is not illiterate, though it is the library of an illiterate man. It is not unknown to them. When they were testing me, they often set foot in it. Let them enter it now and test Plato, whether he, too, is famous without letters. They will find that it is as I say and will confess that I may be ignorant but am no liar, I expect. These most literate men will see not only several Greek writings of his but also some which are translated into Latin, all of which they have never seen elsewhere. They are free to judge of their value; of their number they will not dare to judge otherwise than I say and will not dispute it, however litigious they are. And how small a portion of Plato is this? I have seen many other works of his with my own eyes, especially in the hands of Barlaam the Calabrian, that modern example of Greek wisdom, who once began to teach me Greek. Though I am ignorant of Latin learning, and would perhaps have made me make good progress if death had not enviously bereaved me of him, thus obstructing the honest beginnings as is its custom.

Much too vagrantly am I rambling along at the heels of my ignorance, much too much am I indulging my mind and my pen. It is time to return. These and similar reasons brought me before the friendly and nevertheless unfair court of my friends—a strange combination of attributes! As far as I understand, none has so much weight as the fact that, though I am a sinner, I certainly am a Christian. It is true, I might well hear the reproach once launched at Jerome, as he himself reports: “You lie, you are a Ciceronian. For where your treasure
is, there is your heart also.”²¹ Then I shall answer: My incorruptible treasure and the superior part of my soul is with Christ; but, because of the frailties and burdens of mortal life, which are not only difficult to bear but difficult merely to enumerate, I cannot, I confess, lift up, however ardently I should wish, the inferior parts of my soul, in which the irascible and concupiscible appetites are located, and cannot make them cease to cling to earth. I call upon Christ as witness and invoke Him: He alone knows how often I have tried again and again, sadly and indignantly and with the greatest effort, to drag them up from the ground and how much I suffer because I have not succeeded. Christ will perhaps have compassion on me and lend me a helping hand in the sound attempt of my frail soul, which is weighed down and depressed by the mass of its sins.

In the meantime I do not deny that I am given to vain and injurious cares. But among these I do not count Cicero. I know that he has never done me harm; often has he brought me benefit. Nobody will be astonished to hear this from me, when he hears Augustine assert that he has had a similar experience. I remember discussing this a little while ago and even more explicitly. Therefore, I shall now be content with this simple statement: I do not deny that I am delighted with Cicero’s genius and eloquence, seeing that even Jerome—to omit countless others—was so fascinated by him that he could not free his own style from that of Cicero, not even under the pressure of the terrible vision and of the insults of Rufinus. It always retained a Ciceronian flavor. He feels this himself, and in one place he apologizes for it.

Cicero, read with a pious and modest attitude, did no harm to him or to anybody else at any time. He was profitable to everybody, so far as eloquence is concerned, to many others as regards living. This is especially true in Augustine’s case, as I have already said. Augustine filled his pockets and his lap with the gold and silver of the Egyptians when he was about to depart from Egypt. Destined to be the great fighter for the Church, the great champion of Faith, he girded his loins with the weapons of the enemy, long before he went into battle. When such weapons are in question, especially when eloquence is concerned, I confess, I admire Cicero as much or even more than all whoever wrote a line in any nation. However, much as I admire him, I do not imitate him. I rather try to do the contrary, since I do not want to be too much of an imitator of anybody and am afraid of becoming what I do not approve in others.

If to admire Cicero means to be a Ciceronian, I am a Ciceronian. I admire him so much that I wonder at people who do not admire him. This may appear a new confession of my ignorance, but this is how I feel, such is my amazement. However, when we come to think or speak of religion, that is, of supreme truth and true happiness, and of eternal salvation, then I am certainly not a Ciceronian,

²¹Matthew 6:21; Luke 12:34
or a Platonist, but a Christian. I even feel sure that Cicero himself would have been a Christian if he had been able to see Christ and to comprehend His doctrine. Of Plato, Augustine does not in the least doubt that he would have become a Christian if he had come to life again in Augustine’s time or had foreseen the future while he lived. Augustine relates also that in his time most of the Platonists had become Christians and he himself can be supposed to belong to their number. If this fundament stands, in what way is Ciceronian eloquence opposed to the Christian dogma? Or how is it harmful to consult Cicero’s writings, if reading the books of heretics does no harm, nay, is profitable, according to the words of the Apostle: “There must be heresies that they which are approved may be made manifest to you.” Besides, any pious Catholic, however unlearned he may be, will find much more credit with me in this respect than Plato or Cicero.

These, then, are the more valid arguments for our ignorance. By God, I am so glad they are true that I wish them to become more true every day. Indeed, I agree perfectly with what certain eminent men have said—that these arrogant and ignorant people will charge any philosopher, however famous, and even their god Aristotle, with being rude and ignorant, as soon as they hear that one of them has come to life again and has become a Christian. In their arrogant ignorance they will look down on the same man to whom they before looked up in reverence, as if he had forgotten what he had learned just because he had turned away from the beclouded and loquacious ignorance of this world to the wisdom of God the Father: so rare is truth and so much is it hated. “Victorinus” was reputed to be such a brilliant man that he “deserved and got a statue in the Roman Forum,” while he was still teaching rhetoric. I have no doubt that as soon as he professed Christ and the true Faith with clear and saving voice, he was considered dull and downright delirious by those arrogant demon-worshipers whom he feared so much to offend that, as Augustine reports in his Confessions, he delayed his conversion for quite a while. Just the same I suspect Augustine did himself. I suspect it all the more, because he was a more brilliant figure and his conversion was more conspicuous. The enemies of Christ and His Church were the more exasperated and grieved the more propitious and gratifying it was for the faithful when he resigned his chair of rhetoric in Milan—as he mentions in his same Confessions—grasped the heavenly wisdom under the guidance of Ambrose, that most faithful and holy herald of truth, and, ceasing to be a commentator of Cicero, was about to become a preacher of Christ.

Here let me tell what I once heard said of him, for I want you to understand how grave, how pestiferous, how deeply rooted this disease is. It happened that I once quoted some maxim of Augustine’s to a man with a great name, and he took a deep breath and said, “What a pity that a genius like him was so deeply entangled in empty fables!”
I replied, “How miserable are you to say such a thing; most miserable if you really believe it.”

But he smiled and retorted: “On the contrary, it is you who are stupid, if you believe what you say, though I hope better for you.” What else might he hope for me than that I should silently agree with him in his contempt of piety?

By all faith in God and men, in the judgment of such people nobody can be a man of letters unless he is also a heretic and a madman besides being impertinent and impudent, a two-legged animal disputing about four-legged animals and beasts everywhere in the streets and squares of every city. No wonder my friends declare me not only ignorant but mad, since they doubtless belong to that sort of people who despise piety without regard to the attitude in which it is practiced and take diffidence to be a religious habit. They believe that a man has no great intellect and is hardly learned unless he dares to raise his voice against God and to dispute against the Catholic Faith, silent before Aristotle alone. The more boldly a man ventures to attack Faith—for he will not be able to seize this fortress by the power of intelligence or by violence—the more these men think him highly gifted and learned. The more faithful and pious he proves to be when defending Faith, the more he is supposed to be slow of perception and unlearned, the more he is suspected of using Faith as a veil to cover and mask himself, in consciousness of his ignorance. They act just as if the old fables they tell were not inconsistent and shaky and their silly talk empty and void; as if there could be had certain knowledge of ambiguous and unknown matters and not merely vague, loose, and uncertain opinions; as if knowledge of the true Faith were not the highest, most certain, and ultimately most beatifying of all knowledge. If one deserts it, all other knowledge is not a path but a road with a dead end, not a goal but a disaster, not knowledge but error. However, these friends of our have a strange mentality and a peculiar way of forming their judgments. I am not sure whether the two philosophers of whom I have just now spoken, or others like them, would—I will not say: “have begun to displease the Jews, whom they had pleased all the while before,” as Jerome tells us in his interpretation of Paul’s *Epistle to the Galatians*, but appear to these, our friends, just as raving mad as Paul appeared to the Pharisees and priests, since he had become a lamb instead of a wolf, an Apostle of Christ instead of a persecutor of the Christian name.

Therefore, it can be a comfort to me to be charged with ignorance. Even were I charged with madness, it would be a comfort—since such great men are my companions. And it is a comfort to me: sometimes I am even delighted in my heart and happy to be accused, for honorable reasons, not only of ignorance, but even of madness…. 