



*Detail of an effigy of Leonardo Bruni from his tomb  
in the church of Santa Croce, Florence. The portrait was carved*

# *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*

## Selected Texts

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## *The New Philosophy*

### 1: Introduction

*Humanist Moral Philosophy*      *cfr. 201 ff.*

It is nowadays widely understood that the achievement of the humanist movement was not that it “revived learning,” as used to be said in the eighteenth century. Learning (which until recently always meant knowledge of classical antiquity) had already been revived by the clerical culture of the medieval universities and monastic orders; indeed, in some disciplines, especially philosophy, law, and medicine, the scholastic contribution to the revival of learning was far greater than the humanistic. The special mark of the humanist movement was its new attitude to the heritage of classical antiquity. Medieval thinkers had been content to preserve the shattered fragments of antiquity, incorporating what bits they found useful into their own schemes of education and of culture. The humanists attempted, with varying degrees of success, to reassemble the pieces, and to rebuild in its wholeness the cultural life of the ancient world. They wanted to speak the way the ancients spoke, to live the way they lived, to think the way they thought. They borrowed their literary genres, their artistic techniques and principles, and (they thought) their musical forms. And finally, reaching back beyond medieval Catholicism, they tried to recreate the Christianity of the primitive Church—a movement of which the Protestant revolution was but a part.

If then we want to understand the special nature of moral philosophy as conceived by the Italian humanists, it is clear that we must first understand the nature of moral philosophy as it was practiced in antiquity, and the place it occupied in the classical ideal of culture. Though it would be more correct to say "ideals" of culture. For in the ancient world there existed side by side, usually as rivals though sometimes as allies, two distinct ideas of what it meant to be a cultivated man. We may call these the ideal of the philosopher and the ideal of the orator. The philosopher made his appearance towards the end of the fifth century B.C. in the person of Socrates, and the philosophic life he led was imitated and finally institutionalized by Plato in the Academy, and by others in the other philosophical schools begun in the centuries following. The aim of the philosophic life was the discovery of truth through the correct exercise of the rational faculties, and the attainment of wisdom (including moral excellence) through "care of the soul." Though part at least of Plato's original purpose was to train men for political life by nourishing them on abstract truth, as antiquity went on the philosophic life tended more and more to be a strictly contemplative ideal. This was never true of the ideal of the orator which was given its characteristic form by Isocrates at the beginning of the fourth century B.C., and transmitted to the Roman world and to later times by Cicero. From its stronghold in the Greek and Roman educational system, it spread its doctrine of the ideal orator as a man possessed of a wide and humane culture, high moral principles, and dedication to public service, who would, by the power of his eloquence and the force of his example, move those around him to virtue and political wisdom. As Cicero put it (quoting Cato), he was the "vir bonus dicendi peritus," "the good man skilled in speaking."

The study of moral philosophy occupied quite different positions within these two cultural programs. As one of the three main branches of philosophy, it obviously was at the center of a philosophical education, sharing its place with natural philosophy and logic. This was not the case with the education of the orator. Here, the central place was held by the science of effective speech, or rhetoric; philosophy, along with poetry, history, and the other humane studies, was at the periphery, forming part of the orator's general culture, supplying him with matter for his oratory and occupation for his leisure moments. The influence of rhetoric penetrated everywhere: it tended to rob philosophy of its speculative and dialectical character, and made it instead a field for didacticism and the display of rhetorical ability. Opposing sides of a philosophical question were handled in much the same way as opposing sides of a lawsuit, and too often with much the same indifference to the "weaker thesis" and the "stronger thesis." The concern was more to achieve the best and most effective expression of the arguments for and against

a given philosophical position, than to find out whether that position was true. Moreover, the emphasis on rhetoric brought about a reorientation of the several parts of philosophy. Rhetorical treatment of philosophy ruled out excessively technical discussion and placed a premium on the manipulation of emotions. As a result, moral philosophy reigned supreme, logic was almost ignored, and natural philosophy cultivated only insofar as it affected moral or religious questions.<sup>1</sup>

When, after the lapse of centuries, the Italian humanists tried to revive the ancient way of doing philosophy, it was the second of these two ideals of culture, the rhetorical, that they chose for their model. The reasons for this choice are complex, and cannot be discussed here. But however we account for it, it helps at once to explain why the humanists treated philosophy in the way they did, a way at once so different from medieval philosophical discourse and from that of our own day. In imitation of the ancient rhetorical tradition and especially of Cicero, their philosophical interests were largely confined to moral philosophy. Again, instead of considering it one branch of an independent discipline of philosophy, the humanists thought of moral philosophy as part of a general literary culture called the *studia humanitatis*, a culture which also included grammar, rhetoric, history, and poetry.<sup>2</sup> A work of moral philosophy was for this reason a work of literature as well, to be written in good classical Latin prose in one of the accepted ancient genres: dialogue, treatise or letter. Its purpose was didactic and rhetorical; it set out to teach true moral doctrine and encourage virtue. And its content—its doctrines, and the terms and categories of its discourse—was derived chiefly from the doctrines of the four main philosophical schools of antiquity, the Peripatetics, the Academics, the Stoics, and the Epicureans.

### The Isagogue of Moral Philosophy

In all these respects the *Isagogue of Moral Philosophy* here translated is a typical humanist production. Its form is ancient, a dialogue of the type known as the "Aristotelian expository dialogue," so called because the author, speaking in his own voice, expounds a subject in a series of long speeches. (This as opposed to the "dramatic" form used by Plato in the Socratic dialogues, in which a definition is sought by the dialectical method of question and answer.)<sup>3</sup> The language is classical Latin, and the philosophical vocabulary derived from Cicero; indeed, many whole sentences are hardly more than Cicero rephrased. The content, too, comes from classical sources. The discussion of the ancient schools is mostly drawn from Cicero's dialogue *On the Ultimate Purposes of Good and Evil Acts* (*De finibus bonorum et malorum*). The discussion of the virtues and vices is condensed from Aristotle's *Nicomachean*

*Ethics*, which Bruni had translated some years before. Even the purpose of the dialogue may be called classical, for Bruni doubtless saw himself as continuing, in this work as in his translations, Cicero's great plan of making Greek philosophy available in Latin.<sup>4</sup>

But there were differences as well between Bruni's outlook and that of his Roman master. Because Bruni thought of himself as a Peripatetic, a follower of Aristotle, he was not able to accept Cicero's own philosophical position, Academic skepticism.<sup>5</sup> Nor does he accept Cicero's refutation of the Epicurean position on the Highest Good, preferring instead to emphasize its essential agreement with the Stoic and Peripatetic positions.<sup>6</sup>

Even with Aristotle, his declared *auctor*, Bruni is not entirely in agreement. Though here he conceals his disagreement through reinterpretation, whether purposely or because he misunderstood Aristotle it is difficult to say. The most obvious difference from Aristotle in the *Isagogue* is Bruni's statement that "God sees each particular by means of a pure intuition," a doctrine which has more in common with the God of St. Thomas Aquinas than with Aristotle's Unmoved Mover who knows only himself. A less obvious departure from Aristotle is Bruni's description of the active and contemplative lives. For Aristotle, the chief good, and hence the chief happiness of man, could only be achieved in the contemplative life which he conceived of as a life of reflection on the truths of metaphysics, mathematics, and (possibly) natural philosophy.<sup>7</sup> The active life of politics and human affairs could be happy only "in a secondary degree."<sup>8</sup> But for Bruni, this distinction between the *bios theoretikos* and the *bios praktikos* was overlaid with other and similar distinctions. One was the Roman gentleman's division of time into periods of leisure (*otium*) devoted to literature and philosophy, and business (*negotium*), devoted mainly to politics. In Cicero, we find the latter clearly preferred to the former; indeed, Cicero goes so far as to say that he undertook the literary and philosophical works of his leisure as but another means of serving the state—as a *pis aller* for political activity. This sentiment Bruni applauds.<sup>9</sup> The other layer of meaning which became attached to the distinction between the active and contemplative lives was the Catholic doctrine that the monastic life of contemplative prayer was the highest of human vocations, which in turn implied a devaluation of secular activities. This was not a view Bruni welcomed, partly no doubt because of his disrespect for the monastic communities of his day, and partly because of his general belief in the value of public and familial life.<sup>10</sup> His attitudes toward the Roman and Catholic notions of the active and contemplative life probably contributed to his misinterpretation of Aristotle's position on this point, and encouraged his tendency to place the active and contemplative lives on the same level. Aristotle, he says elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> believed that happiness (*felicitas*)

was possible in the active as well as in the contemplative life; and Aristotle's advocacy of the contemplative life was more a matter of his own preference than of doctrine. Moreover, the active life was the proper life of man (*propria vita hominis*); the contemplative life we exercise not as men, but as "something divine and separate" (*divinum aliquid ac separatum*).<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that Bruni himself preferred the active life; indeed, he several times repeats that his own preference was for the contemplative.<sup>13</sup> His concern is rather to vindicate the moral dignity of civic and family life in a civilization in which it had for centuries been common to regard government as "robbery on a grand scale," and marriage as an institution for the intemperate.

It is plain that the *Isagogue* is of no importance as a work of philosophy, being, indeed, hardly more than a pastiche of Cicero and Aristotle. It was of course very influential in its own day as we can see from its large diffusion in manuscript form and later in printed editions,<sup>14</sup> but this is not why it interests us. For us as historians it is an interesting text because it shows us something of what the humanist movement meant for the history of philosophy. We see a man studying a Greek philosopher not in translations, or translations of translations, but in the philosopher's own tongue. We see an interpretation based not on the works of Arabic commentators, but on Cicero and other ancient sources. We see Aristotle treated not as "The Philosopher" whose philosophy was coextensive with the discipline of philosophy, but as a man with certain philosophical convictions—a man of high authority, to be sure, but still only one philosopher among others. And finally, and perhaps most significantly for the history of philosophy, we see the philosophy of Aristotle used not to arrive at a philosophical understanding of the Christian faith, nor yet again to establish proofs of Christianity for the converting of the heathen, but as a source of secular wisdom, the knowledge of which would enable men to "be good and practice virtue."

### Bruni and Aristotle

It used to be said, and one can still find it said in certain textbooks and popular histories today, that the Middle Ages were an Age of Aristotle and the Renaissance an Age of Plato. We know nowadays that this is not so; the last forty years of scholarship have taught us how important Platonism, and, especially through the influence of St. Augustine, Neoplatonism, were for the formation of medieval thought; strong Platonic influences have been discerned even in the thought of the supposed arch-Aristotelian Thomas Aquinas.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, during the Renaissance the study and influence of Aristotle were of such extent that that age might with perfect justice be styled

(if such generalizations had any value) an Age of Aristotle. For it was the works of Aristotle that continued to inspire by far the greater portion of philosophical literature; it was Aristotle who continued to be the staple of scholastic education and the backbone of scholastic theology. Aristotle's influence during the Renaissance spread from the great medieval centers of Paris, Oxford, and Germany into Italy and especially into the Veneto; it was there in the great Aristotelian school at Padua that much of the pioneering work was done which led to the development of modern science. Nor was it only in the scholastic tradition that one can find a lively and creative Aristotelianism. Among the humanists, too, there existed an important group that took Aristotle for its *auctor*, a group including such leading figures as Bruni, George of Trebizond, George Scholarios, Theodore Gaza, Ermolao Barbaro, Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, and Melanchthon.<sup>16</sup>

The Aristotle of the humanists, of course, was not the scholastic Aristotle. It was Aristotle the logician, Aristotle the metaphysician, and, especially in our period, Aristotle the scientist, who chiefly interested the scholastics. The humanist Aristotelians, on the other hand, looked to Aristotle primarily as an educator, an authority on rhetoric and poetics, and a moral philosopher. They believed they could discern in his extant writings a fountain of eloquence, and this led them to replace the old, barbarous, literal translations of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with new humanistic ones of their own. Their distaste for medieval commentaries generated an interest in the ancient Greek commentators, and these too were translated into Latin by the end of the fifteenth century.

Bruni was the first and in some ways the most characteristic member of this tradition of humanistic Aristotelianism. Yet it appears he did not become a follower of Aristotle until late in his life. In the early years of the century, when he was still under the influence of Petrarch, Salutati, and Chrysoloras,<sup>17</sup> it was Plato who chiefly commanded Bruni's allegiance. Near the end of 1403, he writes to Niccolò Niccoli:

If ever I [shall] finish [Plato's] works and translate them into Latin the way I want to, you, my dear Niccoli, will despise everything you have ever read before when you compare it with the majesty of this man. He possesses the greatest elegance, an elevated manner of debate, and subtlety as well. His sentiments, divine and fruitful, are expressed with a marvelous pleasantness on the part of the interlocutors, and with an incredible command of language.<sup>18</sup>

Bruni avows in his preface to the *Gorgias* (1410) Plato's usefulness "for confirming the true Faith," and even goes on to say, "on moral matters, so sound and healthy are his teachings that whenever I read his works, I could sup-

pose myself hearing Peter and Paul handing down the precepts of life."<sup>19</sup> So convinced was he of Plato's value that he undertook to translate him into Latin, and actually completed, before 1411, translations of the *Phaedo*, the *Letters*, the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Gorgias*.<sup>20</sup>

It may have been his reading of the *Gorgias* that first tempered Bruni's enthusiasm for Plato, as it was to do that of George of Trebizond a decade later.<sup>21</sup> In the *Gorgias*, Plato makes Socrates condemn rhetoric as a "kind of knack" that does nothing but "pander to the multitude" (462a-463a). It is significant that Bruni in his translation weakens this harsh judgment of Socrates.<sup>22</sup> With more certainty we can point to his condemnation in our present text of certain doctrines of Book V of the *Republic*. "The heresies men leave are hated most," and the tones of the convert are perhaps recognizable in Bruni's horror at Plato's doctrine of the community of women and of goods, and **his contempt for Plato's method of exposition**, which he regarded as too **obscure and disorderly to be of use** in education. Years later, when asked to undertake a new translation of the *Republic*, Bruni refused on the ground that it contained many things "abhorrent to our mores" which it would be better for Plato's sake to hush up.<sup>23</sup>

For whatever reasons, by the third decade of the century, when he was already over 50 years old, Bruni abandoned Plato to become a follower of Aristotle.<sup>24</sup> If we go on to ask, why Aristotle? how could a humanist like Bruni be attracted to the great authority of scholasticism? we have both positive and negative evidence to consider. First, we should remember that the humanists, like Samuel Johnson, were inclined to think "the newest and most original things are generally said on the wrong side of the question." Bruni himself remarks in the *Isagogue* that by his time the "common herd of philosophers" had all been weeded out, leaving only the best to choose from. For a humanist, then, to do philosophy meant to follow one of the ancient schools of philosophy, and there were only a limited number of schools available. We have already seen some of the reasons why Bruni did not like Plato; there were strong reasons as well for his rejection of the Skeptics, the Epicureans, and the Stoics. Skepticism, though it enjoyed the support of Cicero himself,<sup>25</sup> did not attract Bruni who was an orthodox Catholic and an admirer of St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>26</sup> Then, too, he had confidence, a bit naive philosophically, in the certitude of human knowledge, which he expressed in the letter to Quirini (see Section VI.4). To the Epicureans Bruni was forced by the demands of rhetoric to be kinder than he was wont, when in the *Isagogue* he tried to show the Epicurean position on the highest good was for practical purposes the same as the Stoic and the Peripatetic. But once freed from these constraints of argument, as in the letter to Cambiatore (Mehus V:2), his attitude was no different from that of most other

men of his day. The "pure and perfect pleasures" of the *Isagogue* turn into "obscene pleasures," and the life of virtue seeking philosophic peace becomes a life of improvident debauchery. From Diogenes Laertius, Bruni would have learned still more of Epicurus, and the latter's doctrines of materialism and the mortality of the soul, and his hostility to politics, learning, eloquence, and the family, were not calculated to convert Bruni into a hog from Epicurus' herd. The Stoics, though in much better odor in the Quattrocento, Bruni dismissed as too narrow and harsh; the Stoic Wise Man, emptied of passions, removed from political broils, who refused to consider possessions or even bodily health as goods, was hardly a figure to appeal to Bruni.

With Aristotle, however, circumstances were different. Aristotle's philosophy to a large extent reflects, and at the same time rationalizes, the values of fourth-century Athenian aristocrats, values in many ways similar to those held by the upper classes in fifteenth-century Florence. As Bruni realized, Aristotle more than anyone could provide a solid intellectual basis for a lay city-state culture. He held sensible views on the importance of wealth and the family, and on the value of literary culture and intellectual life. His view of the State as a natural institution that existed to serve ends that were good in themselves, was a useful counterpoise to the dominant Stoic-Augustinian view of the State as an artificial, arbitrary, but necessary policeman of corrupt human nature. His approval of the mixed constitution seemed to endorse Florence's own republican institutions.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, his ideas were ideally set out from a pedagogical point of view, and best of all, they were well-nigh overflowing with that golden river of eloquence of which Cicero had spoken.

It is clear, then, that Aristotle could be made over from a scholastic to a humanistic *auctor*; that he would be was the task Bruni set himself in the *Life of Aristotle*.

### The Life of Aristotle

The *Life of Aristotle* is a remarkable piece of historical writing, far superior to the medieval *Vita latina* and the brief life in the compilation of Walter Burley, and in some respects technically superior even to his ancient biographers.<sup>28</sup> It is based on a wide range of sources, chiefly Diogenes Laertius and the medieval *Vita latina*, but also makes use of Cicero, Pliny, Aulus Gellius, St. Augustine, apocryphal Byzantine letter collections, Plutarch, the Attic orators, and of course, Aristotle's own works. With Plutarch and Suetonius as his guides, Bruni easily surpasses Aristotle's medieval biographers; for the first time Aristotle is portrayed as a whole man: his character, his interests, his social connections, the sources of his income, even his appearance

and dress. An effort is made to place him in his historical context by discussing his relations with Alexander and Philip of Macedon, with the citizens of Athens and Stagira, with Demosthenes, Plato, and his own disciples.

Formally, Bruni's debt is to Suetonius and Diogenes, rather than to Plutarch; that is to say, he arranges his matter *per species* rather than chronologically. As in Suetonius, there is a brief description of his ancestors, then a short chronological overview of his life, followed by a treatment of his activities and characteristics under various heads, and an account of his death. Passages such as that on p. 285 ("Now that we have completed our quick lap . . .") and on p. 288 ("Let this suffice . . ."), which announce the formal *divisio* of the work, show clearly Suetonius' influence.<sup>29</sup> Diogenes' influence is felt as well: the statement on p. 288 that it is more important to deal with a philosopher's teaching than with his life (which oddly undercuts the stated purpose of the work in the dedication) is taken straight from Diogenes.<sup>30</sup> But instead of following Diogenes' usual dull practice of listing the philosopher's most noted sayings at length, Bruni chooses instead to discuss Aristotle's teaching by a *comparatio* with Plato, and an *invectiva* against those who had denied Aristotle's eloquence.<sup>31</sup> This may be regarded as an innovation of Bruni's own in the formal structure of philosophical biography. The catalogue of works at the end also modifies Diogenes' practice.

But there are other innovations more important still. Where Bruni goes beyond his ancient models and the better medieval biographies such as Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* is in his critical approach to his sources. It is here we find in embryo many of the techniques of later historical scholarship. His criticism of the story of Aristotle's "mad passion for a serving girl" and the tale of his suicide are two nice pieces of historical reasoning which take into account chronology, the character of the subjects, documentary evidence, and show a sense of the prejudices of his sources. A close though perhaps speculative reading of the will is used to reconstruct the extent of Aristotle's patrimony and household and the sources of his wealth, as well as to provide evidence about his character. Most important of all, Bruni revives the tradition, dormant in the biographical tradition since the time of Cicero, of Aristotle's eloquence and of his teaching of rhetoric, and supports his observation with a variety of authorities and argument.<sup>32</sup>

This last point reminds us that Bruni is writing not only history but also polemic, and that advances in historical technique, in the fifteenth century as in the twentieth, are frequently the children of controversy. If Aristotle is praised for his interest in literature and his ability to write beautiful prose and poetry, it is because that is a vital point for Bruni to establish if he is to defend his own, more literary, translations of Aristotle against the medieval versions he considered ignorant and barbarous. If attention is drawn to Aristo-

tle's wealth and the size of his household, it is because Bruni is eager to use the example of a great philosopher to justify the possession of riches to an age which still commonly regarded poverty as a virtue. If Aristotle is defended against the charges of lechery and suicide, if indeed the description of Aristotle's character at times approaches the hagiographic, it is because Bruni needed to defend his Aristotle against the attacks of contemporary humanist detractors of him.

The picture which at length emerges of Aristotle is thus different from those presented by his ancient and medieval biographers—if indeed we can describe the latter as biographies when they are often hardly more than collections of *dicta*. In Bruni we see depicted a man of good family, the son of a wealthy royal counselor, and an owner of landed estates with a large household, the friend of kings and the educator of princes. He is a man of prudence and high moral principles, dedicated to the service of his friends, his country, and the human race. He has a profound interest in literature and other branches of knowledge, and in moral philosophy. He is a follower of the contemplative life, but like Cicero his literary leisure is but another means of serving his country and his fellow man. He is, in fine, a model of all the humanists hoped to produce by their new ideal of education, an embodiment of *humanitas*.

#### A Letter to Lauro Quirini

The letter to Quirini is Bruni's last writing on ethics (1441). It is interesting because it allows us to see Bruni in the role of an expositor of Aristotle, it gives us Bruni's (rather predictable) position in the contemporary debate on the will and the intellect, and it reveals Bruni's latest thoughts on the relative merits of the active and contemplative lives.

The occasion of Bruni's letter was a missive he received from a young Venetian nobleman, Lauro Quirini (ca. 1420–ca. 1480), proposing a debate on four ethical questions.<sup>33</sup> Quirini was a recent graduate in *artibus* of the University of Padua, and had come to Florence in 1441 in the household of Cardinal Bessarion. He was a brash and self-confident young man, given to controversy,<sup>34</sup> and perhaps hoped to make a reputation by giant-killing. His first letter to Bruni wherein he proposed his four *quaestiones* seems to have been polite enough—at least he paid Bruni some compliments—but Bruni was offended<sup>35</sup> and replied (in the text here translated) rather coolly, and in the manner of a master correcting a schoolboy's mistakes. This prompted an *invektiva* from Quirini, to which Bruni replied curtly and with some asperity.<sup>36</sup> The upshot of the exchange was a clear victory for Leonardo, since, as Vespasiano da Bisticci remarks, Lauro lacked Bruni's eloquence

and literary power. When Cardinal Bessarion heard of his young protégé's discomfiture, he is supposed to have laughed and blamed Lauro for having ventured, young as he was, to attack Leonardo, "uomo di tanta autorità et riputatione."

Quirini was already known to the world as a partisan of Aristotle in the Plato-Aristotle controversy,<sup>37</sup> but his Aristotelianism cannot have been very orthodox, for he was obviously influenced by skeptical and voluntaristic trends in fourteenth-century scholastic philosophy. In the first and most important of the four questions, for instance, Quirini seems to have advanced a highly idiosyncratic interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of happiness, and then gone on to attack the same doctrine with a series of counterarguments that show the influence of late medieval Franciscan thought. He maintained (according to Bruni) the incorrect view that Aristotle thought happiness possible only in the contemplative life.<sup>38</sup> He was led into this error by an equally mistaken view that Aristotle's highest good for man (*to anthropinon agathon*) was rational activity, and was achieved solely in the contemplative life. He then turned round and attacked this doctrine *malè sumpta* with three counterarguments. The first is hard to reconstruct, but it was probably some sort of argument based on the transitoriness of human goods and the difficulty of their attainment, for it was buttressed by a quotation from Boethius (taken out of context), saying that the state of perfect happiness requires an aggregation of all goods.<sup>39</sup> The second argument is skeptical: human knowledge, the possession of which is the aim of the contemplative life, is scanty and uncertain; how then should it be for us the greatest source of happiness? In the last argument, Quirini shows his voluntarism: the highest human good should be attained by use of the highest power; the will is nobler than the intellect; therefore, the highest human good cannot be attained in the contemplative life, since its instrument is the intellect.

Bruni's reply reveals something of his virtues and limitations as an interpreter of Aristotle. He puts his finger at once on the error in Quirini's interpretation—the confusion of *operatio cum ratione* with *felicitas*—but seems to fall himself into another error, that of believing it is only in the active life ("properly speaking, human life") that one exercises the proper activity of man, rational activity. In Aristotle, of course, contemplation and action are both types of rational activity. Bruni then asserts that Boethius' *sententia* requiring an aggregation of all goods for happiness must have referred only to the active life. (In fact, it refers to the vulgar, as opposed to the philosophical, definition of happiness.) Quirini is therefore wrong to use it as an argument for the difficulty of attaining happiness in the contemplative life.

To Quirini's second argument Bruni opposes a philosophically rather naive

of will vs intellect

*argumentum per exempla*: do we dare say Augustine and Basil, Plato and Aristotle failed to achieve excellence (and hence happiness) in the contemplative life? Surely not. As Aristotle says, the power of reason in us is divine; our minds, moreover, partake of the Divine Mind. How shall we not then “have knowledge of almost an infinite number of things?” All it requires is effort on our part.

There are several points worth noting in this. First, in asserting that our minds partake of the Divine Mind, Bruni falls into what would seem to be a Neoplatonic reading of Aristotle—not for the first time.<sup>40</sup> Secondly, Bruni makes no attempt to reconcile his Aristotelianism with his Christian faith. For in saying that man is completely responsible, in this life at least, for his own happiness, that he can achieve his highest good in the contemplative life simply by hard study, Bruni is in effect advancing a kind of secular Pelagianism. Of happiness in the next life Bruni does not speak. Finally there is his tremendous confidence in human potential. The subject, as Bruni remarked, required an entire book. Bruni himself never wrote that book, but it is perhaps a sign of the underlying continuity of humanistic thought that the book was in the end written—by Pico della Mirandola.

Bruni answers Quirini’s final argument in the way one would expect of an orthodox Aristotelian: by a flat denial of the will’s superiority to the intellect. Quirini is wrong to argue the will’s superiority from its being “more common.”<sup>41</sup> It is true essences or powers in themselves are better for being “commoner,” but one must consider also their relations to other things; that is (to put it into the terminology of the Chain of Being), one must consider hierarchical position as well as plenitude in judging the nobility of powers and their objects.<sup>42</sup>

The rest of Quirini’s *quaestiones* are of lesser interest; in the last two, indeed, it is even difficult to discover from Bruni’s account what position Quirini took up. In the second question (whether virtue is a mean), Bruni corrects a misapprehension on Quirini’s part of the nature of the intellectual virtues, and rightly distinguishes in the case of the moral virtues between the axiological scale (where virtue is an extreme with respect to vice) and the ontological scale (where acts of virtue are means with respect to vicious acts). In the last two questions, which are entirely typical of ethical disputations of the period, Bruni satisfies himself with expounding Aristotle: virtues are produced by training and practice (that is, they are habits), and there is a connection between the moral virtues properly so-called.

Throughout this letter, as in the *Isagogue of Moral Philosophy*, the level of philosophical reasoning can hardly be called sophisticated. But the letter is important for us, not as an original work of philosophy, but as an historical document. It reinforces our view that Bruni tried to raise the dignity of the

active life without lowering that of the contemplative life. It exposes one of the great weaknesses of most humanist moral philosophy, its tendency to interpretative error owing to its ignorance of epistemology and metaphysics. *Philosophia est omnis inter se coniuncta*. Bruni could not have Platonized Aristotle had he read and understood the *Metaphysics* or the *De anima*. It was only later in the century that the union between the philological and historical knowledge of the humanists and the philosophical understanding of the schoolmen was achieved and bore its first fruits in the work of Marsilio Ficino.

## 2: An Isagogue of Moral Philosophy

For Galeotto Ricasoli

[TEXT: This translation is based upon the Latin text in *Schriften*, pp. 20–41, with the corrections noted in Bertalot, *Studien*, 2: 377–78.]

If, my dear Galeotto, we had the same concern for the Good Life as for the mere act of living, we should consider mad and pointless the nearly endless strivings which occupy men in their stupidity, and should flee and avoid them at all costs. But as it is, we generally make the mistake of living without a defined purpose, as though we were wandering about in the dark like blind men on whatever by-way chance should offer us instead of travelling safely and confidently along the beaten track. So, being scarcely able ourselves to say where our steps are taking us, we come to regret even having started out. Frustrated as much in attaining as in seeking our desire, we light on no solid object which is able to pacify our foolish human appetites. We do have a natural desire for the true good,<sup>1</sup> but it is confused and uncertain, and false beliefs cling to it like a fog, leading us astray, blinded and deceived. To counteract this blinding cloud which lies over the human race, we must seek help from philosophy. If it should deem us worthy and shine forth with its light, all those mists which throw us into confusion will evaporate, and the true and false ways of life will stand revealed.

Now of course I have not forgotten how devoted you have been to philosophy from your earliest years, but your devotion is to that branch of philosophy which deals with the investigation of nature.<sup>2</sup> Such



## 4: A Letter to Lauro Quirini

[TEXT: Mehus, IX:2=Luiso, IX:3; the latter gives the date of Florence, 1441.]

Leonardo to Lauro Quirini, greeting.

In your letter you credit me with much that I, being conscious of my failings, can neither accept nor agree to. Though the very name "philosopher," which you misapply to me, does in fact mean humility rather than arrogance, suggesting as it does the desire for, rather than the attainment of, learning. That is why Pythagoras of Samos, when other men used to call him wise, replied that he was not wise but a philosopher, a lover of wisdom.<sup>1</sup> A lover is someone burning bright with desire to obtain some thing. If *that* is what you mean, I agree; but if you mean it in the common and customary sense of the word, I do not.

Nonetheless, I have undertaken to answer the questions you raise, not to teach you, but to learn from you. You approach me with four controversies. The first concerns happiness (*felicitas*) which Aristotle, according to you, maintained was to be found in contemplation alone. But in your view, contemplation is incapable of producing in us this happiness. The second controversy is about the virtues, which Aristotle says are means; you seek to prove the opposite. Thirdly, you maintain the virtues arise from nature rather than habituation. Fourthly, you inquire whether a man who has one virtue has all of them, or whether they admit of separation.

I shall preserve your order, and try to give you my views on each of these questions.

As to the first, you would appear to be mistaken in what you say about happiness. It is necessary to distinguish between the proper activity of man (*proprium opus hominis*) and happiness. All men exercise the proper activity of man, but few or none have happiness. Aristotle says, "As builders and weavers each have some proper activity, so too ought man to have his."<sup>2</sup> If then we investigate the question according to Aristotle's method here, what will the proper activity of man be? Certainly not the act of living, for we have that in common with plants; nor again can it be sensation, for that is common also to the brute animals. The proper activity of man can therefore only consist in rational activity (*operatio cum ratione*). This rational activity you take to be contemplation and happiness, which is wrong; for on that view everyone would be happy. Every man, surely, possesses reason and acts with it, since he is a rational animal. So if you ask me what the proper activity of man is, I shall reply, "rational activity." If you ask what happiness is, however, I shall tell you that happiness is activity in accordance with

perfect virtue in a perfect life. All men have reason and act with it; very few possess perfect virtue. The proper activity of man and happiness are therefore not the same thing. So your exposition is incorrect and the contemplative life is *not* the proper life of man, but the active life. A man does not contemplate *qua* man, but rather *qua* something divine and separate.<sup>3</sup> Justice, temperance, fortitude, and the other moral virtues he exercises as a man. The life, then, of moral virtue is properly the life of man.

If you will examine the foregoing correctly, the first and strongest of your arguments has been answered. For the contemplative life, since it is not, properly speaking, human life, does not require riches or civil power or magnificence or similar things. So what Boethius says, that that state is perfect in which there is an aggregate of all goods,<sup>4</sup> seems to be said not of the contemplative life but of the active. For the civic life requires many [goods], and is blessed and happy only when it is brought to perfection by an aggregate of all goods. But the contemplative life is content with a few [goods] and despises that aggregation of external goods: for it, indeed, it is sufficient that it lack nothing it needs for contemplation.

So much for Boethius. You are not, though, doing the right thing by trying to refute Aristotle from the words of Boethius. In fact, you really ought to have done the opposite. For if Aristotle thinks contemplation alone suffices for the happy life, it is plain that Boethius' utterance, which requires an aggregate of all goods for virtue, does not follow.

Your second argument is from defect of knowledge. For if [you say] the contemplative man can have certitude of few things, what in the end does the happiness of knowing, of a sterile understanding of nature, amount to? What can a man know? Of what can we have certainty? Small indeed is the knowledge of men and it lasts but a little while. Such is the burden of your argument. You say it, surely, either to test my patience or because you do not correctly understand the principles of the discipline. We do not say that everyone who follows the contemplative life is happy, nor everyone who follows the active. But if it is asked whether the active and busy life is more suitable to happiness, or the life of leisure and contemplation, Aristotle teaches with many arguments that happiness is more often the fruit of this quiet, retired life—not that he would deprive the active life of happiness, but because he gives the preference to that other life as being more similar to the divine life. Who then obtains happiness in this contemplative life? Not everyone, to be sure, but the man who has wisdom, knowledge, understanding, and the other intellectual virtues, and having trained himself in them has formed a habit of them. This is the man who acts in contemplation according to perfect virtue. You, however, present me with a lot of ignorant dullards, instead of seeking out a great man blessed with wisdom.

But such men, you say, are rare. Quite so: excellent things are rare, but I put it to you that many men have been able to become so. Any man of large intelligence can become so if he truly and unfeignedly choose this kind of life, and if with unceasing toil he apply himself sincerely to research and reflection—though he needs as well longevity, health, and other favorable circumstances. Augustine, Basil and many others from among us [Christians] have followed the contemplative life; of the pagans, there were Pythagoras and Plato and many others as well. Do you believe that after Augustine there was no one born of an intelligence equal to his? You may take my word for it that there were many who were his equals in intelligence, but lacked his effort, zeal, and determination. Thus it was he who won the palm of victory in the race; the rest either did not compete, or gave up exhausted in mid-course. If then few have reached the highest goal, we may blame our own indifference, laziness, and neglect. Of this Horace has rightly said,

The lad who yearns for the much-prized goal  
Runs hard, nor has from hard pains fled;  
He sweats and breathes the rough-edged cold,  
Abstains from wine and love's sweet bed.<sup>5</sup>

Do we think to attain the highest good of man with both ears asleep? What you say about [the impossibility of certain] knowledge amazes me. Do you think the knowledge of Pythagoras and Plato of small extent, who thoroughly investigated with incredible toil the mathematical sciences, and who left almost nothing unknown in heaven and earth? What of Aristotle, who has left an entire library of the arts and sciences? Would you say he had written a few things only? Or nearly infinite? I should have said he knew too much, not too little! What of Augustine? Shall we say he knew little, when we have so many volumes of his marvelous learning? What of Basil the Great? Of Gregory Nazianzen? Of Dionysius the Areopagite, who, not content with earthly, human matters, examined the heavens and their hierarchies? What of Marcus Varro? Of Sextus Nigidius? Of our own Marcus Cicero? Do you dare say they were barren of knowledge? Don't, I beg you, condemn all men of ignorance because of the ignorance of some. A man can, in fact, have knowledge of an almost infinite number of things, provided he is willing to spend time studying them. He has, surely, a mind that partakes of the Divine Mind, and he is, as it were, a mortal god. Let this suffice for the present; the subject calls for a book, not a letter.

The argument by which you would prove that the highest good does not lie in contemplation is, however, a different matter. You say the will is nobler than the intellect, and that happiness therefore does not consist in contempla-

tion, whose instrument is the intellect, but must consist in something else whose instrument is the will.<sup>6</sup> You say the will is proved to be nobler because (a) it is more common, since it is also of impossibles, (b) it directs the intellect,<sup>7</sup> and (c) it is posterior in the order of nature.<sup>8</sup>

Now really, all this seems to me so absurd that it is scarce worth my replying. (a) Are you saying that the *will*, an irrational power of the soul, is nobler than the intellect, which is the part of the soul that has reason and which we share with the gods? Who ever would say that? But [you say] the will is more common, and the commoner a good is, the more divine it is. This argument of yours makes the vegetative soul nobler than the sensitive and the rational, for the vegetative soul is also in the plants and all the animals. Reason belongs to man alone. Shall we then say the vegetative soul is more noble than the rational since it is more common? Surely not. Your argument is therefore false. But [you say] Aristotle himself said that a good was more divine, the commoner it was. Quite so; but this is true with respect to *itself*, not in comparison with other things. For example, the vegetative is in itself much greater and of greater dignity for being in plants *and* animals, rather than being simply in plants. Thus the more common a good is, the more divine it is *in itself*. But dignity and excellence [in this case] are to be considered in comparison with something else. The rational soul is of far greater dignity and nobility than the vegetative, though the vegetative is more common. The same must be said of the will and the intellect.

(b) The parts of our souls are two: the rational and the irrational. The part having reason is called the intellect, and the virtues it contains are called the intellectual virtues. These are the virtues of wisdom, knowledge, understanding, prudence, and art. The moral virtues, on the contrary, belong not to the rational part of the soul, but to the irrational part in which anger, concupiscence, fear and appetite exist. How then does the will direct the intellect, when the intellect has reason and the will does not?

(c) You are completely mistaken in saying that the will is posterior in the order of nature. It is clear in the case of children that anger, will, and concupiscence are immediately present, while reason and intelligence only come with increasing age.<sup>9</sup>

So much for your first problem. I pass now to the second, wherein you appear to doubt that virtue is a mean. Aristotle, you say, asserted that all **virtues were means**. You think, on the contrary, that certain virtues such as prudence, temperance, and justice seem not in fact to be means at all, but rather extremes. Before I answer this part of your argument, I should like to state that Aristotle does not say that *all* virtues are concerned with affects such as daring, fear, anger, compassion, desire, etc., an excess or defect

whereof is to be condemned, and a mean praised. The intellectual virtues are not about affects, but about truth and falsehood. It is the moral virtues Aristotle calls means, not (if I remember correctly) the intellectual. I suppose your inexperience led you to couple together prudence, temperance, and justice, although prudence is an intellectual virtue, and temperance and justice moral virtues. In any case it is plain that temperance is a mean. For it is concerned with corporeal pleasures, surrender to which is disgraceful. On the other hand, to abstain and flee from all pleasures entirely is a sort of insensibility and inhumanity. The sort of person who turns his back on wine, the table, company, and good cheer generally is not the kind I should like to have as a friend. Since therefore temperance falls so far short of these extremes, who can deny that it is a mean? And in the case of justice there is even less room for doubt, since justice is a species of fairness and the fair is, surely, what lies between more and less.

But if we say that justice and temperance are means, you argue, it would follow that the moderately temperate man would be more praiseworthy than the most temperate, and that the moderately just man would be better than the more just. But this reasoning is invalid. A virtue is a kind of mean between excess and defect, true; but this is not to say that there is some mediocrity in the virtue itself. So the man who has temperance is not moderately temperate, but altogether temperate; and he who possesses justice is not moderately just, but altogether just. In sum, just as temperance is a kind of mean with respect to pleasures, so the temperate man is moderate with respect to the pleasures, not with respect to temperance.

You say, moreover, that every mean is composed of extremes, as is evident in the case of colors and flavors. If virtue then is to be a mean, it would follow that it is composed of vices, which is absurd. Further, if virtue were in the middle, it would not be opposite to vice, since opposites are the things that are farthest from each other, whereas the middle is insufficiently removed from the extreme. Moreover [you say] it would follow that some part of vice would be a virtue, as is clear in the case of prodigality. For if we take away what is excessive in it, what remains is liberality.

I shall reply to each of these points briefly; they are not of a kind to deserve many words.

It is not true, I maintain, that every mean is composed of extremes. A point in the middle of a line is not composed of the line. Nor did He who was between two robbers possess a robber's character. But [you say] moderate flavors and colors are composed of extremes. Agreed: but through mixing. Among the virtues, however, there is no mixing, but a separation and rejection of the vices. Accordingly, a virtue is not composed of vices, even though it is a mean between excess and defect. Nor is virtue near to vice,

but far from it indeed, for virtue is exercised according to reason, vice contrary to reason; a virtue is a good, vice an evil; the former is to be praised, the latter blamed. These are all opposites, and far distant from one another. As for your argument that if we remove the excess from prodigality, the moderate part that remains will be liberality, so that the remaining part of a vice will be a virtue, I thought you understood that the virtue of liberality did not consist in quantity but in a disposition of the soul through the choice of when, how, and for whom it should be exercised. And so, if these [dispositions] were not present in the prodigal man before, neither will those [dispositions] that remain [after removing the excess from prodigality] be a part of virtue.

Your third question is about the virtues: you seem to be in doubt whether they are produced by **nature or by practice**. To this I reply simply that all virtues are habits formed by training and practice. Hence it is obvious the virtues are produced by training and practice. We have, however, a certain natural disposition to the virtues, for we see that certain men are more suited by nature to some virtues than to others. It is undeniable that some people are intrepid in the face of danger, while others are timid; some people are naturally gentle and modest, others are loose and shameless; some are by nature greedy and rapacious, others liberal and self-denying. Such inborn dispositions to liberality, fortitude, and justice are not virtues in the proper sense. **Virtue, properly speaking**, is an **established habit built up through training and practice**. As a man becomes a builder by building, and a lutenist by playing the lute, so he becomes just by acts of justice, and brave by acts of bravery. Hence it is clear that the virtues exist in us neither naturally nor preternaturally, but that we are naturally suited to receive them, and bring them to perfection by training and habituation.

There remains your last question, a thorny one indeed, and a hard one: whether there exists between the virtues themselves any sequence and connection such that the man who possesses one virtue necessarily possesses all the rest as well, or whether the virtues can be detached and separated from each other. I must admit this a question about which I frequently change my mind. Reason compels me to admit that the virtues are all interconnected, linked as though by an indissoluble knot. Yet common sense recoils from such thorny reasoning. Let us make allowance **for reasoning**, while letting common sense prevail **where appropriate**.

We must first make a distinction between the virtues. In this way what we are seeking will become clearer. As we have shown above there are natural virtues, and virtues properly so called. Again, of virtues in the proper sense,

some are intellectual, and others moral. Now then, between the natural virtues there is no connection. Someone can be by nature constant and intrepid in the face of danger—that is, naturally brave—while at the same time being greedy, rapacious, unjust, and dishonorable, as we see in many cases. So there is no connection between the natural virtues; they are manifestly separate. [In the case of the virtues proper] there seems to be a linkage between all of the moral virtues, nor can one be separated from another. For they are **rational habits with respect** to mental affects, but reason in such virtues comes from prudence, and prudence is the same in all affects. It is not concerned with one to the neglect of the rest. It follows that prudence links all the moral virtues together, not allowing any one of them to be taken separately, and so the man who possesses one [moral] virtue possesses them all.

There remain the **intellectual virtues**. I see no reason why they cannot be separated. The artist who has achieved a degree of perfection in his art (or has the habit of art), such as Apelles in painting or Praxiteles in sculpture, does not necessarily have military or political knowledge, or familiarity with the natural sciences. It is in fact, as Socrates observes in the *Apology*, a positive vice among artists to deceive themselves and regard themselves as knowledgeable in other arts because of the excellence they have in their own. Art, then, can be separated from the other intellectual virtues; perhaps the same should be said of knowledge and prudence. For when the prudent man is engaged in action, he does not require, it would seem, a knowledge of nature, whose end is thought, not action. So like the natural virtues, the intellectual virtues appear to admit of separation. The moral virtues, on the other hand, by no means admit of separation; given one moral virtue, all the rest of that kind follow.

Farewell.