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Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Carte Italiane, 1(2)

ISSN

0737-9412

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Publication Date

1981

DOI

10.5070/C912011191

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LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI
ON
VIRTÙ AND *FORTUNA*

MARK G. HENNINGER

In writing the first Italian grammar, Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472) illustrated the similarities between Latin and Italian based on the theory of the latter evolving from the former. In accomplishing this, and in writing many of his own works in Italian, he was a key figure in elevating the vernacular from its subservience to Latin. His accomplishments in architecture, both in theory and practice, are better known, as, to a lesser extent, are his contributions to painting, e.g., a mathematically based theory of perspective and insights into composition and content that would influence the course of renaissance painting. He found time to devote his considerable attention to literature, the theory of education, satire, sculpture, map-making, mathematical games, and even a fool-proof code for papal messages!

As other renaissance men of letters, Alberti was concerned with the problem of *virtù* and *fortuna*. To what extent are our lives the result of our own efforts and desires, of our own moral qualities (*virtù*), and to what extent are they determined by factors outside our control—by birth, or in Alberti's case by illegitimacy, education, natural disasters, disease—in short, by *fortuna*? As Alberti moved from his young student days to early manhood to middle age and into old age, his views on this problem seem to have changed. At least different emphases

are found in his writings, and these in turn reflect the circumstances in which he lived. In this paper, I trace these changes upon the larger background of his life, itself a product of *virtù* and *fortuna*.

In order to illustrate the progression from his earlier to his later views, I have used the following fiction. I pretend that an industrious bibliophile recently has discovered three manuscripts. Each fictional manuscript is purported to have been written by Alberti at a different time in his life.

In the first 'codex', Alberti tells us what he, at about thirty years of age, thinks about the views on *virtù* and *fortuna* he held during his student days. The second 'codex' gives us the views of Alberti, now sadder and wiser at forty, on his optimistic thirties while in Rome and Florence. The third and final 'codex' has Alberti, an old man, reviewing his life, surprised at the pessimism that surfaced in his writings on *virtù* and *fortuna* during his forties. I then end with a straightforward account of his last work in Italian, *De Iciarchia*, written when he was about sixty-five.

The basis for the ideas found in the fictional codices are, of course, the actual writings of Alberti as indicated in the notes. I have tried to clarify with additional notes any doubts that one may have as to what specifically is fact and what is fiction.

* * *

The first 'manuscript' (Vat. Lat. 375) dates from either the early 1430's when Alberti was in Rome, or a little later when he was visiting Florence. I pretend that Alberti rereads his early *De Commodis Litterarum atque Incommodis* (On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Letters), written after 1428, the year he finished his studies in Bologna. He decides to settle accounts with these early views.

'I would hope that anyone in the future reading my *De Commodis* would recall my youth, my inexperience, and especially the grim conditions that were forced upon me. These latter were particularly vivid at that time: the social stigma of my illegitimacy, the death of my father a few years before, my sickness and poverty, and finally the constant injustices visited upon me by my dull relatives. They had little sympathy for or understanding of my humanistic studies. Their attitude was summed up in the words of my old friend and relative

Giannozzo, “he is worthy of hate who wishes to be preferred to those who are wealthy because of his literary merits.”¹

‘It is upon this background that one can appreciate the dual theme of *De Commodis*: a condemnation of society at large, caught up in what I thought was a frenzied pursuit of wealth, honor, and glory, and praise of the solitary life of the scholar who pursues good letters despite the lack of material rewards and recognition. And I see now I let myself voice the perennial humanist complaint, lamenting the discrepancy between the lucrative professions of law and medicine² and the shambles of humanist education. At that time, how could I see my career as anything else than that of a poor itinerant teacher of letters? How few humanists at that time were employed by princes and Popes! Not being myself in the mainstream of society, how could I be anything but suspicious (and perhaps envious) of the commercial-minded centers like Florence and Venice?’

‘And so it seemed to me certain that to be virtuous one does not need, and should actually flee from, riches and pleasures. As I wrote at the time,

Chi vorrà invero havere lo animo suo ornatissimo, è necessario che veramente disprezzi, odii e abborrisca quelle brutture che si chiamano piaceri e quelle inimiche capitali della virtù che si chiamano abbondanze e ricchezze . . . honori e grandezza.³

(I translate my early Latin into Tuscan, for these pages are written to be useful in some small way to my fellow man. And how can they be of use if very few can read them?)

‘I can scarcely believe I wrote those words. Was I so enamored of the medieval ascetical tradition? I think not. It was the stoics of antiquity that drew me. If *fortuna* is a necessary chain of events from which there is no escape, what is the wise man to do? Essentially, he should become a stoic:

Tutti i così fatti piaceri adunque del senso, così come non si concedono alle lettere, così ancora non se ne debbe tenere conto. Se ci nuocono grandemente, grandemente ancora si debbono fuggire.⁴

I felt I must flee anything that would disturb my soul:

Imparino [i saggi] a fuggire i piaceri, sprezzare le ricchezze, non tener conto delle pompe, non haver paura della fortuna, e ad acquistarsi la sola quiete dello animo, i costumi, la virtù, e la sapientia.⁵

To live virtuously was to pursue wisdom alone, and to achieve this one need only have no regard for anything that disturbed one's study.

Ma io ho giudicato che quanto agli studii delle lettere ci bisogni esser di questo animo, ch'altri si debba risolvere, che fuori della cognitione delle cose noblissime, tutti gl'altri beni della fortuna, s'habbin'a stimar poco, che noi ci dobbiamo contentare solo della sapientia.⁶

'Further, if one did not attain some degree of wisdom and *virtù*, it was one's own fault, not that of *fortuna*. I still believe today as firmly as I did then in one's own personal responsibility. I cannot imagine ever losing my faith in it. It is foolish to blame *fortuna*. Often those who manage families or lead nations complain of being buffeted by the storms and floods of fortune. Fools! *They* threw themselves into the flood.⁷

'But lest the reader think I stayed cramped up with my books, knowing nothing of the joys and beauties of nature, recall that I then also wrote

l'huomo [è] più eccellente di qual si voglia altro animale sì in molte altre cose, sì ancora per questo di gran lunga agli altri superiore, che egli ha una certa cognitione e forza di discorso, per la quale si può credere che le menti degli huomini non sieno molto inferiori alla natura delle creature celesti. Conciosiache è cosa manifesta che tutte le cose che muovono in Mare et in Terra sono sottoposte agli ingegni degli huomini. Et per questo tutti confessono che l'huomo è il più honorato animale che si truovi fatto dalla natura.⁸

I still believe that man's ability to understand and control nature is part of his essence. But after coming to this glorious city, how much more varied and wide-ranging do I now conceive that curiosity, that divine ability to change and to perfect nature for man's own purposes. Painting, architecture, maintaining a household, running a business—none of this had yet entered my head as I ended my studies. Instead I felt

Veramente, di tutti i piaceri il più eccellente e da nobili e ben nati è lo andare a spasso per le città e per le Provincie, e il considerare infinite cose, i tempî, i teatri e le muraglie e ogni sorte di edifitî, a andare attorno esaminando i luoghi di lor natura amenissimi, i grati, i fortissimi, e quegli che e dalla natura e dallo artificio degli huomini sieno stati fatti più gratisosi a riguardargli.⁹

Written as a typical student. I felt it was through renunciation, through controlling oneself that one arrives at self-knowledge and dominion over oneself. Only then can one truly appreciate nature, delighting in its variety. The pleasures of the world can be enjoyed, but only by him who is detached from them, not involved in the affairs of the world, whose mind is almost like a theater on which the world can be watched.¹⁰

'In sum, not knowing very much of the world, and what I knew being for the most part hostile, I conceived the sphere in which one could exercise true *virtù* to be very circumscribed. I felt that to act virtuously outside that limited sphere, to try to incarnate one's values in the affairs of men, would destroy one's inner peace and tranquility. Happily my future as a self-contained stoic was lost shortly after I arrived in this city.'

* * *

The second 'codex' (Codex Assisi 154) seems to date from the early 1440's, and throws some light on the causes for his unexpected despair and disillusionment with human affairs at that time.

'O Fortuna! Inconstancy, disease, death, avarice, and jealousy! The one woman I loved, L.M., walks out on me (then, by chance, is taken away by the plague!). My stupid relations, thinking erroneously that they would gain my wealth if I were to die, attempt to poison me, and, purely by accident, they fail. And what "friend" hasn't attacked me through jealousy?¹¹ Like Petrarch, maligned himself, I am forced to defend my work *La Famiglia* [1433–34], explaining now what were then my views on *virtù* and *fortuna*.

'At that time I strongly believed that man has within himself the capacity to govern his own destiny. What many say is brought about by *fortuna* can be avoided by prudence, initiative, and diligence. The enemies of *virtù*, I believed, were no longer pleasures, riches, and

honor. I believed that the humanists in Rome had all these and were still virtuous. I discovered that one need not be a stoic to be virtuous. In fact, I conceived *virtù* to be a bundle of moral qualities:

E se così si conosce la virtù, costumi e opere virili, le quali tanto sono de' mortali quanto e' le vogliono, i consigli ottimi, la prudenza, i forti, constanti e perseveranti animi, la ragione, ordine e modo, le buone arti e discipline, l'equità, la iustizia, la diligenza e cura delle cose adempieno e abbracciano tanto imperio, e contro l'insidiosa fortuna salgono in ultimo supremo grado a fastigio di gloria.¹²

Virtù was no longer found simply in a tranquil mind, in conquering one's passions, but rather these moral qualities could be exercised, have an effect, outside of the cell of the scholar. My thinking at that time was that *fortuna*, chance events in the world, can never rob one of *virtù*, of these internal moral qualities. It is through these qualities, by acting with zeal, method, and order, that one can accomplish great things in the world. Therefore, since *fortuna* cannot ever conquer these internal qualities, as long as one stands firm, *fortuna* herself will be conquered in the world of affairs, and one can accomplish one's plans. And, finally, this *virtù* is available to everyone: «Solo è senza virtù chi nolla vuole.»¹³

Coluccio Salutati and Leonardo Bruni, the first two humanist chancellors of Florence, saw the proper sphere for the exercise of *virtù* in civic affairs. I had no such experience in Florentine civic life, and not by my own choice.¹⁴ Rather for me it was the family and the empires of the past—here I saw that *virtù* was the key to their growth and decline.

Ma se alcuno con diligenza qui vorrà investigare qual cosa molto estolla e accresca le famiglie, qual anche le mantenga in sublime grado d'onore e di felicità, costui apertamente vederà gli uomini le più volte aversi d'ogni suo bene cagione e d'ogni suo male, né certo ad alcuna cosa tanto attribuirà imperio, che mai giudichi ad acquistare laude, amplitudine e fama non più valere la virtù che la fortuna. Vero, e cerchi le repubbliche, ponghisi mente a tutti e' passati principati: troverassi che ad acquistare e moltiplicare, mantenere e conservare la maestate e gloria già conseguita, in alcuna mai più valse la fortuna che le buone e sante discipline del vivere. E che dubita?¹⁵

I had broken out of an individualistic conception of *virtù* to see its social dimensions.

Non fece la natura gli uomini tutti d'una compressione, d'uno ingegno e d'uno volere, né tutti a un modo atti e valenti. Anzi volse che in quello in quale io manco, ivi tu supplisca, e in altra cosa manchi la quale sia apresso di quell'altro. Perché questo? Perch'io abbia di te bisogno, tu di colui, colui d'uno altro, e qualche uno di me, e così questo aver bisogno l'uno dell'altro sia cagione e vincolo a conservarci insieme con publica amicizia e congiunzione.¹⁶

'Today these words are a cruel mockery. When in need I was completely abandoned.¹⁷ And even my "friends" from the bright days of Rome and Florence during the 1430's today criticize my writings, quoting out of context, for instance, my most beautiful sentiments:

Non è potere della fortuna, non è, come alcuni sciocchi credono, così facile vincere chi non voglia essere vinto. Tiene gioco la fortuna solo a chi se gli sottomette.¹⁸

"What of famines, disease, death, and the plague?" they cry. "What can your diligence, your strong and constant persevering spirits do against them?" I admit I was idealistic and overly optimistic then, and moralistic in interpreting history. But what do I say about the plague?

Fugga el padre, fugga el figliuolo, fugga il fratello, fuggano tutti, poiché a tanta forza di veneno, a tanta bestemmia, nulla si truova che giovi se non fuggirla. Fuggansi, poiché altra arme o arte còntroli niuna ci vale. Non si può, non propulsare, non difendere quella rabbia mortifera ed essecrabile. Adunque vorranno i savi prima salvare sé fuggendo, che rimanendo non giovare ad altri e nuocere a sé. Piaccia a' piatosi non meno la salute sua che una vana opinione di grazia.¹⁹

I was idealistic, but not a fool! Later, in book two, when I have Battista object to Lionardo that very few are lucky enough to find a good woman from a good family and also attain a decent dowry, I have Lionardo reply:

Ma facciasi come consigliava quel servo Birria apresso Terenzio: 'Non si può quel che tu vuoi; voglia quel che tu puoi.'²⁰

I now realize more acutely that there are vast limits to what *virtù* can accomplish. But even then I knew that part of wisdom was recognizing limits and moderating one's desires.

E se la fortuna a voi toglie le già date e bene adoperate ricchezze, che si dee fare se non portarlo in pace e forte? Volere con malinconie, con miseria d'animo acquistare o riavere quello che a noi sia vietato, sarebbe pazzia, sarebbe servire, sarebbe certo essere infelice.²¹

The difference is that now I realize all too well that much more is barred from us, that the sphere for the exercise of *virtù* is much reduced.

'The priests accuse me of impiety, religious indifference.²² "Not by our own efforts, etc. etc. etc." Have they read my works?

. . . quand'io lasciava adrieto così fatta e innanzi a tutte necessaria cosa, quante altre credi tu utili e commodissime ora mi sieno fuggite dinanzi e nascose drieto? . . . pregare Iddio che alla tua nuova sposa dia grazia d'essere fecunda con pace e onestà della casa . . . Ancora di nuovo dirò tanto: mai si resti di pregare Iddio che conservi nel coniugio onestà, quiete e amore.²³

So there, I've said it: providence helps us overcome fortune. "Niuna cosa si truova tanto difficile che a noi quella col favore d'Iddio non sia molto facilissima."²⁴ How and to what extent I leave to the mice and men of the schools. God must have better things to do besides answering every little prayer! Who is to blame anyway? I realized even then that the vast majority of human ills comes about by our lack of prudence, fortitude, and by our own laziness.

'Perhaps a better appreciation of my views on *virtù* at that time can be had by understanding my constant invectives against idleness and laziness. My conception of the purpose of human life had changed from that of my early writings. I finally realized that man was made to manage things, to preserve friendship, and to build up human society. In brief,

Platone scrivendo ad Archita tarentino dice gli uomini essere nati per cagione degli uomini, e parte di noi si debbe alla patria, parte a'parenti, parte agli amici.²⁵

And

. . . tutti [i detti dei filosofi] piace nell'uomo non ozio e cessazione, ma operazione e azione.²⁶

If the purpose of being human is not ideally to be a solitary scholar, but to accomplish great works and deeds, *virtù* turns out to be the set of moral qualities that allows one to accomplish them. That, at root, is why I was and am against idleness.

Né mi può non dispiacere la sentenza dello Epicuro filosofo, el quale riputa in Dio somma felicità el far nulla. Sia licito a Dio, quello che forse non è a' mortali volendo, far nulla; ma io credo ogni altra cosa potere essere a Dio di sé stessi forse meno ingrata e agli uomini, dal vizio in fuori, più licita che starsi indarno.²⁷

'But, to finish at last, I must admit honestly that some of what I wrote then I simply no longer believe.

E non stimo io essere altro felicità se non vivere lieto, senza bisogno e con onore.²⁸

If this is happiness, the result of acting virtuously, there must be very little of it in the world.

'I also wrote

A conseguire laude si richiede virtù; a ottenere virtù solo bisogna così volere sé tanto essere, più che parere, tale quale desideri d'essere tenuto. Per questo si dice che alla virtù pochissime cose sono necessarie. Come vedi, solo la ferma, intera e non fitta volontà basta. . . . Ma non ci stendiamo in disputare quanto sia facilissimo conseguire la virtù.²⁹

I would ask my younger self, "If it is so easy to attain excellence, then why are there so few in any given profession or field who attain it? Is it because there are so few who really want excellence? Or isn't it just as often the case that *fortuna*, blind circumstances, prevents one from excelling, from accomplishing great and praiseworthy deeds?"

'I see, finally, that old Giannozzo was right. I was then too "educated", without his experience. It is folly to hope to exercise *virtù* beyond one's own limited life, especially in public affairs. As he said:

Ogni altra vita a me sempre piacque più troppo che quella delli, così diremo, statuali. E a chi non dovesse quella al tutto dispiacere? Vita molestissima, piena di sospetti, di fatiche, pienissima di servitù.³⁰

He was right: "si vuole vivere a se, non al comune."³¹

* * *

The third and last 'manuscript' (Codex Monacensis Latinus 8717) purports to contain a work from Alberti's later life. He looks back on his writings of the early 1440's, particularly *Teogenio*, *Profugiorum ab aerumna*, and *Fatum et Fortuna*.

'Having for some years now worked as an architect, and having met with some success, I am content with life. And so I was surprised last night, while going through my old papers, to rediscover my sentiments on *virtù* and *fortuna*.

Aggiungi ancora la poca concordia dell'uomo quale egli ha con tutte le cose create e seco stessi, quasi come giurasse in sé osservare ultima crudeltà e immanità. Volle el suo ventre essere pubblica sepoltura di tutte le cose, erbe, piante, frutti, uccelli, quadrupedi, vermi, pesci; nulla sopra terra, nulla sotto terra, nulla che esso non divori. Inimico capitale di ciò che vede e de quello che non vede, tutte le volle a servitù; inimico della generazione umana, inimico a se stesso.³²

'Once again, the cynicism and suspicion of *De Commodis* surfaced. I realized that *fortuna* can most easily ruin the rash and the rich. The ideal was the stoic sage, Genipatro, who, old and wise, is glad to be free from the storms and strivings of his youth, free from the burdens of riches, and happily spends his time among his books, while discussing with his friends topics worthy and edifying. Happiness consists in

viversi senza cura alcuna di queste cose caduche e fragili della fortuna coll'animo libero da tanta contagione del corpo, e fuggito lo strepito e fastidio della plebe in solitudine parlarsi colla natura, maestra di tante meraviglie, seco disputando della cagione, ragione, modo e ordine di sue perfettissime e ottime opere, riconoscendo e lodando el padre e procreatore di tanti beni.³³

What a contrast with *La Famiglia*! Here, in *Teogenio*, no thought of serving an empire, or a republic, or even a family is found. One

comes to *virtù* precisely by withdrawing from all political and family life. I had little hope that the internal moral qualities could be woven into the fabric of public life. I was on the defensive. One should simply strive to keep one's soul tranquil and serene.

E come pospongo non la mia vecchiezza alla tua gioventù, così prepongo non le tue ricchezze e amplitudine alla mia povertà, non la tua popolosa famiglia alla mia solitudine.³⁴

'However, traces of public and familial spirit still survived. As Genipatro says to the brash Tichipedo, "Ma tanto te loderò quanto in salvare e onestare la patria tua e i tuoi espenderai non le ricchezze soie, ma ancora el sudore, el sanque, la vita."³⁵ And Genipatro praises the old for contributing to public life much more than the young. He asks Tichipedo,

E sia quanto tu vuoi forza e consuetudine della gioventù avervi robusti, sofferenti in ogni fatica e disagio possiate la polvere, el sole, e' ghiazzi, e' venti, che utilità presterete voi giovani alla patria, alla famiglia vostra? Fugarete, ucciderete, sometterete a servitù con vostre mani e armi uno e un altro inimico.³⁶

'Still, true riches and wisdom are within a person and can never be taken away. The ideal is a self-contained tranquility of soul that can never be lost:

Non la perfidia degli uomini, non la iniquità della fortuna, non gli incendi, naufragi, ruine, potranno a me rapire tanta mia ricchezza quale io non tema perdere . . . E qualunque ivi sia ignominia poco nocerà a quello animo ben composto quale in sé sia splendido e ornato de virtù.³⁷

'Still, one criticism would be this. In my middle age, I portrayed Genipatro as I thought wise old men would be: happily free from active life, pleasantly inactive and retired—in sum, rather innocuous. Now I'd much rather be talking and joking with people out in the open, on street corners, making fun of politicians and other incompetents, than staying indoors, staring at my books, or, half bored, looking out my window!

'My greatest folly in this regard was what I wrote in *Profugiorum*:

Modera la oppinione e iudizio, tempererai gli affetti e' moti dell'animo. Temperato l'amore, si spegne la volontà. Estinta la volontà, non desidererai; non desiderando, non ti duole el non avere o avere quello che tu nulla stime.³⁸

“Si spegne la volontà!” *Mai!* I see now it's neither possible nor desirable.

In another work of that period, *Fatum et Fortuna*, I have a philosopher on a small hill overlooking a river, the river of life that all must cross. Some swim alone, some on large rafts, i.e., ships of state, some float most dangerously on inflated skins, their pride easily punctured by the jagged rocks beneath the waters. And, as some of my more omnivorous readers will recall, I wrote that the best men of all were those who go it alone with only small boards, the good art of letters, to help them.

‘However even then I had doubts that this was the best way to get through life,³⁹ and my philosopher reacts:

What? Isn't it better, with friendly *virtù*, to sit upright in rafts, undergoing every danger, than to go through this life with one's own little board?⁴⁰

I resolved the difficulty at that time in this way:

While the strongest souls will try to obtain a small raft rather than some private board, still a free and peaceful mind, with no wrong, will flee far from those heavy labors and the great and constant dangers of the large rafts. And those who are content with taking care of a household find it hard to bear the foolishness of the crowd and public hoopla, while even the lazy masses find it difficult and hard to keep sensibly order, dignity, quiet and leisure.⁴¹

Here, a life devoted to good letters seemed best, the golden mean between the foolishness and commotion of public life and hateful leisure. But another alternative I didn't consider or felt to be foolish: why not find a wife and a small raft? Or make a raft with two or three close friends? This was perhaps behind the doubts I put into the mouth of the philosopher: is it best to go through life *alone* with one's own small board? I see now, too late, I was wrong when I said:

Ma della natura e delle pazzie delle donne è molto meglio non ne parlare punto, che entrare in voler raccontare una cosa infinita et manifestissima.⁴²

If I had shared a raft with a wife or a few close friends, I certainly would have borne misfortune better. This may have been the true golden mean that would have kept me from swinging from the heights of praise for *virtù* to the depths of cynicism and scorn found, for example, in *Momus*.⁴³

* * *

A final word can be said about his last work in Italian *De Iciarchia* of 1469. The increased political stability of these years in Florence may have had an influence on his thinking. For, in this work, the confidence of *La Famiglia* surfaces once again, but with a new dimension—a wide political context for the exercise of *virtù*. This contrasts with the individualism of *De Commodis* and the works of the early 1440's, as also with the domestic setting of *La Famiglia*. The discussion revolves around the ideal ruler.

One of the leading themes of the work is that true riches are internal, moral and intellectual qualities that cannot be taken away.

La vera ricchezza, giovini, sta in essere copioso di cose buone; e quelle sono ottime quali fanno l'omo ottimo, e non li possono essere tolte da persona. Questa sarà la virtù, figliuoli, la bontà, la sapienza.⁴⁴

This view of *virtù* was found in *Teogenio*. But the sphere for the exercise of *virtù* has expanded to include the whole of society. The ideal society is ruled by the ideal ruler who is virtuous, is able to moderate or control himself, and so, Alberti reasons, will be able to rule or moderate others. This is certainly not the case, for living a virtuous life is no guarantee that one can rule. In Alberti's other optimistic stage, that of *La Famiglia*, a moralizing view of history predominated. Here, in *De Iciarchia*, a similar moralistic emphasis is seen in his approach to good government.

Other major themes are found.

Restaci adunque solo imporre a noi stessi quanto appartenga alla cura dell'animo, e devemoci con ogni arte, industria, studio, assiduità,

diligenza, preporci e cercare d'averlo tuttora cultissimo e ornatissimo. Questo potrà non altro che la *virtù*.⁴⁵

Here again, he talks of the soul being adorned with moral qualities. These can be found in anyone who truly wants them and works hard for them.

Further, the old humanist theme returns: man is born for others.⁴⁶ The opposite of this, as always, is to spend one's time in leisure and idleness. Furthermore, in this work Alberti strongly emphasizes the harmful effects of idleness *on the community*.

Nacque l'omo per essere utile a sé, e non meno agli altri. La prima e propria utilità nostra sarà adoperar le forze dell'animo nostro a virtù, a riconoscere le ragioni e ordine delle cose, e indi venerare e temere Dio. E questo officio qual presta e riceve l'uno all'altro in vita aiutandosi insieme a' bisogni umani, se tutti vivessimo oziosi, quanta sarebbe miseria essere nati omini!⁴⁷

He has confidence in the victory of *virtù* over *fortuna*, that by acting in accordance with those moral qualities we can overcome a very great many obstacles, more than is often assumed. For example, in the dialogue, Battista explains that man is made to learn, to investigate the world and pursue letters. Paulo objects that the success of one's pursuit of learning depends to a large extent on one's body and the ebb and flow of fortune. Battista responds:

Concedere'ti in parte che le fortune siano commode agli studi quanto tu stimi, s'io non vedessi fra gli studiosi acquistar dottrina men numero di que' che sono più ricchi che di que' che sono men fortunati. E simile asserterei che la imbecillità del corpo disturba questa opera, s'io non vedessi che tutte l'altre cose per età mancano all'omo: solo le forze dello intelletto persino all'ultima imbecillità della vecchiezza tuttora fioriscono e inverdiscono.⁴⁸

And the good influence of studies should break out of the school and into public life.

E datevi a conoscere quelle che sono necessarie a chi desideri essere, quanto merita la virtù vostra, pregiato e amato da' nostri cittadini, e adoperato in le amministrazione della republica.⁴⁹

The *iciarco*, the ideal ruler, exercises *virtù* on an even wider scale:

Queste sono cose molto degne a uno omo civile, e molto utili a chi presunse essere moderatore degli altri, e avere perizia di quello che bisogni a reggere e condocere lo essercito e armati per terra e per mare, e avere perizia di quel che giovi a difendere e propulsare ed espugnare inimici e simili.⁵⁰

Here, Alberti completely overcomes the timidity of *Fatum et Fortuna*. His confidence that the virtuous man can manage a large raft is founded on the belief that *virtù* can be inserted into the tumult of human affairs and have an effect even in large-scale politics.

Buon fine sarà quello che giovi a te con molta onestà. Miglior fine sarà quello che goverà non solo a te, ma insieme a molti con buon grazia.⁵¹

A final theme that is found throughout Alberti's works is expressed particularly well in the *De Iciarchia*. It was always Alberti's belief that a virtuous life was natural to man, that *virtù* made man happy, that man was, by nature, made to act virtuously. This may cost him much work and effort, but the pleasure of acting virtuously was taken as given and as far outweighing the sweat and hours of labor it entails. In Alberti's later life, when looking back on his own experience, it may have been this faith in the natural tendency of man toward *virtù*, and so happiness, that sustained his belief in the eventual victory of *virtù* over *fortuna*.

La virtù in te studioso e vero bono omo sta in te conceputa e parata non come cose impostavi e collocata, ma come innata sanità e vita in un corpo animato e per essa ben fermo e valido . . . Questo incredibile piacere e contentamento tuo in te ti rende curioso osservatore di quello che ti fa vivere lieto e sufficiente a te stessi . . . O figliuoli, questa compiuta e divina beatitudine quale tu virtuoso contribuisci a te stessi facendo bene e adoperandoti in virtù, potrò io chiamarla altro che summa felicità? Dio ottimo essaudisca el desiderio mio e la espettazione mia, quanto io spero vedervi per simili vostre operazioni e costumi e virtù fatti felicissimi!⁵²

Notes

1. This quotation is actually found in Alberti's own *Pupillus*, ed. G. Mancini (Firenze, 1890), p. 126.
2. *De Commodis Litterarum atque Incommodis* in *Opuscoli Morali*, trans. C. Bartoli (Venezia, 1568), pp. 162ff.
3. *Ibid.*, 178.
4. *Ibid.*, 148.
5. *Ibid.*, 176.
6. *Ibid.*, 143.
7. These sentiments would be incorporated into one of Alberti's major works, *La Famiglia* (1433-34): « . . . e scorgo molti per loro stultizia scorsi ne' casi sinistri, biasimarsi della fortuna e dolersi d'essere agitati da quelle fluttuosissime sue unde, nelle quali stolti sé stessi precipitorono. E così molti inetti de'suoi errati dicono altrui forza furne cagione.» *Opere Volgari*, vol. 1, ed. C. Grayson (Bari, 1960), p. 4.
8. *De Commodis*, *op. cit.*, 168.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 145-6.
10. As Eugenio Garin writes, quoting from Alberti's *De Commodis*: «D'altro lato, di fronte al margine imprevedibile della fortuna cieca, ci mostra le risorse della disciplina interiore: 'escludere alle perturbazioni ogni addito . . . ; vivere vita quieta e tranquilla' attraverso il dominio di sé; ricordarsi che 'all'uomo savio la coscienza sua è grande celeberrimo teatro.' » E. Garin, «Il Pensiero di L.B. Alberti nella Cultura del Rinascimento,» in «Convegno Internazionale Indetto nel V Centenario di Leon Battista Alberti,» in *Problemi Attuali di Scienza di Cultura* (Roma 1974), p. 38.
11. The only truth in these fictions is that Alberti did constantly complain of being attacked and criticized throughout his life. There is also some reason to believe an attempt was probably made to kill him. (G. Mancini, *Vita di L.B.A.*, 2nd ed., Firenze 1911, pp. 168-69). But in his writings there is, in fact, no evidence of a woman in his life.
12. *La Famiglia* in *Opere Volgari*, vol. 1, ed. C. Grayson (Bari, 1960), p. 9.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Because of various political rivalries, Alberti's family was exiled from Florence in 1387. This exile lasted forty years, preventing him from taking part in the early Florentine civic humanism.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 135.
17. Alberti frequently complained of attacks and treatment by so-called friends. Here, I am using this fact as the basis for his changed views on *virtù* and *fortuna*.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
22. One of the remarkable facets of Alberti is how infrequently God and religious sentiments are explicitly mentioned in his writings.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
32. *Theogenius in Opere Volgari*, vol. 2, ed. C. Grayson (Bari, 1966), p. 94.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 73 and 75.
38. *Profugiorum ab aerumna in Opere Volgari*, vol. 2, ed. C. Grayson (Bari, 1966), p. 181.
39. The following paragraphs, expressing Alberti's doubts about his earlier views, are my invention. However, it is not unlikely that in his later life, when he wrote *De Iciarchia* (1469), he would have had doubts similar to those mentioned here. See the next section for *De Iciarchia*.
40. *Fatum et Fortuna in Opera Inedita*, ed. C. Mancini (Firenze, 1890), p. 140. The translation from the Latin is my own.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *De Commodis*, trans., Bartoli, p. 166. This passage is not unusual. Whether it is called anti-feminism or misogyny, Alberti's attitude toward women, except for a few passages in *La Famiglia*, is unrelievedly negative. This about-face at the end of his life is pure fiction, i.e., my own comment and criticism.
43. Partly because the bright side of Alberti's view of human nature has been so emphasized, E. Garin has recently stressed, as a corrective, the writings of Alberti in which the darker, more absurd side of human nature emerges. See Garin, *op. cit.* See especially Alberti's *Momus*, ed. G. Martini (Bologna, 1942).
44. *De Iciarchia in Opere Volgari*, vol. 2, *op. cit.* p. 209.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
46. See Cicero's *De Officiis*, I, 7, 22: « . . . ut praeclare scriptum est a Platone [Epist. IX. 358a], non nobis solum nati sumus ortusque nostri partem patria vindicat, partem amici.»
47. *De Iciarchia, op. cit.*, p. 198.
48. *Ibid.*, pp. 212–13.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 245.

For their help and kindnesses I thank Cecil Grayson and the students who, with myself, contributed to his seminar on Alberti in the fall of 1980 at UCLA.