

DESIDERIUS ERASMUS

He was unconventional in one respect: his pacifism or near-pacifism, an opinion that war is the besetting vice of monarchical government, largely because ambitious courtiers seeking their own advantage promote aggressive policies through which the ruler will win glory and increase his power, territory, and wealth.

Erasmus hoped that proper indoctrination of future rulers in moral philosophy and the principles of Christian life would safeguard them from such foolish and destructive policies and would convince them that the true path to glory is not military victory and territorial expansion but rather is to encourage justice and promote the happiness and prosperity of the people whom a prince already rules. He warns the prince not to undertake the risks and waste of blood and treasure involved in warfare, and to avoid dynastic marriages that will create future territorial claims and so breed future wars. Inevitably, any prince will be tempted and constantly urged by flatterers intent on their own advantage to seek military glory and territorial gain by wars of conquest. He warns any prince that wars breed future wars, and that any ruler contemplating war must apply reason to calculate the true cost of the war, including not merely the expenditure on military preparations but also the anxieties, uncertainties, and dangers involved. A special cost of war is the need to hire and pamper mercenary soldiers, a class whom Erasmus despised and described as “a barbarian rabble, made up of all the worst scoundrels.”



He contended that the traditional concept of the just war, though approved by St. Augustine and most later theologians, is specious, for any ruler who wants to start a war will find a way to convince himself that his cause is just. The first and most undeserving victims of such a ruler's decision will be his own people: “a prince cannot revenge himself on his enemy without first opening hostilities against his own subjects” (CWE 27:285), who will be taxed by their own government, plundered and abused by their own troops as well as by the enemy, and forced to bear the loss of husbands and sons as well as widowhood, mourning, and impoverishment.

He warns against the malign influence of national stereotypes by which other nationalities are slandered, whereas in reality the foolish national labels that divide Christians are less important than the name of Christ that should unite all who claim his name

He was generally opposed to war under almost any circumstances, especially to war between people who called themselves Christians and then ignored Christ's call to peace and brotherhood. His hatred of war and scorn for the mercenary riffraff who composed the armies of his time appears frequently in his vast correspondence and was already a major theme in one of his earliest publications

He was a pacifist.

Erasmus' initial position on human nature had been fundamentally optimistic, in the sense that humans, having free will, can be directed toward moral virtue and piety if they receive the proper education, though he always added that this movement toward righteousness required the assistance of grace. This optimistic assumption underlies all of his tracts on education, where the shaping of moral integrity and learning to avoid or control temptations were the dominant concerns.

Like most educated contemporaries, he assumed that the masses of people, those without property or some established trade, were not qualified to share political power and that “the mob,” easily misled by false prophets, was potentially a danger to social order and internal peace

He accepted monarchy as the best and most natural form of government. He did think that a king ought to be expected to consult with the magnates and people of his country, though he expressed no opinion on just how this vague idea should be carried out in real life.

He was suspicious or even hostile toward philosophers

Erasmus had expressed hostility to the traditional scholastic theology based on questions, disputations, and reliance on Aristotle.

Religion must be experienced inwardly rather than in formal ceremonies and must be expressed in daily living rather than in dogmas and liturgies

The only suggestion he could make for safeguarding the people from a corrupt and tyrannical ruler was that the heir to the throne should receive a good education, concentrated especially on moral philosophy and including indoctrination in the principles of a genuine Christian faith. A future ruler's education should aim to make him eager to use power for the welfare of the people rather than for personal self-aggrandizement. Erasmus knew enough about court life to be aware that any ruler or royal heir would be constantly surrounded by men and women who would curry favor by encouraging the ruler to put the general interest of society out of mind and to pursue policies and pleasures that would permit them to influence royal policy in ways suited to their own social and economic advancement

He was apolitical.

The philosophers and sages of pre-Christian antiquity may indeed be good and worthy of study, but they are far inferior to Christ or any saintly Christian

His view of human nature is often described as dualistic, and this is seen as a Platonic influence. Certainly he was no materialist; he valued the spiritual side of human experience more highly than the corporeal and constantly reiterated this judgment. In the *Enchiridion*, which is regularly described as the work where Platonic influence is strongest, he endorses a dualism between a godlike soul and a physical body similar to the body of any animal. In the *Timaeus*, he says, Plato describes a two-part soul, one part being immortal and divine, the other being subject to various disorders such as pain, fear, anger, lust, love, passion, and desire for pleasure. True happiness in life consists in repressing these disorders and letting the highest part of the soul, reason, rule as king over the mortal part, especially the digestive and sexual appetites, the parts most likely to rebel against reason. Reason, the part closest to God, can be overthrown by passion and the other weaknesses, but it cannot itself be corrupted. But after expounding what he views as a Platonic account of human nature, Erasmus suggests a different concept, the opinion that man is divided into three parts, not just two. This tripartite conception of human nature comes from the patristic theologian Origen, whose works Erasmus had recently discovered and had embraced with great enthusiasm. In Thessalonians, Paul refers to body, soul, and mind. From this and other biblical passages, Origen concluded “with good reason” that there are three parts in man: first the body or the flesh, the lowest part, in which after the sin of Adam the law of sin is rooted, leading us to evil deeds and hence to the Devil; second, the spirit, the highest part, which is modeled on God's own nature, by which we are drawn to God and made one with him; and “a third and middle soul between the other two, which is capable of sensations and natural movements”. Thus the human being is divided, for the middle part or soul is drawn both to the spirit, through which it can become spiritual, and to the desires of the body or the flesh. If a person yields to the desires of the bodily or fleshly part, the total person degenerates into body. In an early work like the *Enchiridion*, written long before he faced the challenge from Martin Luther, the human being through his will is free to choose whichever side he wishes

Both Erasmus and Martin Luther believed that the question of free will—that is, whether people can freely make choices or only have the illusion that they can—was beyond the very limited capacity of human reason, a question insoluble by any of the known schools of philosophy.

He asserted in his defense against the papal bull of excommunication (directed against Martin Luther) that contrary to the opinion of scholastic theologians, the human will after Adam's sin was so disordered that it was unfree, unable through its own power to make even the slightest positive response to God's saving grace, unable to do anything that was not a sin.