Leonardo Bruni's Justification of the Pursuit of Wealth

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The civic humanists of the fifteenth century made a virtue of an active life in this world: of the married state, of participation in the political life of the city, and, with qualifications, of the pursuit of wealth. All of this was in contrast to what was held in the Middle Ages to be the ideal Christian life: one that involved retirement from this world, celibacy, and a renunciation of personal wealth.

Against the arguments of their monastic opponents, the humanists cast about for justifications of the active life, and were pleased to find them in authorities as venerable as Aristotle. Leonardo Bruni translated his *Ethics* in 1418 and his *Politics*, in which man was defined as a "political animal," in 1437. He also translated, in 1421, a little treatise on *Economics*[1] that was at that time attributed to Aristotle. This he dedicated in a prefatory letter[2] to Cosimo de' Medici. The dedicatory letter contained a reference to "wealth" as a "good," and it was this challenge to the traditionally accepted Christian concept that provoked a critical letter from one Thomas Cambiatore of Ferrara. We do not possess Cambiatore's letter, but Bruni felt obliged to respond with a more extended development of his own ideas on the pursuit of wealth in the letter I have translated below.

† Gordon Griffith died on 13 January 2001.

[1] We await the definitive edition being prepared by Hermann Goldbrunner.

[2] An extract of which Bruni includes in his letter to Cambiatore, below. For the full text, see my translation in Griffiths, Hankins and Thompson, *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, The Renaissance Society of America, Renaissance Texts Series, Vol. 10, Binghamton, N.Y, 1987, pp. 305-6.

LETTER FROM BRUNI TO THOMAS CAMBIATORE[3]

To Thomas Cambiatore, Greetings:

If your letter had praised everything of mine, I would not have been as pleased as I am by your attempt to disprove and reject certain points. I regard this as a mark of friendship and the other as one of adulation. But in return I ask you to listen with an open mind to my rebuttal. For what you say, if it were allowed to pass without any reply from me, would be too one-sided. When you strike me with a blow and attack me everywhere, am I neither to strike back nor to resist? Such passive behaviour is contrary to nature itself, which has given stings even to the makers of sweetness and honey - the bees - so that they may counter any force that may be inflicted upon them. Our argument is, however, imbued not with a spirit of obstinacy nor of hatred, but of moderation and of liberality; its thesis is not aimed at your defeat but at the discovery of the truth. As Cicero says, let us debate, but not fight with one another.[4]

You say that you have recently read certain booklets of mine that had arrived in Ferrara. In your letter to me, you find many points in them to

[3] *Epist.*, ed. Mehus, V:2. Another letter addressed to Thomas Cambiatore is No. 21 in Book X, a book made up of letters found by Mehus but which Bruni had not included in his original collection. In X:21 Bruni explains that his efforts to get Cambiatore a position on the *Mercanzia* in Florence had failed in the face of strong support for a rival candidate from Rimini. Bruni promised to try again at the next opportunity. Meanwhile, Cambiatore "would have to bear these things patiently and philosophically, especially as a man shows himself to be a philosopher by counting as good nothing but honour." We may conclude from this that Cambiatore was a younger man, and from V:2 that he was then living in Ferrara. Franz Beck suggests that both letters were written in the neighborhood of 1425 ("Studien zu Lionardo Bruni," *Abhandlungen zur mittleren und neueren Geschichte*, ed. Georg von Below *et al.*, Heft 36 (1912), pp 80, 82). Tommaso Cambiatore is mentioned by Werner L. Gundersheimer in a list of humanists at the court of Leonello d'Este, Marquess of Ferrara (1441-1450), in *The Style of a Renaissance Despotism* (Princeton, 1972), pp. 103 n. and 239. Gundersheimer draws on G. Bertoni, *Guarino da Verona fra letterati e cortigiani a Ferrara*, 1429-1460 (Geneva, 1921), especially chapters II and III, and on the same author's *Biblioteca Estense* (Turin, 1903), p. 25, n.1, which lists codices dedicated to Leonello by Flavio Biondo, Ariosto, Tommaso Cambiatore, and others. For additional references, supplied by Prof. Sabbadini, see Francesco Paolo Luiso, *Studi su l'Epistolario di Leonardo Bruni*, ed. Lucia Gualdo Rosa, (Roma, 1980). Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, Studi Storici, fasc. 122-124, p. 107,n.3

[4] Cic., phil. fragm. II.3. Ed. Mueller, 1890, p.311; ed. Prisciano, VIII,735.

praise, but one to which you bitterly object, namely, that I said that wealth was numbered among the good things by philosophers. What I wrote about this makes you so angry that you make yourself almost hoarse shouting and protesting against me. I think, though, that I must reply to two of your charges: first, regarding the place (whether it was indeed an appropriate or inappropriate one), and second, regarding the substance (whether what I wrote was indeed false or erroneous). For it will be clear, if the context was a fitting one for what I said, and if my assessment was correct, that your reprimand, as I may jokingly refer to it, was not justified.

Let us therefore look first at the context. I had translated a book of Aristotle's, entitled **οι'κονομιχα'** (*Economics*) from Greek into Latin. I had decided to make this a gift to a friend and associate, a learned and delightful man.[5] The art of increasing one's estate is precisely the subject of this book, and the author himself says in another place that the object of economics (household management) is wealth.[6]

What then should I have said by way of preface when I sent this book to my friend? That this book contained Aristotle's precepts for the acquisition of wealth, but that such wealth was pernicious and evil, to be avoided and abominated? Who would read it if I had said that? Who wouldn't condemn my gift? Who wouldn't complain against Aristotle himself for describing the art of acquiring an evil thing? On the contrary, if there is any method or skill in writing, it is to produce in the preface something that will make the reader favorably inclined, responsive and attentive. But how favourable an attitude will be produced by some one who says that it was an evil art that he had translated from Greek into Latin for the sake of his friend? How responsive and attentive an attitude will be produced by some one who says in advance that he is going to write about things that will be injurious and which should be shunned? You see, therefore, Thomas, what the art of rhetoric *(ratio artificiumque dicendi)* requires, namely, that I should say what I said, and that what you object to is, in fact, in accord with the art *(artificiosum)*, while that which you praise is counter to it *(contra artem)*. This was, therefore,

[5] Cosimo de'Medici. It is probably to be dated 1420; see Gualdo Rosa's n. 5 in Luiso, *op. cit.*, p.107.
[6] *Pol.*, I, iv, 1.

what was especially required in the context of the preface, as you should have been able to see even as you read it. For it is the duty of the intelligent reader to pay attention to what is said and in what context, and to understand it in that context.

I come now to the substance. I said that wealth was numbered among the good things by philosophers. Do you object to this on the ground that this is not what the philosophers say, or on the ground that what they say is not true? If you are denying that they say this, and asserting that I have made it up, I beg you to hear what Aristotle as well as the whole Peripatetic school affirm, namely, that there are three kinds of goods: belonging to the external world, to the body and to the soul.[7] If you say that these are false, don't blame me but them. Look again and again at your position on this matter, weigh and consider whether it is not gainsaying the authority of Aristotle, Theophrastus, Cratippus and countless other philosophers, as if you alone knew more than they.

What did Plato himself, whom I might call the God of philosophers, say in the Gorgias?

"There is nothing (he says) that is not either good, bad, or indifferent. The good things are wisdom, health and wealth. The bad things are the contraries of these. Examples of the indifferent are sitting, running and sailing."[8]

Can you then accuse me of not having written the truth, when you see that these leading philosophers so clearly give a place to wealth among the good things? Was it wrong of me to have written what Plato himself and Aristotle, too, have laid down?

It is true that Epicurus is of a different opinion. So we are getting into a serious and intolerable situation. Are you not ashamed to represent the darkness of Epicurus against the two suns of philosophy - I mean Plato and Aristotle? If Epicurus does not regard wealth as a good thing, it is, I believe, because for him the blessed are the prodigal and the profligate, that is, those who waste their patrimony on obscene pleasures. Is this the man you are following? Can you or any sane person approve of a man who thinks that happiness is derived from such a shameful source?

[7] *Nic. Eth.*, I, viii, 2.
[8] *Gorgias*, 467 e.

What could be more insane than to dissent from Plato and Aristotle and to adhere to Epicurus, a man already damned and, as I might put it, a heretic in philosophy?

But I ask of you, who have given long and praiseworthy service to the law, whether you think that the jurists of authority, men of such prudence and learning, are crazy? You insist that they are learned in philosophy, too, but they do not deny that they follow what is, if I am not mistaken, the true and not the false philosophy. Now how do these jurists who are followers of the true and not of the false philosophy describe external things - as indifferent, or evil, or good? The answer is that the number of books in which they describe them as good is overwhelming.

I ask you, who argue this point so stubbornly, whether, when you are sitting as a judge in court and ordering someone to be put into possession of his property, you are thinking only about the virtues or also about real and personal property? Why then this stubborn insistence on speaking in a way different from that of other men? To show contempt for the philosophers? To look down upon Plato and Aristotle? To regard the authority of the jurists as valueless? To hold that they saw little, while we know everything?

Bona (goods), you say, is derived from *beare* (to bless). Certainly a man cannot acquire blessedness from external things. Therefore they cannot be good. This logic of yours, I see, seems to you to be very sharp. In fact it is obtuse, or rather fallacious.

First of all, on what you take for granted, that *bona* is derived from *beare*, Cicero says that he has no idea what the derivation of *bona* is.[9] Be careful, therefore, lest, as you claim more for yourself in philosophy than you concede to Aristotle, you claim in like fashion to know more about the structure of the Latin language than Cicero. This we shall never concede to you. For what do *bona* and *beatum* have in common besides the letter "b"? And so how can you explain that *bona* is better derived from *beare* than from *bibere* (to drink)? But once this assumption of yours is gone, you see that your whole argument is destroyed.

Yet even if one conceded to you that *bona* could be derived from *beare*, you cannot build anything on that concession. For we say that these external things *are* related to happiness (*beatitudo*), and hence, if

you will, are called *bona*, because without them no one can be happy (*beatus*). The goods of the soul alone cannot make one happy, unless perhaps you are going to assert that the victim inside the bull of Phalaris[10] could be happy, in a manner that I think you would not like to be happy. I can certainly affirm, so far as I am concerned, that I am averse to such a calamitous happiness, and think it is enough to concede that he is not to be despised, but I shudder to call happy the man who is in prison, under torment, in penury, under torture, or a witness to the slaughter of his children, because such would not be the attitude of a human being, but of some kind of stony monster that had rejected all feeling of humanity.

Virtue can, indeed, make a man good, but is by itself not sufficient to make him happy. A combination of goods is necessary. Just as the soul, which is far nobler than the body, nevertheless has need of the body to constitute a human being, so the goods of the soul, I say, are far nobler, but that it needs the external goods of the body in order to be happy.

Aristotle was certainly right in holding that external goods have their place not only in that kind of happiness that comes from fortitude and justice and the other active virtues, but also in the happiness of contemplation and leisure. This is what he says in discussing the contemplative life:

"He will have need of external prosperity, since he is a human being. For nature is not of itself sufficient to the life of contemplation; a healthy body is necessary, and food, and other services. Yet, although he cannot be said to be happy in the absence of external goods, it should not be thought that he has need of much or many. They, too, can be happy who are lords neither of sea or land."[11]

This is Aristotle's opinion regarding the contemplative life. But the civic and active life, he says, needs much more for happiness. He says:

"The generous man has to have money to exercise his generosity; and the just man has to have it to pay his obligations; and the brave man

[9] But *cf.* what Cicero said in the fifth book of the *Tusculanae*: that *virtus per se sufficit ad bene beateque vivendum*.

[10] Phalaris, the tyrant of Agrigento (b.c.565-549), burned his victims in a brazen bull.

[11] *Nic. Eth.*, X, viii, 9-10.

has to have power, if he is to carry out anything in accordance with his kind of virtue. Thus, he says, to carry out actions there is need of many things, and the greater and nobler they are, the greater are their requirements."[12]

Notice, then, that in this civic life in which we find ourselves, we have great need of external goods, and that the greater and nobler our actions are, the more we have need of external goods. The contemplative life has need of fewer things, but still has need of the external goods of the body, since without these it cannot be happy.

It is appropriate now to repeat those words of mine which you thought deserved such sharp criticism. This is what I wrote:[13]

"Wealth is indeed useful, since it is both an embellishment for those who possess it, and the means by which they may exercise virtue. It is also of benefit to one's sons, who can by means of it rise more easily to positions of honour and distinction. For "those whose talents are limited by domestic poverty find it hard to rise," as the line of our poet goes.[14] Therefore we ought, for our own and much more for the sake of our children, to strive as hard as we honorably can to increase our wealth, since it is numbered by the philosophers among the good things, and believed by them to be conducive to happiness."

In these words, I ask you, what is there that is not in accord with Aristotle's concept? Does he not include wealth among the goods? Does he not say that it pertains to happiness? Does he not say that it contributes to the exercise of virtue?

You have some objection to what I said about wealth's being an embellishment. But I was not talking about a bracelet or a fringe or actor's ornament, but about patronage (*magnificentia*). This virtue calls for embellishment, and depends so much on wealth that a poor man cannot be a patron (*magnificus*). I wonder therefore what it is you criticise in me, when for the above reason I wrote that wealth was useful, because

[12] *Nic. Eth.*, X, viii, 4-5.
[13] In the dedicatory letter to Cosimo.
[14] Juvenal, *Satir.*, 3, 164.

it made it possible to exercise virtue, and for the same reason was of benefit to the children, who might otherwise find their talents limited by domestic poverty. I certainly do not see why I should feel guilty for having written so, especially when I wrote in a context in which the praise of wealth was specifically called for. If I said that wealth was to be sought for its own sake, and that it was therefore legitimate to seize it, you might rightly complain. But since I said that it was to be sought for a virtuous purpose, and only as a sort of instrument for the exercise of this virtue, and added the qualification that it should be acquired only to the extent that this could be done honorably, so that concentration on this purpose should not divert us from right reason, what is there for anyone to charge against me?

My commendation of wealth, you say, will tend to make men's spirits small and narrow. But look and see whether this is not what you are doing. For if wealth is, indeed, the instrument of virtue, and if lofty, noble actions require it, as without it they cannot be carried out, who is it who is making men's spirits small and narrow? I, for saying that the necessary instruments for the exercise of virtue must be supplied? Or you, who deny that they should be supplied at all? Which of us, then, has the nobler aim for the human spirit? I, who would attempt lofty things, and would supply the necessary instruments? Or you, who are contemplating nothing grand and lofty?

You say that you will never admit that wealth should be numbered among the things that are good. But Plato and Aristotle say so, and I prefer their authority to yours by far. And, indeed, if wealth is good, it will not be injurious.

Why do you think reason, and that natural power of intellect which distinguishes us from the brutes, was given to man? Do you not think that it should be numbered among the good things? There are men who make perverse use of it, yet this does not prevent its being a good thing.

But, you say, there does not seem to be any way of acquiring wealth honorably. If you say that it cannot be acquired *honorably*, this of course indicates that wealth is not to be numbered amongst things that are good. But I regard a kingdom and a republic in the same way as among the things that are good, though we should not acquire any of these by fraud,

but only insofar as honour and the law permit. For an unjust acquisition corrupts what has been acquired. All useful things bear a likeness to an instrument, but the nature of instruments is such that one too small or one too large corrupts its use. For example, a ship only one cubit long, or one that is two stadia long, is useless; it is plain that one should never desire in anything more or less than the amount that is useful. We said that wealth was useful for the exercise of virtue, but as in the case of a ship, too little would impede the purpose, and too much would be of no advantage. Thus the acquisition of it must be both just and moderate, and any increase must be related to a virtuous purpose.

Love and best wishes, and be assured that your letter was not unwelcome. Again, farewell.