Humanism & Liberty

WRITINGS ON FREEDOM FROM FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE

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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA PRESS
Alamanno Rinuccini 1426-1499

To introduce Rinuccini, I want briefly to describe his career, the beliefs he expresses in De Libertate, and the value of this dialogue. His career was admired, not least by Rinuccini himself, as of duplex felicitatis genus, combining the active and the contemplative life. His political and his scholarly activities were certainly related. He used his writings to gain influence and his influence to encourage scholarship. The ideas in De Libertate are largely classical, yet combined in a creative way, and applied with precision to the actual contemporary situation. The dialogue has special virtues, in fact, for it compresses into one short, clear exposition the essential heritage of Florentine civic humanism. At the same time it openly discusses some of the major political issues debated in Lorenzo de' Medici's Florence, issues carefully veiled in most writings from Lorenzo's circle.

Rinuccini wrote De Libertate a year after the Pazzi conspiracy; he was fifty-three, a long time member of the Medici party now embittered by the turn politics had taken in his country. He wrote both as a humanist and as a member of the Florentine hereditary ruling class. Since the thirteenth century, as he reminds us, members of his family had enjoyed wealth, status and public office in Florence. His own career, though this is something he does not make clear, had always been dependent on his friendship with the Medici. At various times, however, he had shown himself critical of their growing power. He enjoyed a small patrimony, and he devoted his youth to scholarship, not, like his brothers, to getting established in business. When his name was first placed in the lists from which public officials were chosen by lot, it was withdrawn because of his youth (1433). Later, when he was reelected and actually chosen for the office of prior, or member of the Signoria, he could not hold office because, it seems, he was in debt for taxes (1454). At this time, however, his scholarly translations and participation in philosophical discussions earned him certain eminent friends and a reputation. He and his friends formed an "Academy"—the direct model for Ficino's later and more famous Neoplatonic group. Rinuccini, in 1456, urged Cosimo de' Medici to bring to Florence the noted Byzantine teacher, Argyropoulos. Argyropoulos saw as an integrated whole the history of ancient philosophy from Socrates to the Alexandrians, and thus he shaped the later humanist perspective on the classical heritage. Cosimo arranged for him to hold a professorship in the new university at Florence. Rinuccini, in various writings dedicated to the Medici, expressed his enthusiasm for Cosimo's quiet political coup of 1458, when he put an end to the organized opposition of some eminent patricians. Rinuccini viewed this coup as a public boon and as a peaceful, viable compromise.

In 1459 Rinuccini was again entered on the lists of those eligible for the highest offices. He became a prior in 1460, a member of the committee called "Twelve Good Men" in 1462, a member of the Squittino, or board of scrutiny, which controlled the lists of possible officials, in 1465. In 1466 he was a member of the balla, or ad hoc council with full powers, which exiled Piero de' Medici's opponents, and greatly tightened his control. Rinuccini, however, seems to have voted against this increase in Medici power. Suddenly, thereafter, he found himself entirely without public office—a state that lasted until 1472. Such unemployment may have given him more time to study, but it surely meant financial hardship as well as anxiety about his social status. In 1469 Piero died.

Rinuccini's relations with young Lorenzo seem to have been good, and he played a part in facilitating the succession to power of Lorenzo and Giuliano. In 1471 Rinuccini's name was drawn for the highest office in the state, the position of standard-bearer among the priors, or Gonfaloniere di Giustizia. He could not actually hold the office because his brother was a prior at the time, but simply to have been drawn for it gave one prestige and meant that a promising career lay ahead. Starting in 1472, in fact, Rinuccini became a member of the five-man board of trustees of the growing Florentine university. In 1475-76, however, he took on, rather naively, an important but dangerous post as ambassador to Rome. He was caught in the cross fire of the feud between Sixtus IV and Lorenzo de' Medici. When he reported in too great detail to the Signoria a papal tirade against the first citizen of Florence, he won the enmity of Lorenzo. He was not again de-
proved of all offices, but he was delayed for a while from reentering Florence and then was confined to administrative work outside the city itself. In the first years after the embassy, he was sometimes entirely unemployed. He approved of the Pazzi revolt, as he tells us, and saw it defeated—presumably in silence. War taxes greatly reduced his private wealth, while he privately considered the war an expression of Lorenzo’s tyranny. In 1479, moreover, he also lost his only son to a plague, which took, during those years of civil conflict, a recorded 18,000 Florentine lives. In a mood of bitter grief, therefore, Rinuccini wrote his De Libertate, dated April 10, 1479.

Though he wrote as though he would never more serve the Medici, he again received and accepted offices from 1480 on. He sat that year in the balia which created the Council of Seventy, a new ruling group designed to give Lorenzo more absolute political control. Rinuccini did not like this creation and probably voted against it. Lorenzo, however, did not always mind a show of opposition, as long as it was ineffectual. He gave back to Rinuccini the position that best suited his wishes and talents, perhaps, for he again made Rinuccini one of the trustees of the University. This position, which he had held from 1473 to 1477, was his again, with the power of hiring and firing professors and planning development, from 1480 to 1484. After this, he was given a series of minor administrative posts in various Tuscan towns under Florentine control. Perhaps the overthrow of the Medici in 1494 brought Rinuccini satisfaction. Certainly it brought him an important position in the new government of the Republic. He became a member of the Council of One Hundred, which oversaw the administration of taxation. He remained politically active until his death in May 1499.

The story of Rinuccini’s life shows that he was not one of the most consistent opponents of the Medici. Yet the De Libertate is “the most vehement and merciless indictment of Lorenzo’s politics written by any of his contemporaries.” As Vito Guicciardini also suggests, “…in Rinuccini the conflict between an inherited dependence on the Medici and the old idea of libertà is much more visible and impressive than in his contemporaries, who experienced similar things….” It may also be true that Rinuccini simply wrote down what many others thought and said. How many people were like Alitheus in the dialogue, who knew very well what Rinuccini meant when he began to complain about Florence? The De Libertate seems to Nicola Rubinstein to express the viewpoint of the conservative republican opposition, a viewpoint found in the Signoria debates of 1466 and probably implicit in the Pazzi revolt. How many patricians, however, were like Rinuccini’s friend, Microuttus, dupes of propaganda who still considered Florence a citadel of freedom? Rinuccini complains furiously of citizen apathy. Donato Acciauoli, his close friend and fellow humanist, distinguished himself in 1478 by his visible loyalty to the Medici. One must realize, however, that by this means alone, he avoided exile and the confiscation of his goods. Rinuccini’s own withdrawal and counsel of silence to other disidents kept him, too, safe, and could well have looked rather weak to, for example, a Pazzi. It seems possible that a good many Florentine citizens were simply waiting for an assassin to eliminate Lorenzo.

What sort of political faith did Rinuccini have? He gives us a clear idea of it in Alitheus’ long speech in the latter half of the first book of De Libertate. He believed in the Republic and its institutions as he thought they had been in the days of Leonardo Bruni and as Leonardo Bruni had described them. Citizen equality ought to be the basis of liberty. Equality would mean equal justice in the courts, equal and effective protection for life and property. Justice would hold the rich and poor in their respective places. The government ought to rest on wide participation—citizens to qualify by being taxpayers, hence pillars of the state. Freedom of debate should really exist, producing wise decisions in the governing councils. No clique, obviously, should seize all the profits of government and drive opponents into exile. The result of true liberty, moreover, would be the protection and extension of the common good, the Florentine empire. And Rinuccini, through Alitheus, narrates a good part of the history of Florence’s wars, justifying all her conquests and taking pride in her vigorous defense of her gains.

Rinuccini shared, not only Bruni’s essential program, but also his feeling that Florence was or ought to be as related to the Athenian as to the more obviously relevant Roman ideal. In Athens there were not only law and empire and a republican form of government, but also a stress on the individual citizen’s power to reason, hence on diversity. As Athens was Bruni’s model in his Laudatio, a work based on Achius Aristides’ Panegyric of Athens, so in Rinuccini one can see the influence of Pericles’ funeral oration, particularly where the humanist claims that the justice of the Florentine courts used to attract many foreigners to them, and where he speaks of the stability formerly achieved through rational debate.

In giving a philosophical basis for his own view of liberty Rinuccini begins with the idea of the summum bonum, leaning on Cicero and also on Leonardo Bruni’s Isagogicon, which compares Aristotelian and Stoic ideas of happiness. The summum bonum is happiness, but, philosophy teaches us, real happiness depends on virtue. This virtue may be a style of action achieved by moderating and balancing one’s desires, or a static condition of the soul achieved by eliminating passions and needs entirely. In either interpretation, as Rinuccini says, virtue requires ethical choices. Libertas must
be achieved on two levels: first, as an outer precondition allowing the individual to make choices at all, and second, as an inner state of self-discipline. (In our translation, the first kind of libertas tends to appear as "liberty," the second as "freedom.") Full liberty belongs only to virtuous men, and these, by definition, wish to serve their fellow men—a willing service, not a bondage. Hence the virtuous man does participate in politics. Only when his own ethical freedom is threatened thereby, will he withdraw from politics, and then reluctantly. (The great and ancient question whether virtue can be politically imposed simply does not appear for Rinuccini.)

Following, possibly, Xenophon's Hiero—On Tyranny,12 Rinuccini stresses that the effect of tyranny is to surround the tyrant with dishonest people. Both he and they live in constant anxiety, but are driven on by greed as well as by fear itself. The effect is to undermine not only philosophical liberty, but also the traditional Florentine patrician standards of honesty in transactions and personal dignity, onestà.

At this time, Rinuccini says, withdrawal seems best to him. If he could overthrow the tyrant, he says, he would gladly do it, but too many citizens are complacent. Since he feels he cannot change the government, he does not want to stay in Florence even as a merely private man. To do so would involve seeing things that it is painful even to hear about. He may be referring to the persecutions that followed the Pazzi revolt—persecutions described in a different spirit by Poliziano—and to the war with all its costs, which he considers a private crime of Lorenzo's.

As soon as Rinuccini—who in forced retirement, prescribed retirement—was offered a position by Lorenzo, he in fact abandoned his villa and returned to the city. Perhaps he was satisfied to think that his own role in Florence would be opposed to the general direction of the regime. As he says in De Libertate, the refusal of good men to hold office under a tyrant makes the tyranny worse.

One of the great virtues of the dialogue is its concreteness. Rinuccini directs himself especially to Microtus, the man of limited vision. When Microtus says that, "Really all generalizations, or, to use the philosophical term, universals, do completely and wholly contain the particular truth spoken of, but just the same such conceptions are not easy for everybody to grasp,"13 he points to the need for a nonscholastic explanation. Rinuccini then moves toward the methods of modern fiction, for he tries to capture and convey the quality of an individual's experience in a specific situation. This technique is meant to clarify, not to undermine, philosophy, though a certain hostility to philosophy as logic-chopping (the philosophy of the scholastics) is quite apparent. In effect, however, Rinuccini transcends the

weaknesses of his own moral and political philosophy by creating a clear expression of his ambivalent and difficult state of mind.

The ideas and experience of Rinuccini are startlingly modern, and this is true although his vocabulary is classical and his experience that of a patrician in a pre-modern city-state. His ideas on freedom and virtue, on the need for tolerance and lawfulness in political processes, seem indispensable still. And many modern liberals, too, are prevented by the patrician roots or cast of their thought from observing that the rule of law in an oligarchy is undermined, not just by a few unscrupulous men, but by the underlying need of such a state to oppress its neighbors and to keep its masses in silent subjection.

NOTES

1. The facts of Rinuccini's career as given here are taken from the meticulous work of Vito R. Giuntini, Alamanno Rinuccini, 1426-1499 (Böldau), Cologne, 1965, especially 1-35, "Das Leben."

2. This, at least, is the usual meaning of being a specchio, as the records show that he was. (Guicciardini, 30). Cf. Nicolai Rubinstein The Government of Florence under the Medici, Oxford, 1966, p. 64, note 4.

3. Most of his writings date from 1455 to 1475. (Guicciardini, 30). From 1466 to 1471, only seven short letters are preserved (Guicciardini, viii) which suggests that political inactivity did not stimulate writing.

4. He sat in the halls of 1471 which arranged for greater control of offices by the two young Medici. It is clear that he manifested his support for them because he was immediately named the head of the "Brotherhood of the Three Kings," an organization of Medici supporters. Guicciardini, 25-6.

5. Guicciardini, 30.

6. Ibid.


8. Rubinstein, 196.


10. De Libertate, below, "It is considered best for liberty and justice if all those who aid the republic privately by payment of taxes are also given a chance to participate in its rewards and advantages."


LIBERTY

by Alamanno Rinuccini

Preface to his brother, Alessandro:

_When I took up a way of life, my beloved brother, not much different from the one you yourself profess, I was encouraged by your advice and that of certain friends, but I know full well that my decision met with disapproval from some who envied me and some, perhaps, who did not understand. They did not like to see me give no further consideration to practically any of the affairs of the city and devote myself, almost like an exile, solely to the cultivation of this little house and farm. They did not approve of my leaving all public concerns and all unnecessary personal ones. We can silence their criticism, of course, by calling on the testimony of various famous men, but you alone seem enough of an example. You lived in the great English city of London, representing the richest and most eminent company of all that were there and enjoying the favor and good will of your superiors. The way you did business made it clear that only lack of desire prevented you from amassing an enormous fortune. All these things you put aside, however, and what is more, relinquished your considerable personal inheritance, in order to live a kind of life you thought would give you leisure with dignity and undisturbed tranquility. I could not do the same, for I was already committed to the care of wife and family, but I chose the nearest approximation, a life far from the crowded city and innumerable anxieties associated with the greed and ambition which it fosters._

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I have been unable to avoid some well-meant reproaches from friends, however, and I have made, as you will see, a rather long answer to their objections. Rather than let them change my determination in the least, I won them over to my own opinion. After the grievous loss of my only son, I was living sorrowfully in the villa he himself had frequented and was avoiding the company of men. Two persons of our academy came to see me at that time on a visit of condolence. I shall not put their names in writing lest, if some of the talk that took place among us seems to attack a certain person, these men might have reason to complain that I published the freely spoken words of a friendly conversation. So I have invented names appropriate to their characters and sentiments, which I think suggest them both well enough. If you recognize them, I look forward to your comment on that. But if you cannot give me your opinion on the choice of names, I would still appreciate it on the substance of the discussion at least, and I look forward to hearing whether you agree.

This is how it all happened: they were returning from the Casentine and went out of their way to visit me. By chance they found me at home, reading something or other, and after the sort of things customarily said when friends first meet again, they spoke at length on the themes of comfort and consolation. Finally Alitheus, hoping to distract me from the oppressive grief that weighed on me, suggested to Microtoxus that he say in my presence what they had been saying about me on their trip. So he began as follows.

**DIALOGUE ON LIBERTY BEGINS:**

Speakers: *Alitheus* (the Truthful), *Eleutherius* (the Lover of Liberty), and *Microtoxus* (the Short-Range Shooter)

**Microtoxus:** This little house and the land around it remind me of the Curii or Cincinnatus. The farm is beautifully cultivated though it looks to me basically quite small. Clearly all this delights you no end, Eleutherius, yet it provokes me to laughter or amazement. For up to now, when you stayed out of town so much, I always thought you were busy either in agricultural pursuits or in the enjoyment of a more beau-

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tiful house. I could easily understand your desire for open air and for escape from the prison-like confinement of the city house. After all, your very name, Eleutherius, indicates a love and zeal for liberty. But now I see your fields are well kept up and that your country house is much smaller than your city residence; I really don't see what has kept you away so long. I can't believe that you hate the city, like some people, who are lazy and want to enjoy a passive leisure. You abound in skills that not only keep you active in the city but bring you honor. And I think Alitheus agrees.

**Alitheus:** Frankly, Microtoxus, I am not as surprised as you at Eleutherius' decision to live in the country. And what is more, I admire his frugality and modesty, for he has set the limits of both farm and house to make them economical and to provide for all necessities, not to fulfill luxurious designs. When I consider his former life and character and especially, as you say, his name, I feel he has not set himself these limits just by chance but rather that he has chosen a life style. I think he has made a wise decision. If he wanted freedom to lead a good life, I think it is indeed more possible here in isolation than in the city.

**Microtoxus:** You have strange ideas, Alitheus. Why should he alone, among so many thousands, be unable to find freedom in the city? And particularly in the one city which professes to uphold liberty most among the states of Italy! She has spared neither treasure nor risk to defend not only her own freedom and the freedom of her citizens but also the freedom of many other Italian cities. All that I could easily prove on historical evidence, but to set it forth to you seems superfluous. You have given your attention to the talk of our elders and also to books, so you know these things very well.

**Alitheus:** Very true, Microtoxus. In all Italy, I think, there is no city that has so energetically and enduringly championed the cause of liberty. Nor is there any place where it has flourished in so pure and ample a form. For if you go from the beginnings to the present, you will find that this country's liberty has never been crushed by a foreign people or a tyrant. There is only the isolated case of Walter [of Brienne], duke of Athens, who was called in by a popular revolt and reigned as a tyrant.
I think you should think of it as you bring to your mind the influence—

Experiments: Yes, it is not right. Since you were raised the almighty

you said in your previous speech. If you can't explain the influence at this point, you would be better advised not to mention it at all. This is the point where I think you are making a mistake. If the idea of the experiment is important, perhaps it is only in another context where I can properly explain the influence. Of course, I can explain it there, so I'll do it there.

I think you realize that you have just thrown the whole discussion off track. You must realize that you have just thrown the whole discussion off track.

Attorneys: You must realize that you have just thrown the whole discussion off track.

Influence: How do you explain the influence? Is it part of your defense?

Experiments: I would like to be somewhat clearer and I may not be completely clear of your reader.

is completely contrary to your reader.

Influence: I think that the influence is actually written in gold on one of the pages. If so, why is the world's liberty actually written in gold on one of the pages? Is there any correspondence with what is written in the text of the experiment?

Attorneys: And where was that?

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Doctoral historian: What is the full account of your research?

The account of the research, and of what your findings are, is not what I am trying to explain. I am trying to explain the influence of the experiment. It is not important to know your research and accounting without all that. I am not aware of your research and accounting without the influence of the experiment. If I were to explain it, I would do so in a way that would make sense in the context of the research without the influence of the experiment.

I must emphasize that the research has been conducted in a way that respects the account of the research without the influence of the experiment. This is the research that respects the account of the research without the influence of the experiment.
ing to see which of you comes closer to the truth, and I may on occasion give my own opinion.

**Microtus:** Well said, Eleutherius. But we don't want you to get away without even getting your feet wet, you know, especially when the whole discussion began on account of you. So let's take the divisions just made by Alithus, and leave to you the explanation of your total retirement to the country and of the philosophy behind your life style. You have been listening to us in cunning silence, while we seemed to be guessing, as it were, at your secrets, but now we won't do that anymore. I suppose you were laughing to yourself while we tried to understand someone else's mind by our own interpretation rather than by asking him questions directly.

**Eleutherius:** Your talk concerned things that are most worthwhile, and was very interesting—so I was happy to have served as the object of some speculation. Now I am really eager to hear Alithus' ideas, which he promised us. For I think he will take his speech from the heart of philosophy. I know how hard he has been studying, especially these last years as a good student of Johannes Argyropoulos. Like a good many of our friends, moreover, he has even kept a written journal on the lectures. I won't, as Microtus puts it, escape without getting my feet wet. If any need is felt for a word from me, I shall tell you whatever you want to know. Now let's listen to Alithus. I noticed already how well he defined the parts of our topic.

**Alithus:** I don't see how I can put off any longer fulfilling my promise to you. I do suggest, though, that we go sit in that grove over there, for this is a lovely time of day, especially in spring, and the walk through flowering vines and trees, and over blossoming flowers and grasses, seems to call to us. I know that it's just the work of nature, but this landscape—in its dimensions, its relation to the sun, and its shape—looks like the work of an artist. The grove is just far enough from the house so that if you go back and forth while you're reading or meditating, you get some exercise. The gentle slope offers a lovely view, and makes your walk not overstrenuous and fairly quick.

**Microtus:** What good ideas you have. The mild weather urges us to stay outside, not under a roof, and the very topic of our discussion suits the open air and not a walled-in place. Not to cross the space from the house to the woods in idleness, however, let Eleutherius recite for us, on the way, one of the poems of Theocritus' *Bucolics*.

**Eleutherius:** I shall, and it's a pleasure to do for you what I so often do even by myself. For I almost never wander through these places without a book of poetry. I shall begin, then, and when I fall into barbarisms, as they used to say in Attica, please correct my mistakes. You know how hard it is for a man used to Latin to speak Greek correctly. But be that as it may, I shall begin.

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**Microtus:** A lovely poem and most suited to our bucolic surroundings. You spoke so well that you seemed a very Greek. Now, as you see, here we are at the wood. Let's sit or lie, whichever we prefer, beneath this spreading oak, and listen to Alithus.

**Alithus:** As you please. But hearing this poem delighted me so that I could have walked unawares all the way to Florence. I was enthralled by its sweetness and occupied also by thoughts of what I should say. To begin with that now, I shall use the method developed by Plato and define the subject of our discussion so that it is clear to all the participants. I think you will indulge me if I take rather many words to state with some precision what that subject is. There is no such thing in actuality, as an absolute and perfect definition composed according to the method of the philosophers, by stating first the category to which the thing belongs and then the essential differences that mark it off from other members of that category. They themselves admit that, because of the paucity and inaccuracy of words, there are many more things than there are words for things, hence always ambiguities. I think I may say roughly, though, that liberty is a kind of potential for enjoying freedom within the limits set by law and custom.
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Microtoxus: Right, but it hasn’t taken you many words, Alitheus, to state the extent of this potential. Still, since we aren’t trying to match the sharp wits of the dialecticians and their verbal parsimony, but really want the amplitude of the orator, I hope you’ll explain each of these points more extensively and completely.

Alitheus: I’ll be glad to, if Eleutherius doesn’t mind.

Eleutherius: On the contrary, nothing could be more to my taste. I long to hear some words on this subject, which often concerns and troubles my mind. For I see a lot of people who neglect and utterly scorn this precious gift of God. Yet the love of liberty and longing for freedom are natural not only to man but even to the animals. The very brutes prefer poverty and hardship, accompanied by freedom, to a life of comfortable servitude. But too much of this, I see Alitheus is ready to speak.

Alitheus: You’ve heard my definition of liberty, as brief as I could make it. It seems reasonable to call liberty a kind of potential or capacity, for the man who is called free is able, at will, to use or not to use this capacity. If he is indeed free, nothing prevents him from leading the life of a slave, which he can do through ignorance or by a conscious, if perverse, choice. Such is the case, for instance, of men addicted to lust or avarice or some such vice; they voluntarily give up the use of their liberty. For who would call a man free if he’s subject to avarice, anxious night and day, bending every effort to the pursuit of money by fair means or foul? Neither his body nor his mind is ever free from labor.

Shall I continue and also consider the people who get entangled in shameful love affairs? At the nod of a lover, they vacillate a thousand times an hour—now filled with foolish delight, now tormented by horrible anguish. Shall I talk about ambition too? Tossed about by vicissitudes, ambitious men constantly attempt to command undistinguished little wretches. And, for the appearance of being in command, they actually subject themselves to men even worse than they are. Let’s not list all the kinds of vice that enslave men and oppress them. I shall just cite the Stoic paradox, which is as true as it is elegant: “Only the wise are free.”

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Only the wise, as the Stoics say, have extinguished the passions; or, in the language of the Peripatetics,6 moderated them. Empty of conflict and distraction, they live in peace and tranquillity and are directed by their own free will. Their senses, their reason, and all the powers of their soul agree in directing them to certain ends, and these they steadily pursue. This is not just the source of liberty, but of happiness, the goal praised and desired by philosophers. Perhaps its nature was best expressed by the writer who called it ἐλευθερία,7 a state of spiritual well-being, a state I would suppose, of peace and tranquillity. The man whose mind is in this state truly is free and can live exactly as he wishes. It seems that liberty does not differ much from happiness. From these remarks it is clear, I think, why I defined liberty as a kind of potential. Now let us—if you do not object—look at the other parts of this definition.

Microtoxus: You have made amply clear that liberty is some kind of potential. Now it would be nice to know whether you think this potential is innate or acquired by training and practice, like running and jumping and wrestling.

Alitheus: A good question, Microtoxus. I too think this potential is much like any human faculty. Its basis, like that of any tendency or inclination, is a natural gift found in any well-endowed human being, and it may be perfected by the liberal arts and good education. Its origins, since it is actually also a certain appetite, I think are quite like the origins of the affection. It is like love, hate, anger and other such things, to which some men naturally incline and which others naturally shun. For I won’t deny that some people are, by nature, more inclined than others to cherish liberty. Such is the character of all affections.

Eleutherius: My own observations confirm the truth and wisdom of what you say. I have seen plenty of men, not in the least attracted by any definite advantage, subordinate themselves to the vilest persons. Yet others could not be induced by bribes or terrible threats to make themselves the inferiors of their peers. In this sense liberty might reasonably be classed as a kind of fortitude. Even Cicero seems to think so in his
book *De Officiis*, where he says of fortitude: "It makes anyone of a naturally strong mind unwilling to obey another unless his commands are just and legitimate and serve a useful purpose."

I could give you many examples, both Florentine and other. But not to go far from home, Alitheus is such a man and, I admit, so am I. We have often talked about it in the past. I don’t see why I should subordinate myself to men who are inferior to me in family and character, men who owe their higher status only to the depraved judgment of knaves and to the bold whim of fortune. But I don’t know if we should even call it high status to hold offices that are awarded, in many cases, not for merit or education or good character, but by arbitrary choice, or for a price, or for reasons of shameful corruption. I am holding up Alitheus’ discourse unduly, however. I am eager to hear his explanation of the rest of his definition.

**Alitheus:** I was very glad of your critique of these times. I found in it a kind of reply to certain thoughts that often torment me. But of that I shall find occasion to speak later. Now let us move on. We have defined liberty as a kind of potential for living, meaning by “live” to act and do things. I don’t use the term here as Aristotle does where he says that to live is simply to be among the living. Such life is fully present not only in animals but in plants and in grass and in anything that has a vegetative soul. Here, however, I am calling life something that consists of action and is granted to animals, especially to men. For human life, as the philosopher says himself, consists of a kind of action. What I said of the potential for living, therefore, is the same as if I had said the capacity to act and do things. I think we do well to call this a free capacity, moreover, if it is not limited by force or by consideration of externals, but acts in accordance with the dictates of right reason.

In the senate, or in court, or in any place of judgment, a man may be inhibited by fear or desire or something else from saying openly what he thinks. But would he then be free? He must dare to speak and to act. Hence, as I said before, liberty has quite reasonably been seen as part of fortitude. Both the free and the strong man reveals himself most clearly in action. We praise a man’s strength, however, when he with reason exposes himself to bodily danger, while we admire his freedom when he is speaking and giving counsel. Frank and noble spirits must possess both virtues, it seems, for they neither yield to present dangers nor are terrified by threats. In states where liberty exists, these qualities are most useful, for there the citizens speak without subterfuge and give advice to the Republic based on their real convictions. I think it was right, therefore, to call this power to live liberty. Or do you perhaps disagree?

**Microtoxus:** I don’t feel that anything has been introduced here altogether superfluously. Furthermore I won’t take offense at anything you say or that I hear said about myself, as long as you’ll please go on with the discourse you started. Even if I seem to know already what is coming, I still want to hear you explain what is meant by “within the limits of law and custom.”

**Alitheus:** I noticed long ago, Microtoxus, that nothing worries you more than to seem to be hearing something for the first time. Let me tell you what I think though.

I would not call anyone unfree merely because he had to obey the law of his country. Obedience to the law is, as Cicero says, the truest liberty. So, we obey the law in order to be free. Many actions can, in fact, be prohibited without diminishing personal liberty. I would not call it lack of freedom not to be allowed to strike one’s fellow citizen with impunity, or to take his wealth by force, or to rape his wife. Then there is a myriad of things not prohibited by law but forbidden by the customs and conventions of the city. Anyone who does those things risks suspicion of madness. This, in my view, is not a threat to liberty either. I don’t consider a man unfree because, if he wants to keep his reputation for sanity, he can’t unlace his boots or eat his dinner in the piazza—that is, if he’s a citizen of Florence, for these same things are tolerated in travelers. Custom likewise does not let a respectable man cavort or sing in the marketplace, though there is no law against it. I would not describe a man as less than free because, for fear of disgrace, he abstained from such activities. Would you?

**Microtoxus:** Not at all. What you say seems absolutely true, and nothing could be truer. I see how wrong I was not to understand the need for these last points in your definition. They are really no less
important than the rest. Since you have done justice to the first part of our problem, now, and explicated your definition part by part, I am only waiting to hear you on the other half of the question. Please go on and explain in what ways we at present live without liberty, for this point I scarcely believe you can prove.

_Ailtheus:_ You are asking me to contemplate again a very sad situation. These things are painful to remember, let alone discuss. Dear friends, I cannot think about this subject without tears. It makes me ashamed, for I too was born in this city, and I too belong to our time. And I see the people who once commanded most of Tuscany and even some of the neighboring peoples, bullied today by the whims of one young man. Many noble minds and men of eminent seniority and wisdom wear today the yoke of servitude and hardly recognize their own condition. Nor, when they do see it, do they dare avenge themselves. They become, and this is worst of all, the unwilling adversaries of those who try to liberate them.

We have degenerated so much in our time from the virtues of our ancestors; I am convinced that if they came back to life, they would deny we ever sprang from them. They founded, cherished, and increased this Republic. They gave it excellent customs, sacred laws, and institutions that further an upright way of life. Our constitution, as anyone could see, equalled or surpassed in its protection of the people’s liberty the ancient constitutions of Lycurgus, Solon, Pompey, and the rest. The results proved it. As long as our state lived in accordance with its own law, it enjoyed preeminence among the other Tuscan cities in wealth, in dignity, and in power. All that time this city was a model, not of power alone, but of moral principles. Now I see the same laws despised by everyone till nothing stands lower. The desires of a few irresponsible citizens, instead, have gained the force of law.

Consider the facts, really. Isn’t it well known that the basic principle of all liberty is citizen equality? This is a fundamental to keep the rich from oppressing the poor or the poor, for their part, from violently robbing the rich. On this basis everyone keeps what is his and is secure from attack. Judge for yourselves how secure things are in our country. Shall I describe the sale of justice? Most carefully, as long as our state was free, was justice kept clear of corruption. Now it is managed in

a way that is sickening even to talk about. I cannot recall without great sorrow how no one dared, by word or vote, contradict the charges which, backed by plenty of false denunciations from certain individuals, were thought to be in line with the wishes of one powerful man. It came to the point where I considered it one of Fortune’s gifts, and not one of the lesser ones, if a man could find some honorable reason not to participate in judgment. And yet at one time our state was well known for justice, and men from distant countries brought cases to be tried in Florence. Now when cases arise in the city, they are never judged but after long delay and great expense. The play of ambition and bribery or the wishes of the powerful are always involved. As a result the sentence often favors, not the man with right on his side, but the one with influence. There are many to tell how they have been forced out of their houses and lost their inheritance. They have been despised by force and fraud of their homes, their money, and all that they possess.

Why compare the freedom of speech that used to prevail in the senate and in all public meetings with the present silence? There once did shine the wisdom, the eloquence, and the fervent patriotism which graced some of our best citizens. Serious and responsible men used to consider all sides of any proposal freely, and soon got at the truth of things that way. There were not many errors made in council then. Once a decree was passed, it was not repented of the next day and changed to its opposite. Now, on the other hand, as there are just a few Catos sitting in consultation on the weightiest questions, we often see resolutions passed one day and reversed the next by the same body, perhaps because they received a word of warning from someone. Our state has been robbed of the advantage or convenience which Aristotle noticed in free republics—that they are one body served by many heads and hands and feet. For it is practically the same as not to possess something, if, having it, you do not wish to use it.

Thanks to the arrogance of a few overbearing individuals and the apathy of the rest of the citizens, these few today usurp the power of all. Their impulses and ambitions decide everything, while almost no authority is left to the councils or the people. Silent is the voice of the herald so eloquently praised by Demosthenes, that used to be empowered by our government to call all citizens to a council. If, for custom’s sake, it does occasionally still ring out, everyone knows it is
meaningless. For men are too intimidated to give free and open counsel.

Consider, too, the undeniable important power of the state to punish malefactors. Irresponsible criminals, whom no shame, no sense of right and wrong, no love of honor can deter from crime, can be coerced by fear of the judge and of punishment. Unless their boldness is curbed by that fear, no crime is horrible and cruel enough to make them hesitate. The absence of threats is for them an invitation to crime. And what do such scoundrels have to fear today? What holds them back, when the bribes and the influence of wicked leaders whom they delight to serve assure them of immunity and rewards? Men actually condemned to exile or prison openly walk the streets in front of everybody, released, not on the order of an official, but by the words of one citizen. Men condemned by the Committee of Eight to perpetual imprisonment are removed from jail on the whim of a private person, or rather of a tyrant.

And what about the way public officials are chosen these days? You know as well as I that, in free states, offices are filled by chance selection from certain lists. It is considered best for liberty and justice if all those who aid the Republic privately by payment of taxes are also given a chance to participate in its rewards and advantages. But now all the positions that bestow some dignity on a man and yield some profit are filled, not by lot, but by appointment. The result is that no good men, no men noted for prudence and nobility are chosen, but satellites of the powerful or servants of their desires and pleasures who will unquestioningly obey them and act as humble as ever they can. This, of course, lessens the authority of the legitimate government, or rather destroys it. Good men, furthermore, and men fitted for public affairs, react with the natural indignation of free persons and refuse to hold any office. This gives still more license, however, to the small group of criminals who harass and ruin the Republic. I could go on much longer, protesting against these disgraceful abuses, but my own grief, by God, and the repulsive character of the crimes involved, makes me want to stop.

I cannot simply ignore, however, the most terrible abuse of all. This is an evil all our citizens should be trying to stop like a plague. While Italy in general has enjoyed great peace in recent years, what could be more shameful than to find that all our citizens, but for a few, have been drained by heavy taxes? These resources, moreover, collected on the excuse of purchasing agricultural surpluses or on some other stupid pretext, have all been diverted to serve one man's pleasures. No need to wonder, now, how they get all the money for urban and rural building at once, or where the money comes from to feed such crowds of horses, dogs, birds, actors, sycomants, and parasites. So much spent in so few months does in itself invalidate the impression of private wealth he supposedly wants to give. And he openly admits that he does not have to pay his debts. He has always extorted money on any pretext from all sides, from friend as well as stranger. He has always assumed that Fortune will always favor him, so that he can freely use the wealth of others, public or private, as his own.

These facts and others like them, Microtuxus, in my judgment simply undermine liberty. Liberty has been uprooted and thrown away. To hate such an undignified and corrupt condition like the plague is only natural. But I find the situation even more unbearably bitter when I reflect on what I have learned from the talk of older men and from books about our ancestors' long struggle to preserve liberty and citizen equality. They used to have periodic inquiries to expose wild behavior or, in legal terms, to uncover public scandal. Those who were convicted they exiled. This custom of ostracism goes back to the Athenians and has always been characteristic of free republics, for people knew that citizen equality is basic to the preservation of liberty. I am sure the fact has not escaped you, for instance, that Giorgio Scala received the death penalty. He was a noble knight and a very distinguished man who held high public office, but he had removed his follower, Scatiza Ascela, from the prefect's prison. The knight, Verius Circulus, was exiled for claiming a position above his fellow citizens. Curtius Donatus was expelled from the city because he took to wife the daughter of Uguccione Fagiolano. The people attacked him, and later he was defeated and killed in battle. Once he formed a connection with a tyrant, the people suspected he might have some sort of tyrannical designs. In those days there was real concern for liberty among the people. They wanted, that is, to keep things under their own control and to govern the Republic themselves. Now, on the other hand, the people seem to despair of themselves. They submit to an alien will and let the wishes of certain people subvert their lives.

This is not the result of natural and honest ignorance, but of coercion
by force and threat. They dare not vindicate their rights. Yet this same people once fought powerful republics and great tyrants. They defended their liberty with success, first by sacrifice of blood and second by expenditure of vast wealth. We know how boldly, with what might and military cunning they made war against their neighbors when they saw themselves invaded or when, goaded by injuries and excessive provocations, they crossed the borders of others. They fought Volterra, Pisa, Arezzo, and Pistoia until all these cities came under their rule and dominion. They made Siena, Perugia, and Bologna suffer so much in war that by finally demanding peace, they were granting a boon. To speak of Lucca, it is true, is somewhat embarrassing. We repeatedly conquered that city but we never could hold it, and though it has often come under Florentine government, for some reason it has always slipped through our fingers again. It really has seemed like a dragon that annually devoured Florentine money and blood.

It would take too long to list all the tyrants and princes of the Florentine people who have fought. They carried on long and bitter wars rather than suffer the loss, if only in name, of their liberty. They fought Manfred at Arbus and again at Benevento, where he died defeated. Love of liberty made our ancestors, much as they always cherished the Christian religion and the cult of the church, unhesitatingly take up arms against a wicked pope. Such was Gregory X, who for three years denied our city the sacraments. Later they made war against the Emperor Henry, who pitched his tents as near as the monastery of San Salvi. For similar reasons, they fought Uguzzone Fagnano and Castruccio of Lucca. These tyrants could do great damage to our city but they could not destroy our liberty. The same thing with Guido Tarlato, who was leader and tyrant of Arezzo. Even Louis of Bavaria, coming to be crowned emperor of the Romans, tried in vain to subjugate Florence. Mastino [della Scala, of Verona], that pernicious tyrant, took over Lucca and made her drop her obligations as a Florentine ally. He not only held that city against all law and custom, but also waged war against Florence. Again his strategies and onsloughts, Florence made a marvelous defense. Following Mastino’s example the Milanese leader, Biscio of the Visconti, tried to drag the Florentines into his empire. He used no less fraud than force but in the end he grew weary of the struggle and was glad to sue for peace. Then there was the greatest and most expensive war, the one against the terrible governors of the Papal States. They disregarded divine and human law. First by starvation, and when that didn’t work, by war, they tried to rob us of our liberty. At that time Gregory XI ruled from Avignon, and the Florentines, led by the Eight appointed to wage the war, were able to make many papal cities revolt against the rule of the church.¹⁸

Not much later there was a full-scale war against Gian Galeazzo Visconti, the tyrant of Milan. That was a war that put us in great peril. It staggered the imagination to consider how much money it cost. For many years the Florentines waged that war without obtaining a true peace settlement, made in good faith. In the midst of peace the duke was setting traps for the Florentines and preparing further war. So they summoned Duke Robert of Bavaria into Italy on the promise of 40,000 gold pieces, and in a single night, they collected all that and more as the citizens carried their contributions to the magistrates. Such was their hatred of tyranny, their love of liberty and country.

Great and mighty war was waged against Ladidas of Naples, that perfidious king, with the Florentines pouring out money: some spent on armaments and some intercepted by the treachery of the king. Yet they did buy purchase Cortona from that same king, and increase their dominion.²⁰ Later there were wars, not one but several, with Filippo Visconti, the duke of Milan. That wicked tyrant and sever of all crime used force and all sorts of cunning tricks to destroy our liberty. But our forefathers stopped him, and gave him occasion to do some worrying about keeping his own domains. Should I remind you of the wars with Alfonso, King of Sicily? Under the influence of Pope Eugene and the Siennese, he attacked the innocent Florentines, who were most loath to fight, and waged a cruel war. Finally, he conspired with the Venetians so that he and they both expelled our ambassadors. Then he sent his son Ferdinand at the head of a huge army and himself invaded our borders. What happened? On both fronts the armies came back to their kingdom without loot, wholly disgraced, and ravaged by hunger and exhaustion.²²

But the war we are now waging against Pope Sixtus and King Ferdinando²³ leaves me at a loss as to what to say. Both of them clearly declare in speech and writing that they do not seek to take away but to restore the liberty of the Florentine people, and that they war, not against the
Florentines, but only against Lorenzo de’ Medici. Everywhere they speak of him as a tyrant, not a citizen, and they have hurled at him alone the full range of ecclesiastical censures. I don’t really know whether the struggle of those who oppose these attacks ought to be viewed as a defense of liberty or of servitude.

I wanted to review all this briefly, however, and to demonstrate by a quick summary of past events how great was our ancestors’ concern always to preserve and guard liberty. They gave their blood, insofar as it was their business to fight, and later, when they waged their wars with foreign armies, they spent enormous sums. Nor were they satisfied with Italian forces; they brought to their side various transalpine princes. They called kings and emperors into Italy, such as Charles, king of Bohemia and emperor of the Romans, against the power of the bishop of Milan. Similarly against Ladislas of Sicily, they called in Louis of Anjou from France, and together with Pope Alexander V, arranged a friendly alliance with him. On the same principle, they paid heavily to get the count of Armenia to cross over into Italy and oppose what Gian Galeazzo was trying to do. They labored with special zeal, though not with success, to incite Robert, duke of Bavaria, elected Roman emperor, to come and fight that same Gian Galeazzo. And not to harp on ancient history, in our own day we have seen René, the alternate king of Sicily, called down from Provence to carry on against the Venetians the campaign of Francesco Sforza, duke of Milan, with whom we had become allied and associated. King René, to keep a presence in Italy as long as there was work to be done, left behind his son, John, styled the duke of Calabria. He lived a long time in Florence and avenged the city against the unprovoked onslaught of Alfonso and Ferdinand [king of Sicily and duke of Calabria of the actually reigning Aragonese house] when they tried to destroy her liberty.  

These things I had to say, excellent friends, concerning liberty. I am afraid I may have seemed to run on and on. But, by God, the subject drew out my talk beyond what I intended almost without my noticing it. If it bored you, I beg your pardon, but if it gave you some joy and pleasure, thank liberty herself, whose very name is a delight to the ear. Now, not to let ourselves be cheated of what was promised us, I think we may fairly expect to listen to Eleutherius while he gives us his reasons for living as he does.

Eleutherius: Your demand is just, Alithcus, and I can’t in honesty evade it, much as I was hoping to. I had convinced myself that the seriousness and magnitude of the problems we have been discussing would make you forget my trivial and foolish concerns. But I do think it best to put all this further talk off till tomorrow. The sun, now inclining to the west, and the breath of a gentle breeze so pleasantly cooling the air remind us to think of our health. You know how good it is to take some moderate, not overstimulating exercise before supper. That’s what the doctors say. So, with your approval, let’s go look at the various trees in that grove. It’s just far enough from here to let us walk there and return home in time for supper.

Microtoxus: A wholly delightful and happy thought, Eleutherius. Nothing you could have suggested would do us more good. We wander through tall grass in the shade of the trees’ green roof, we are surrounded by the varied songs of birds, and we approach a pleasant destination. These very delights, this abundance of honest pleasures, might even alter my opinion if I did not know you for a man destined to do greater things. Well, we shall argue about that later. Let’s go now, and continue our little journey until we arrive at home. Then we shall see to our bodily refreshment, and surrender to rest and sleep.

BOOK TWO

Eleutherius: The next day, as dawn was breaking, I went to see my friends. They were already up and taking a stroll in the garden, where it was cool. When we had exchanged the usual words of greeting, I turned to Microtoxus and said, “Well, Microtoxus, did this night change your mind? Would you agree now that one is happier living in the fresh air, among wide fields, amidst the gratuitous bounties of nature? Or would you still prefer to be walled in on all sides by the city, to live as if in prison, and hardly to breathe freely?”

Microtoxus: We shall talk about these things later. Let us go slowly down the road which encircles the farm and sit in the meadow shaded by great oaks. You may follow me there now, and I shall be your leader.
Alithetus: Microtoxus, you made a fine choice of place. The heavy growth of oaks on the east provides shade and the field, surrounded by grapevines, is better furnished for our comfort with its soft grass and flowers than any room full of drapes and rugs.

Don't hold back any longer, Eleutherius, fulfill your promise to speak. Redeem your pledge now and tell us your reasons for your way of life. Though I agree with you and approve of your life, I still want you to say something convincing to Microtoxus here.

Microtoxus: I myself, before Eleutherius begins, would like to state my objections to his retirement. I don't want you to think I am afraid to state my views. Also, I don't see the need for a lot of repetition in case Eleutherius wants to rebut my arguments.

Alitheus: Wise words. I admit it is folly to try to judge a cause unheard. So state your position. We are ready to listen.

Microtoxus: I've always believed that a man of natural talents, especially if he has further profited by education, ought as far as possible to be useful to society. He ought to communicate to others what he has developed in his own life. Architas is right, you know, when he tells us that we are born, not for our own sakes, but for our family, country, and friends, and that we are only in some small part our own. But a man who lives only for himself, who withdraws into solitude and occupies his mind with private affairs, neglects his duty. I might concede the privilege to persons defective in mind or body, and therefore unable to do their duty as regards society. But I think withdrawal is least permissible to a man whose limbs are unhurt and who possesses an aptitude for speech and for observation, especially a man whom long study of literature has made still more intelligent. Such a person would be useful to his fellow men in the city.

Nor can you reasonably be deterred by shame or modesty, Eleutherius, as if you were some outsider newly invited to take part in government. Long ago your ancestors were already contenders for the honors of the city. In time of grave danger they aided the state with large financial contributions, being second to no other family or few. I find in the public records that when the office of prior was only eighteen years old in

our city, one Senro Rinuccini was awarded this highest dignity. Do not imagine, for the records show clearly that it was not so, that men of humble station or condition or men without proven ability and character were elected to the highest office in the Republic in those days. Until 1347, as it happens, I find no others of the clan raised to this dignity; perhaps those who lived then overlooked them, or perhaps it was the paucity of men, always a problem in your family. In the year I mentioned, however, Eleutherius, an ancestor of yours named Francisco was made prior, and he held that office five times before 1368. Between the last and second to last time, he was also made a knight by Niccolò d'Este, then prince of Ferrara. He and Maffeo Pilloio were sent to that prince as orators from the Republic, and he elevated them both to knighthood rank. After these events, Francisco was created one of the Eight with undefined powers. It was a dangerous time for the Republic, for Bernabò, the tyrant of Milan, had occupied the fort of Miniatò with connivance of a noble faction. The Eight appointed to direct that war by their full efforts and with the support and cooperation of the people of Miniatò took it back from the tyrant. Thus it returned to Florentine jurisdiction and control. After that, however, your family, along with the nobles in general, was excluded from the government of Florence by a rabble of scoundrels who cruelly vexed all the good men except those who paid them off. Not much later, nonetheless, Giovanni, his son, was made a knight by the people and became a prior as well. Your house did not again enjoy that dignity for sometime, until Francisco, son of Cino and nephew of your father, the knight Francisco, was elected to that office in the year 1437.

I remind you of these things, Eleutherius, which you know better than anyone, of course, only to make you see that, if you sleep or live in leisure and rest on your wealth, you disgrace your family. You accepted your dignity from your ancestors, I remind you, and it is up to you not so much to guard the ample fortune which they bequeathed to you as to carry on their official role and likewise gain public honors, which are just as desirable a heritage.

Eleutherius: You, Microtoxus, have certainly given us a lot of information about my ancestors and about our whole family. I am filled with admiration for your diligence. You have managed to put together
facts I thought were known to few persons beside myself. For while these things are all true, still, being old truths, they have been generally forgotten. I know them partly because my father, Filippo, told me, and partly from certain old documents. I carefully keep those documents, which I sorted out after much labor from numerous bundles of papers, for such things are often lost through the negligence of the very people they concern. This makes it easy for me to accept your rather freely spoken criticism. I shall answer your points one by one, as briefly as I can.

I don't want to go into too much detailed exposition and bore you. When it comes to the actual reasons for my own decisions, however, I shall state my arguments at more length.

I won't deny, good friends, that I have spent my whole life in the study of books and have, as I believe, made the best of my education. For I did not limit myself, as many people do, to what is done by the faculties of grammar and rhetoric at universities; I did not devote all my time to the poets and orators and historians, though I read enough in them. But equipped with this kind of knowledge, I turned to philosophy, a study which merits the name of guide to life. I applied my mind and worked hard to get from my studies not just an ornamental polish or some honest intellectual pleasure but also guidance to right living.

There is much acute controversy among the best philosophers, as to the nature of the ultimate good. Plausible reasons are poured out on every side of the issue, but all do seem to agree on one point, that happiness, or synonymously, the highest good, is found in whatever makes men, as far as humanly possible, similar to God. According to all the best thinkers, moreover, whether our own theologians or pagan philosophers, in God there is no passion or motion. Whatever, therefore, makes the mind tranquil and free of passion, that, they admit must bestow happiness. If we agree with Aristotle's conviction that happiness lies, not in passivity but in action, we shall conclude that tranquility is the essential foundation and basis of happiness because it allows us to devote ourselves properly to either action or contemplation.

I do not think it foolish to point this out because I have so often seen people mistakenly suppose that anything productive of tranquility itself is the dreamed-of goal, happiness. Thus there are people who say that wealth or status or some combination of external advantages is happiness, thinking that one of these can guarantee peace and tranquility. This, I think, is far from true. For desires and possessions, as is well known, plunge the soul into perpetual agitation and anxiety. The opinion of the Stoics may not be unfounded when they say that only virtue, a right spiritual disposition or condition, is happiness. This is a hard doctrine, for the soul so disposed is, by habit or by the condition of virtue, emptied of all passion. What are generally esteemed excellent things such men have learned simply to scorn. They live as though they had no sensual capacities, or as though, having them, they had no use for them at all. That is what the Stoics ask. If anyone actually should reach this state of mind, I would consider him, not a man but a mortal god.

Aristotle, however, speaks more plausibly and more in line with every day experience. He grants that men may have passions within moderation, with the proviso that their feelings must obey rather than oppose reason. Thus we may in moderation seek honors, wealth, and some pleasures. Since he considers happiness an active pursuit, however, he seems thus to allow us very little of it. For, weighed down by the body and its needs, we are obviously prevented from cultivating happiness and can give only snatches of time to contemplation. In this regard the Stoics' ideas seem better to fit the case, for they declare that happiness consists simply in the quality or condition of being virtuous. These problems really require more extensive treatment and subtler argumentation, however, so let's leave them to people who inquire into the fine points of this kind of discussion more for the sake of argument than with a view to application.

We'll let it suffice to draw the following conclusion from their arguments: Man's first concern is to seek inner peace and liberty and tranquillity, and furthermore, he may do so in either of two ways—avoiding anything he might desire to possess, or learning so to moderate his desires as to have them diverge only minimally from the dictates of virtue and right reason. Having thus gained the mastery of our passions, we may live happily and well. A moderate worldly fortune will easily suffice us. We differ widely, then, from the foolish opinion of the mass of men, who think that the highest good, the goal that all should seek,
is great wealth or the vulgar fame awarded and sought by the general
public. Happiness is truly what the Greeks called εὐθυμία, a word we
might translate "spiritual well being," or simply tranquility.26

How I have hoped to attain this condition myself you shall hear. But
I don’t want you to think that I am trying to give other people a set of
rules by which to live. I am not telling you what others ought to do,
but simply what I have done and for what reasons. That is what you
asked me.

When I read in the best authors that to a wise man nothing is so im-
portant as his own moral guilt, I understand this to mean that one should
bear with equanimity whatever happens to one through no fault of
one’s own. Fault or guilt is properly defined as of two kinds: faults of
ignorance, that is, and faults of wickedness or vice. Since by our own
efforts we are able to avoid both classes of guilt, I have always believed
that we are also obligated to avoid them both. It seems to me Cicero
expressed it well and truly: “I have always wished,” he said, “first to
deserve honors, second, to be thought to deserve them, and only third
—what many people consider the first thing—actually to obtain them.”

With this philosophy in mind, I have mainly tried not to be barbarous,
superstition, and ignorant concerning the customary activities of men living
the common and civic life. I have tried to make absolutely sure that no
one could ever justly call me a thief, a robber, a liar, a scoundrel, a
slanderer, or an unjust man. Secondly, I have tried to give some evi-
dence of my character to my fellow citizens, most easily, I thought,
by service in office. I took the trouble, therefore, to fill, first the highest
office of prior, and, not much later, that of member of the Eight.

I don’t know what others thought of me, but this is what happened:
without my asking or even suspecting it, I was appointed along with
some most distinguished citizens, to the post of prefect of grammar
schools, and I was soon sent as an envoy on an important mission to
the pope. There, if I had preferred private advantage, or rather foul
disgrace, to the public interest, I might have had what people call a
very successful career. But I would rather lose every possession I own
than enrich a certain private person at the expense of the Republic.
Through all vicissitudes, I have maintained this principle always: noth-
ing could make me an abject careerist, a servile creature, a man with no
dignity. I would not buy anything with deals and favors. I saw it all
donated so often and so shamelessly that I was embarrassed for these igno-
rant souls who wanted to be preferred above others and therefore
acted so obsequiously towards their natural peers as to fill them with
vast and unjustified delusions of grandeur. Too late these people them-
selves saw the mistake they had made. Then it was useless, for the disease
was too advanced for cure.

This is why up to a certain point I tried to participate in govern-
ment, though I considered it a wise precept that says “do not get in-
volved in politics.” Such, we know, was Plato’s view, the Prince of
Philosophers, when, in his old age, he saw the Athenians apparently
gone mad.27 The same can justifiably be said today of the Florentines,
whose prolonged and bitter servitude has made them lay aside a long
time ago all sense of honor, all moral sensibility, all manly vigor and
love of liberty. Instead scoundrels and criminals, men one wouldn’t want
to call citizens, have reached such a pitch of audacity that they unhesi-
tatingly overturn and betray and undermine everything for their own
purposes. With virulent hatred, moreover, do they persecute anyone
they think knows of their crimes but refuses to be a tool or accomplice.
The result is that good men who do obtain a position in the government
along with them live in great danger and acute anxiety. For to serve
their greed would be vile and criminal, but for one to resist the power
of a whole group is impossible. And the greatest horror of all is seeing
crime committed in one’s presence which one could not even hear de-
scribed without distress.

Although I am far from that wisdom which reached its height in
Plato, still the little knowledge of literature that I have has freed me
from the disease of avarice and ambition and taught me that the hap-
iness all men seek is not to be found by amassing wealth, nor by
gaining what the crowd thinks are honors, but by living in tranquility
and freedom of spirit. I speak now of the sort of happiness to which
a person placed in civic life can aspire in this valley of tears. Not that
I have ever wanted to live passively in a state of idleness. An inactive
and slothful life weakens the nerves of body and brain. But I have aimed
for the middle way which would make me every day a better man. I
am always learning something and becoming potentially more useful,
should the state ever require my services. Since, as I remarked before, it
is less painful to hear than to see things you cannot approve of, I spend
much of my time alone, in converse with my own mind or with the
books you have seen here, and I enjoy the liberty I wholly believe in.
I have apportioned my time so that not a particle of it is wasted. I am
always attending to my bodily health by taking exercise, or concerning
myself with domestic matters, or cultivating my mind by reading and
meditation. For nothing worth writing has come to my mind, seeing
how much there is already in the way of all sorts of books, and how
well they have been written in both ancient and modern times. If Nestor
or Titonius were to return to life and devote all his years to reading, I
think he would hardly find time for my contribution—if I wrote.

If something were occasionally to bring me friends like you, there-
fore, to visit me here, I would not exchange my life for the life of those
the poets call blessed, who inhabit the Elysian fields. Whatever it may
be, I think my life is more blessed than the life of a city person, burdened
by constant anxiety, humiliated by being unable to move a finger of his
own will. Good men and loyal friends, now you have heard my philos-
ophy. Perhaps I went into more detail than you bargained for. What-
ever others may say, these sentiments will remain mine if you approve
them. I so much respect your judgment that, if you agree, I shall con-
sider myself armed against all criticism. If something seems amiss to
you, however, I shall not refuse to change the present direction of my
life.

Eleutherius: The model of your conduct already impressed me before,
but now, after your discourse, I feel convinced that no other is so con-
ductive to happiness. Although I do not at present live so very differently
from you, I shall after this strive to go more often to the country and
enjoy solitude.

Microtoxus: Right, Eleutherius. For, the ideas of Eleutherius have
changed my mind so that I can think of nothing truer. Yet really I still
don’t believe that a man should shrink from work and from feelings of
indignation, and should live for himself only. You turn your back on
others and abandon your country, which should be your dearest concern.
Aside from what we owe to immortal God, we owe our best to our
country.
What excuse can they give for excluding me from the government? I carried out my mission, though in vain. They cannot say there was some flaw in my conduct, some contravention of orders, something done that was not in accordance with their orders. I had been given, by order of the people, full power to make binding agreements. I never used that power, however, unless specifically directed to do so by the highest magistrate. I can prove all this easily from public documents. I knew very well the duty of a good envoy and a loyal citizen. That man, elevated by Fortune’s bold hand and by the impropriety of the foolish citizens, complained that I wrote publicly to the magistrate on great affairs of state, rather than privately to him. This does not bother me one bit. I shall always remember and declare that I was sent forth, not by one private individual, but by the whole people, by the highest public office, by the Republic itself. What right did he have to complain when, for friendship’s sake, I even gave him a private report on the main points at the same time I handed in my official one? But with his usual arrogance he scorns this report, and left me without even the honor of a written acknowledgment. I would be dishonest not to admit that these things were somewhat upsetting.

When the pope in the council of cardinals, therefore, formally pronounced sentence against our Republic, I made a private report to him as well as a public one to the highest magistrate. Then he wrote and censured me for having spoken as I had in a public document. It is true that, both before and after my return, I did not hide my indignation. When the pope had left Rome on account of the plague and was traveling around, to the great discomfort and danger of his court, since he was no longer deliberating on matters that concerned us, I asked permission to return home. First I asked the magistrate and then him privately, but he kept denying my request. Shortly after, when without his knowledge I got permission from the Eight, he used the excuse that I came from plague-ridden parts to make the same Eight bar me from the city. I omit many details, I don’t want to seem overconcerned with trivia.

The fact is I would have taken these blows calmly and not let them disturb my mind, had not far greater crimes and more serious evils inflicted by him on the Republic aroused my deep disgust. He accepted tyranny as a legacy from his grandfather, but exercised it much more severely than his grandfather did. He was more insolent than his father.

He did not get reasonable advice from the citizens, nor did he listen to his own reason. He did everything according to the impulses of his willful spirit, and he dragged down the poor country. Spoiled in part of her wealth and altogether of her dignity, she has become the mockery of all Italy for enduring such a destructive and cruel tyranny.

Even certain princes, remembering our former dignity and glory, have come to pity our distress. It has reached the point where they use their resources to war on Florence only partly to avenge their own injuries at his hands, but partly to restore to the Florentine people their former liberty. This Florentine Phalaris has now gone so far in insolence that he considers himself greater than the greatest princes of Italy. When he receives favors from them in his need, he esteems those something owed to him by right.

This gives you some idea of his cruel oppression of the citizens, his fantastic audacity and incredible arrogance. He taxed them enough in recent years, while there was peace from external enemies, to vex and wound them. Now he has involved them in a war that is grave indeed, dangerous and pernicious. This war—as not only rumor but public letters sent by the pope and king to all peoples make clear—was undertaken not against the Florentines but against Lorenzo de’ Medici, the tyrant of Florence, for the liberty of the people. This man, whose insolence, temerity, and ingratitude had wounded the most powerful princes of Italy, implicated the state in a grave and calamitous war, conducted by them, as they declare, not against the Florentine people but for their liberation from Lorenzo’s fierce tyranny. It is a shame and a misery, altogether, to see the many fields laid waste, the villages and farms devastated, the many men taken prisoner, the many victims reduced to indigence and beggary. One might well sing to us the song of Hesiod:?

\[
\text{πολλάχι δὲ ὑμῖν κακὸν ἔγραφον ὀπήμα.}
\]

Often the whole city suffers through one bad man.

If I am unwilling to adore, to flatter and to bow before this man, can you blame me?

These, good friends, are my answers to the arguments of Micrurus.
I don't scorn the honors won by my ancestors nor do I lack the desire to follow in some modest way along the same path, if I may do so in liberty. I do not shirk labor and trouble. I would take on work, and danger too, for my country. But the truth is that I cannot peacefully tolerate our ungrateful citizenry and the usurpers of our liberty. I live, therefore, as you see, content with this little house and farm. I am free from all anxiety. I don't inquire what goes on in the city, and I lead a quiet and free life. There's never a day when I fail to read or write, and, except when it rains, I always take some exercise outdoors. If only I could have your company here, therefore, I should consider myself in paradise.

Alithes: I think you have done very well, Eleutherius, and I myself, persuaded by your thoughts, shall try to see you and talk with you often.

Microtoxus: On such journeys, I promise to be your constant companion. But since we have talked enough now, let us dedicate the rest of the day to our health. Walking and talking, let us get ourselves a good appetite for dinner.

NOTES

1. Translated from Francesco Adorno's edition in Atti Colombario, vol. 22 (N. F. 8; 1957), 265–303, previously published by him in E. Grassi, Collezione Tradizione y Tarea, (Josada), Santiago, Chile, 1952. Footnotes to classical sources are with one small exception his.


3. F. Adorno thinks this is a reference to Donato Acciaiuoli's still extant Commentary on the lectures of Argyropoulos. It is even possible that Alithes may be Rinuccini's fictional name for Donato, and not just for one of his friends.

5. Cicero Paradoxa V.
7. Cicero De futilibus V, 8, 23; V, 29, 87.

11. Battle of Benevento in February 1266 ended the Hohenstaufen line in Italy.
12. Florence lay under the interdict from September 1273 till January 1276.
14. Ugolino Ciaciulano was a Ghibelline leader who became tyrant of Pisa after Henry VIII's departure. He defeated Florence at Montecatini in August 1315; he was overthrown by Castruccio in the spring of 1316. Florence warred against Castruccio from 1320 till his death in 1329. Florence took Pisa and could not be dissuaded by the Emperor Louis of Bavaria in 1329.
15. Guido Tarlati, appointed Bishop of Arezzo in 1313, led that city in collaboration with his brother, Piero, Arezzo expanded its territory by conquest and Florence responded by conquering Arezzo and its domains in 1336.
17. Pisa, rather than Florence, finally took Lucca from Mastino in July 1342.
18. In 1351 Florence repelled the invasion of her territory by Milan, ruled at that time by Archbishop Giovanni Visconti.
19. In the War of the Eight Saints, fought in 1375–78 against Gregory XI, the Florentines sent representatives to papal towns and urged revolt. They carried a banner inscribed with the word, Libertas.
20. The wars with Ladislas went on from 1408 till his death in 1414. The purchase of Cortona, according to Schevill, occurred in January 1411, when Florence “abandoned its allies and was rewarded for its treachery by the cession of the town of Cortona.” Ferdinand Schevill, History of Florence, New York, 1961, 399, 21. 1422–28; 1440.
23. This dates the present dialogue to the period from the summer of 1478 to the end of 1479. It seems unlikely that Rinuccini was writing after Lorenzo had set out for Naples in December 1479, a spectacular mission which did bring peace by February 1480.
24. Rinuccini's attitude to Florentine diplomacy based on calling in foreigners to the peninsula is most unapologetic, compared to the Florentine ambassadors' speech in Brun's History, Book XII. Cf. Schevill (391): “the descent of the French was for many decades suspended like a portent over the peninsula, filling all its states, large and small alike, with alarm, but at the same time exercising a curious, hypnotic fascination.” In 1405 Savonarola would convince the Florentines that Charles VIII of France was both a scourge of God falling upon them, and, after negotiations, an ally who would eventually help them regain control of Pisa.
25. Plato Ep. IX 358a; Cicero De Officiis I, 7, 22.
26. Reference to the Giansì revolt of 1378 which greatly democratized the government till the counterrevolution of 1382.
29. Cicero Oratio pro Marcus, 63.
30. Cicero De futilibus V, 8, 23; V, 29, 87.
Girolamo Savonarola