

Renaissance Consolations: Philosophical Remedies for Fate and Fortune

JOHN SELLARS

Philosophy during the Renaissance adopted a range of different literary forms. One that proved popular was the work of consolation, inspired by ancient models such as the consolatory works of Seneca. Many of these works were prompted by immediate, often traumatic events – both personal and political – and were sincere attempts to draw on ancient models of consolatory thought for the therapeutic benefit they might confer. In this chapter I shall examine examples of philosophical consolation by Petrarch, Filelfo, and Scala among others, approaching them as practical responses to the vicissitudes of fate and fortune. In particular I shall focus on the way these authors draw on ancient therapeutic arguments recorded in Cicero and Seneca, such as the Stoic denial that external events are ever truly bad. I shall also be concerned with what these Renaissance works tell us about how their authors conceived the role and purpose of philosophy – a practical guide to life.

1. Ancient Background

Philosophy during the Renaissance adopted a variety of literary forms. One of these was the philosophical consolation, which itself found expression in a variety of different kinds of text, from letters to friends, works of self-consolation, and dialogues. In this variety it followed ancient precedents, drawing on both new discoveries and texts already well known. In the beginning, the Renaissance consolatory tradition leaned heavily on the works of Cicero and Seneca, both readily available and already well known. In the case of Cicero, the *Tusculanae disputationes* was a key point of reference, acting as a sourcebook for consolatory and therapeutic material from the Greek philosophical schools. In particular we might note Cicero's references to a now-lost work of the Academic philosopher Crantor, which may have been one of the first literary works of philosophical

consolation.¹ Another lost work to which Cicero refers is his own *Consolatio*, written in response to the loss of his daughter Tullia, who had died a few weeks after childbirth in 45 BC.² Cicero's response to this loss was to seek out consolatory literature, such as Crantor's *On Grief*, and to write his own text of self-consolation.³ In a letter to his friend Atticus he wrote,

Nothing has been written by any author on the alleviation of grief which I did not read in your house. But my sorrow is stronger than any consolation. I have even done something which I imagine no one has ever done before, consoled myself in a literary composition.⁴

¹ See Cicero, *Tusc.* 1.115 (referring to the *Consolatione Crantoris*), 3.12 (recording Crantor's disagreement with the Stoic doctrine of ἀπάθεια), and 3.71 (reporting Crantor's view that one ought to yield to grief); note also *Acad.* 2.135. The fragments for Crantor's *On Grief* (Περὶ πένθους) are gathered together in H. J. Mette, "Zwei Akademiker heute: Crantor von Soloi und Arkesilaos von Pitane," *Lustrum* 26 (1984): 7-94, at 16-23; they are discussed in Margaret Graver, *Cicero on the Emotions: Tusculan Disputations 3 and 4* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 187-94. See also John Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato: A Study of the Old Academy (347-274 BC)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 216-31, esp. 224-30.

² Cicero refers to his own *Consolatio* at *Tusc.* 1.65-6, 1.76, and 4.63. On the death of Tullia, see Graver, *Cicero on the Emotions*, xiii. The fragments for the *Consolatio* are gathered together in Claudius Vitelli, *M. Tulli Ciceronis Consolationis Fragmenta* ([Milan:] Mondadori, 1979); note also the older collection in C. F. W. Mueller, *M. Tulli Ciceronis Scripta Quae Manserunt Omnia, Partis IV, Vol. III* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1904), 332-8. A work purporting to be Cicero's *Consolatio* was published in 1583, although this was a modern forgery; see further William McCuaig, *Carlo Sigonio: The Changing World of the Late Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 291-236.

³ Pliny, *Hist. Nat.* Praef. 22, reports that Cicero acknowledged in the *Consolatio* that he was following Crantor's work.

⁴ Cicero, *Att.* 12.14.3 (251 Shackleton Bailey): *Nihil enim de maerore minuendo scriptum ab ullo est quod ego non domi tuae legerim. Sed omnem consolationem vincit dolor. Quin etiam feci, quod profecto ante me nemo, ut ipse me per litteras consolaretur.*

Alas, readers in the Renaissance were deprived access to this text, save for a handful of fragments preserved by Lactantius, Pliny, and, of course, Cicero himself.⁵

With Seneca we have extant works of consolation addressed to others – Marcia, Polybius, his mother Helvia – dealing with bereavement and exile, as well as letters with consolatory intent in his *Epistulae ad Lucilium*.⁶ The *Consolatio ad Marciam* is the earliest work of consolation to survive intact. To these we can add a number of other ancient works, such as the *Consolatio ad Apollonium*, attributed to Plutarch but often thought to be spurious; this text also owes a debt to Crantor.⁷ In late antiquity we find Boethius' *Consolatione philosophiae*, along with echoes of the ancient tradition in a wide variety of early Christian writers. Ancient texts such as these offered both examples of forms of consolatory writing and reports of arguments from the ancient schools that were supposed to console those facing the vicissitudes of fate and fortune.⁸

⁵ They could, however, read a letter of consolation that Cicero *received* in response to his daughter's death from Servius Sulpicius Rufus (*Fam.* 4.5 (248 Shackleton Bailey)). This letter was preserved in a manuscript of *Fam.* found in Milan in 1392 and copied for Coluccio Salutati. Both the original and the copy were in Florence by 1406, and have remained there ever since (now Laur. 49.9 and 49.7). See further L. D. Reynolds, ed., *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 138-9.

⁶ See, for example, Seneca, *Ep.* 63 and 99.

⁷ See [Plut.] *Cons. ad Apoll.* 102d, 104c, and 114c. Note also Plutarch's consolation to his wife, the *Consolatio ad uxorem*, written after the death of their two-year-old daughter.

⁸ For further discussion of the ancient consolatory tradition, see the papers in Han Baltussen, ed., *Greek and Roman Consolations: Eight Studies of a Tradition and its Afterlife* (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2013), which includes chapters on Cicero's *Consolatio*, Seneca, and Pseudo-Plutarch, among others. The classic study of the topic is Rudolf Kassel, *Untersuchungen zur griechischen und römischen Konsolationsliteratur*, Zetemata 18 (Munich: Beck, 1958).

Not all works of consolation, however, are philosophical. By ‘philosophical consolation’ one ought to understand an attempt to offer a remedy for some kind of perceived misfortune – bereavement, loss of property or reputation, exile – with reference to philosophical argument. These might be i) arguments questioning the value of the thing lost (and so the appropriateness of the feeling of misfortune), ii) arguments about the appropriateness of emotional responses in general, or iii) arguments about the necessity or inevitability of the perceived misfortune. Some of these will draw on aspects of ethical theory while others might involve reference to natural philosophy. The various ancient schools offered arguments of all three types, with the Stoics being most forthright in their rejection of any kind of negative response to a perceived misfortune, arguing that i) external things are at best merely preferable but not good, and certainly not essential for a good life; ii) all negative emotional responses are inappropriate, being grounded on mistaken judgements; and iii) whatever happens does so of necessity and, indeed, is due to the providential ordering of Nature created by the divine reason that permeates all things.⁹ Other schools disputed these claims, and Cicero’s *Tusculanae disputationes* records many of the ancient debates:

Some hold that the comforter has only one responsibility: to teach the sufferer that what happened is not an evil at all. This is the view of Cleanthes. Others, including the Peripatetics, would teach that it is not a great evil. Still others, for instance Epicurus, would draw attention away from evils and towards good things, and there are yet others who think it sufficient to show that nothing has happened

⁹ These Stoic doctrines could be found within texts readily accessible throughout the Renaissance; see e.g. Cicero, *Fin.* 3.29, *Tusc.* 4.11-33, and Seneca, *Ep.* 107.11 respectively.

contrary to expectation. And the list goes on. Chrysippus, for his part, holds that the key to consolation is to get rid of the person's belief that mourning is something he ought to do, something just and appropriate.¹⁰

Cicero goes on to say that in his own *Consolatio* he brought together all these different methods, in a desperate search for any kind of relief from his sorrow. One of the defining characteristics of philosophical consolation is the idea that the person in a state of distress has made a mistake – either they have overly valued some external thing, they wish things to be other than they must necessarily be, or they are behaving contrary to human nature. These are errors that ought to be corrected for their own sakes, and not merely in order to reduce an individual's suffering. One of the functions of philosophical consolation, then, is to show that an error has been made, and that the distress being suffered is due to this error of judgement rather than anything that has taken place in the external world.

In what follows we shall consider a number of Renaissance attempts at philosophical consolation, all of which draw heavily on this ancient tradition. From Petrarch to Ficino, we shall see a variety of Cynic, Stoic, Platonic, and Aristotelian ideas taken up and put to work in the service of relieving suffering at

¹⁰ Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.76: *Sunt qui unum officium consolantis putent malum illud omnino non esse, ut Cleanthi placet; sunt qui non magnum malum, ut Peripatetici; sunt qui abducant a malis ad bona, ut Epicurus; sunt qui satis putent estendere nihil inopinati accidisse nihil non alii. Chrysippus aut caput esse censet in consolando detrahere illam opinionem maerenti, se officio fungi putet iusto atque debito.* I quote from the translation in Graver, *Cicero on the Emotions*, 33-4, and the Latin text printed here reflects her emendation of Pohlenz's text.

the hands of fate.¹¹ That these Humanists and philosophers considered consolation to be an important task for philosophy also tells us something about how they conceived philosophy as an activity.

2. Francesco Petrarch

Following the ancient tradition, Francesco Petrarch wrote a number of letters of consolation to friends during times of distress.¹² He also engaged in self-consolation, following the precedent set by Cicero. We can see this in his dialogue *Secretum*, in which ‘Franciscus’ (standing for Petrarch himself) confesses his sufferings while ‘Augustinus’ (modelled on St Augustine) offers therapeutic arguments in reply.¹³ In particular he recommends to Franciscus texts by Seneca and Cicero:

¹¹ Inevitably this will not be a comprehensive survey. A number of relevant texts have been passed over in silence, while the ones discussed are done so only selectively. Among works not discussed here, one might note Giannozzo Manetti’s *Dialogus Consolatorius* of 1438, which is addressed in Alfonso De Petris, “Giannozzo Manetti and his Consolatoria,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 41 (1979): 493-525, and Leon Battista Alberti’s *Theogenius*, discussed in Timothy Kircher, *Living Well in Renaissance Italy: The Virtues of Humanism and the Irony of Leon Battista Alberti* (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2012), esp. 134-64. For a fuller discussion of consolation in the Renaissance, see George W. McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

¹² Petrarch’s consolatory letters include *Rerum familiarium libri* 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 2.8, 3.16, 4.12, 6.3, 7.13, 8.1, 11.2, 13.1, 14.3, 18.15, 21.9, 23.12. There is a critical edition in Francesco Petrarch, *Le Familiari*, ed. Vittorio Rossi and Umberto Bosco, 4 vols (Florence: Sansoni, 1933-42); they can also be found in Francesco Petrarch, *Opera quae extant Omnia* (Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1554), 631-779. They are translated in Francesco Petrarch, *Letters on Familiar Matters*, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, 3 vols (New York: Italica Press, [1975-85] 2005). For discussion see George W. McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation*, 30-45.

¹³ Petrarch’s *Secretum* is edited and translated in Francesco Petrarch, *My Secret Book*, ed. and trans. Nicholas Mann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016). For a discussion of it as a work of consolation see McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation*, 18-29.

If ever the inner turmoil of your mind were to cease, this uproar all around you, believe me, would strike your senses but wouldn't disturb your mind. I don't want to fill your ears with things that you already know, but there is a useful letter by Seneca on this topic, and there's his book *De tranquillitate animi*; and then there's that excellent book written by Cicero for Brutus on the basis of the third day of the discussions on his Tusculan estate, on how this sickness of the soul can be completely eliminated.¹⁴

Far more significant, though, was his *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, a substantial work taking the form of a series of dialogues, devoted to the topic of how to deal with fortune, both good and bad.¹⁵ It was composed in the 1350s and 1360s and drew heavily on Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes*, while also taking inspiration from Pseudo-Seneca's *De remediis fortuitorum*. Although presented in dialogue form, the work is not a series of conversations between characters but instead a

¹⁴ Petrarch, *Secretum* 2.15.9: *Quod si unquam intestinus tumultus tue mentis conquiesceret, fragor iste circumtonans, michi crede, sensus quidem pulsaret, sed animum non moveret. Ac ne nota pridem auribus tuis ingeram, habes Seneca de hac re non inutilem epistolam, habes et librum eiusdem De Tranquillitate animi; habes et de tota hac mentis egritudine tollenda librum M. Ciceronis egregium, quem ex tertie diei disputationibus in Tusculano suo habitis ad Brutum scripsit.* On Petrarch's admiration for both Cicero and Seneca, see B. L. Ullman, *Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, 2nd edn (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1973), 119-21, who notes that Petrarch cites Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes* "more often than any other philosophical work".

¹⁵ See Francesco Petrarch, *Les remèdes aux deux fortunes / De remediis utriusque fortune*, ed. and trans. Christophe Carraud, 2 vols (Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 2002); the text can also be found in *Opera Omnia*, 1-254. There is an annotated English translation in Francesco Petrarch, *Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*, trans. Conrad H. Rawski, 5 vols (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). For discussions see McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation*, 46-72; Letizia Panizza, "Stoic Psychotherapy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance: Petrarch's *De remediis*," in *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquillity: Epicurean and Stoic Themes in European Thought*, ed. M. J. Osler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 39-65; Timothy Kircher, "On the Two Faces of Fortune," in *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, ed. Victoria Kirkham and Armando Maggi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 245-53.

back-and-forth between “Reason” (*Ratio*) and the emotions of “Joy” (*Gaudium*), “Hope” (*Spes*), “Sorrow” (*Dolor*), and “Fear” (*Metus*). In Book 1, Reason debates with Joy and Hope, while in Book 2 Reason takes on Sorrow and Fear. These four types of emotion are the canonical negative emotions in Stoicism, which were discussed at length by Cicero in the *Tusculanae disputationes*.¹⁶ All four emotions are the product of fortune: Joy and Hope come about in times of prosperity while Sorrow and Fear accompany adversity. The central thesis of the work as a whole is that people need remedies for both kinds of fortune, good and bad, as the title indicates. In this Petrarch takes up a theme one can find in Seneca’s *De providentia*, in which the Stoic argued that “the greatest danger comes from excessive good fortune”.¹⁷ The danger with good fortune is twofold: it makes one weak and lazy, untested by the challenges of adversity, and it makes it harder to deal with adversity when it finally comes, as it inevitably will.

Between them, the two books of *De remediis* contain over two hundred and fifty short dialogues between reason and the four emotions; it will only be possible to discuss a handful here. The most explicitly consolatory exchanges are in Book 2, between Reason and Sorrow. In 2.9, entitled *De damno*, Reason responds to the complaints of Sorrow against Fortune. It is a mistake to think that Fortune can rob one of anything, for all Fortune does is take back what is already hers. This echoes the Stoic claim that whatever someone has is merely on loan and must eventually be returned.¹⁸ Fortune is powerless to take away the essentials of life,

¹⁶ See esp. Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.24-5. Note, however, some terminological variation: in Cicero the four emotions are delight (*laetitia*), lust (*libido*), distress (*aegritudo*), and fear (*metus*).

¹⁷ Seneca, *Prov.* 4.10: *periculosissima felicitatis intemperantia est*. Note also, on two kinds of fortune, Seneca, *Ep.* 76.21.

¹⁸ See e.g. Seneca, *Cons. Marc.* 10.1, *Cons. Polyb.* 10.4-5, and *Tranq.* 11.2-3. Note also Epictetus, *Ench.* 11, although Petrarch is unlikely to have had access to this.

for what is most essential is virtue, which is outside of her control. While some basic physical necessities persist, poverty is often a matter of perspective, and “once you have attained virtue you do not feel poverty any longer”.¹⁹ True riches reside in a noble mind. The contrast throughout is between external goods and virtue, and the mistaken way in which people attribute value to the former over the latter: “Virtue is not attained through riches, but riches are attained through virtue. Virtue is the best defence against any kind of fortune, and against poverty as well”.²⁰ In response to the problem of exile later in the text, Petrarch turns to Socrates for counsel who, when asked where he was born, replied that he was a citizen of the whole world (*mundus*).²¹ Only the small-minded are so attached to one part of the world that they consider themselves exiled when they are anywhere else. In both cases broadly Stoic doctrine is put to work for therapeutic ends.

The dangers of good fortune are equally important to address. When, in Book 1, Joy proclaims the benefits of possessing wealth, Reason warns of the envy, danger, and burdens that come with it.²² Friends can no longer be trusted. What has been fought hard to acquire will require further work to retain, and will generate suffering when eventually lost. It is easy to think that great wealth will bring peace of mind, but in fact, Reason suggests, those in honest poverty are often much

¹⁹ Petrarch, *De remediis* 2.9 (*Opera Omnia*, 134; *Les remèdes*, 594): *Semel vero ubi ad illam perveneris, non senties paupertatem.*

²⁰ Petrarch, *De remediis* 2.9 (*Opera Omnia*, 135; *Les remèdes*, 594): *non divitiis virtus, sed virtute divitiæ queruntur. Virtus una contra fortunam omnem, contraque pauperiem ars optima.* (I quote the text in *Les remèdes*, which differs at a number of points from that printed in the *Opera Omnia*.)

²¹ See Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.108, cited in Petrarch, *De remediis* 2.67 (*Opera Omnia*, 183; *Les remèdes*, 828).

²² This is Petrarch, *De remediis* 1.53 (*Opera Omnia*, 64-5; *Les remèdes*, 264).

happier.²³ While those experiencing good fortune might not require consolation, they nevertheless still need philosophical therapy for their misplaced satisfaction. For Petrarch, then, philosophical consolation focused on attending to ascriptions of value, explicitly drawing on ancient Stoicism.

3. Coluccio Salutati

As we have seen, Petrarch's consolations for fortune were based on a broadly Stoic worldview. Coluccio Salutati – for many years Chancellor of Florence – shared that worldview, embracing a variety of Stoic ideas,²⁴ albeit qualified in the light of some aspects of Christian doctrine.²⁵ However, when put to the test, Salutati found Stoicism wanting as the foundation for real consolation.

The test came relatively late in life when, in 1400, Salutati's son died. His friend and correspondent Francesco Zabarella sent a letter of consolation drawing on the Stoic ideas that Salutati had openly expressed. But in the midst of bereavement Salutati found these ideas unconvincing, if not insensitive, and wrote a lengthy reply to Zabarella's letter.²⁶ In the letter Salutati challenged the

²³ See Petrarch, *De remediis* 1.53 (*Opera Omnia*, 64-5; *Les remèdes*, 264): *vix divitem invenias, qui non sibi melius fuisse in mediocritate vel honesta etiam paupertate fateatur.*

²⁴ See, for example, Coluccio Salutati, *De Laboribus Herculis*, ed. B. L. Ullman, 2 vols (Zürich: Thesaurus Mundi, 1951), 1:311. For further discussion see Berthold L. Ullman, *The Humanism of Coluccio Salutati* (Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1963), 21-6, and Ronald G. Witt, *Hercules at the Crossroads: The Life, Works, and Thought of Coluccio Salutati* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983), 62-73.

²⁵ For example, he denied that one's happiness could ever be completely within one's control, for it required not just virtue but also the grace of God; see Salutati, *Epistulae (Ep.)* 2.18, in Coluccio Salutati, *Epistolario*, ed. Francesco Novati, 4 vols (Rome: Forzani, 1891-1911), 1:110.

²⁶ Salutati's reply is *Ep.* 12.4 (*Epistolario*, 3:456-79). It has been translated into English by Ronald G. Witt in Jill Kraye, ed., *Cambridge Translations of Renaissance Philosophical Texts, Volume 1: Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 179-91, and is discussed in McClure,

Stoic claim that death is not an evil. While accepting that, morally, death is neither good nor evil, he nevertheless insisted that, naturally, it is an evil insofar as it is a privation of the goodness of life.²⁷ Drawing on Aristotle, Salutati argued that things we fear are evils, we fear death, so death is an evil.²⁸ This, he suggested, is a plainly evident fact, to be contrasted with the “cold-heartedness and unattainable logic of the Stoics” that expects “acts and virtues which are impossible to find in the weak flesh of mortal men”.²⁹

Death, then, is a privation and, as such, a genuine evil. Consequently it is “a legitimate source of sorrow”.³⁰ Although death might be inevitable, Salutati insists that reflection on this fact can in no way function as a form of consolation. The general fact of mortality does not, he suggests, alter the legitimacy of sorrow in individual cases. Indeed, Salutati goes on to challenge not just Stoic claims but the very idea of philosophical consolation itself. No rational argument can undo the emotion of grief, or for that matter any other emotion: “whatever philosophy promises with its lessons on consolation, these [emotions] are not removed, but are instead relieved by the passage of time”.³¹ In any case, someone in the grip of

Sorrow and Consolation, 97-8. This letter was in fact Salutati’s second letter in reply to Zabarella. On the first – *Ep. 11.23 (Epistolario 3:408-22)* – see McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation*, 95-7.

²⁷ *Ep. 12.4 (Epistolario 3:461; Kraye, Cambridge Translations, 181)*.

²⁸ *Ep. 12.4 (Epistolario 3:463; Kraye, Cambridge Translations, 182)*, citing Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* 3.6, 115a7-11.

²⁹ *Ep. 12.4 (Epistolario 3:463; Kraye, Cambridge Translations, 182)*: *duricies et inaccessibilis ratio Stoicorum [preceded by] actusque virtutum qualis et quales in hac carne fragilitateque mortalium sit impossibile reperiri*.

³⁰ *Ep. 12.4 (Epistolario 3:465; Kraye, Cambridge Translations, 183)*: *mortem nedum esse malum, sed dolendam*.

³¹ *Ep. 12.4 (Epistolario 3:470-1; Kraye, Cambridge Translations, 185)*: *quicquid promittat philosophia preceptis illis consolandi, non tollitur, sed tempore vel alia potius ratione sedatur*.

a severe emotion cannot be reasoned with, and on this the Stoics would agree.³² So philosophy can offer nothing to someone in a state of sorrow. Although the Stoics claim to be able to offer therapy for the emotions *after* someone had calmed down, Salutati claims that this is disingenuous: it is the passing of time that does the work.³³ Grief is simply a process one has to go through.

Salutati, then, was sceptical about the value of philosophical consolation in the face of bad fortune. The ideas he had admired for much of his life failed him when put to the test. Or perhaps he failed them. His case shows the way in which these ancient ideas were not of merely academic or literary interest. They were being put to the test in the most challenging of circumstances. As Seneca had said, it is one thing to offer consolation to others in grief, but it is quite another to console oneself in the face of bereavement.³⁴ Despite Salutati's claim to have shown the limits of philosophical consolation, it remained a topic of widespread interest among subsequent Humanists in the Quattrocento.

4. Poggio Bracciolini

One of those Humanists was Poggio Bracciolini, a protégé of Salutati who, like him, would go on to become Chancellor of Florence. Towards the end of his life he wrote *De miseria humanae conditionis*, prompted by the fall of Constantinople

³² See Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.51, reporting Chrysippus, with discussion in John Sellars, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 189-91.

³³ See *Ep.* 12.4 (*Epistolario* 3:477; Kraye, *Cambridge Translations*, 188-9): *virtus est temporis, non vis et efficacia consolantis philosophice rationis*.

³⁴ See Seneca, *Prov.* 4.5.

in 1453.³⁵ The text is a dialogue between Poggio, the Humanist Matteo Palmieri, and Cosimo de' Medici. It too engaged with the ancient consolatory literature, drawing on Seneca who is described as the “arbiter of morals” (*morum praeceptor*).³⁶ The opening dedication is emphatic that all human misery is due to desires for the gifts of fortune. Given that fortune is by nature fickle and uncertain, the only way to escape human misery is by reining in those desires. Whether fortune is bad or good, human suffering follows: the wealthy live in fear of losing their riches; the powerful fear their political opponents. No one is content. Unlike his mentor Salutati, though, Poggio suggests that philosophical consolation might indeed be able to help:

We should therefore think of those who try to root out these excessive desires from our minds, and teach us to have as little as possible to do with fortune’s gifts, as making the greatest contribution to the two things which, rightly viewed, are to be preferred to all others: bodily peace and tranquillity of mind.³⁷

According to Poggio, then, the pursuit of external goods inevitably leads to misery, whether one attains them or not. Moreover, placing one’s happiness in

³⁵ The text of *De miseria humanae conditionis* is in Poggio Bracciolini, *Opera* (Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1538), 86-131; there is a facsimile reprint in vol. 1 of *Opera Omnia*, ed. R. Fubini, 4 vols (Turin: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1964-69). Extracts are translated by Martin Davies, in Kraye, *Cambridge Translations*, 17-28. For discussion see Riccardo Fubini, *Humanism and Secularization: From Petrarch to Valla* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 89-139.

³⁶ Bracciolini, *De miseria* Book 1 (*Opera*, 92; Kraye, *Cambridge Translations*, 23).

³⁷ Bracciolini, *De miseria* Praef. (*Opera*, 87; Kraye, *Cambridge Translations*, 19): *Quapropter qui harum rerum nimias cupiditates ex mentibus hominum delere conantur, suadentque parum commercii cum fortunae donis habendum esse, pre ceteris consulere iudicandi sunt, tum quieti corporis tum animi tranquillitati, quae duo, si sana mens foret, essent caeteris anteferenda.*

the hands of fortune – which the pursuit of external goods does – is to place it under the control of an arbitrary and unreliable power.

In the dialogue that ensues, Cosimo opens by suggesting that the worst excesses of bad fortune are offset by the good things that fortune also brings. The person suffering from illness, for instance, can take comfort in their family. Reason can help people to put into context any immediate suffering so as not to be overwhelmed by it. But of course few people develop their reason adequately and consequently remain subject to emotions provoked by random acts of fortune. To this Poggio responds by saying that such a view is easy for someone like Cosimo to maintain, given that his life has been excessively blessed. Drawing on a series of Stoic claims, Poggio says that given how rare perfect rationality is, the vast majority of the human race is effectively condemned to wretchedness.³⁸ Moreover, what external goods they do have are only ever on loan, and fortune can reclaim them at any moment.³⁹ External goods can bring so much misery in their wake that it is perhaps a mistake to call them ‘goods’ at all.

Cosimo’s response to this is to deny that all human beings have been wretched. There have been exceptions. The people he has in mind are the great names of antiquity and in particular “Socrates and Plato and all those other eminent thinkers who ignored the gifts of fortune and gave themselves over to the study of philosophy”.⁴⁰ The misery of the human condition is not inevitable; philosophy

³⁸ Bracciolini, *De miseria* Book 1 (*Opera*, 92-3; Kraye, *Cambridge Translations*, 24).

³⁹ This is a Stoic theme; see n. 18 above.

⁴⁰ Bracciolini, *De miseria* Book 1 (*Opera*, 95; Kraye, *Cambridge Translations*, 26): *Socratem quoque ac Platonem, ceterosque egregios philosophos, qui relictis fortunae donis se philosophandi studio dederunt.*

offers a cure. It is only by pursuing so-called external goods – the goods of fortune – that people expose themselves to misery. But there is an alternative, namely a philosophical life devoted instead to the pursuit of virtue. As in the case of Petrarch, it is by attending to ascriptions of value that such suffering can be overcome.

5. Francesco Filelfo

In Poggio's dialogue, Cosimo de' Medici is presented as a champion of philosophical consolation. In the work of Francesco Filelfo, he is given a quite different persona. Filelfo's *Commentationes Florentinae de exilio* – set in the 1430s but written in the early 1440s – offers a philosophical consolation not just for exile, as suggested by the title, but also infamy (*infamia*) and poverty (*paupertate*), with a book devoted to each topic.⁴¹ Indeed, at one point Filelfo intended to add further topics in additional books, but these were never written.⁴² It opens by stating explicitly that one of the functions of philosophy is to provide “consolation and relief for adverse and troublesome” circumstances.⁴³ The way it can do this is by championing “the goods of the mind” (*animi bonis*), which are stable and reliable, over external goods, which are subject to the “fragility and irrationality of fortune” (*fragilitate amentiaque fortunae*).⁴⁴

⁴¹ The text, along with a translation, is in Francesco Filelfo, *On Exile*, ed. Jeroen De Keyser, trans. W. Scott Blanchard (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁴² This is according to an annotation in a manuscript, reported in Filelfo, *On Exile*, x. In what follows I shall focus attention on just the first book, dealing with exile.

⁴³ Filelfo, *De exilio* 1.1: *adversas atque afflictas consolari levareque consuevit*.

⁴⁴ *De exilio* 1.4.

The context of the text was the imminent exile of a number of opponents of Cosimo de' Medici, including Palla Strozzi and Rinaldo degli Albizzi, who both appear as characters in the dialogue. (Poggio Bracciolini and Giannozzo Manetti also make an appearance, joined later by Leonardo Bruni.) Unlike many other Humanists in Florence at the time, Filelfo aligned himself with the political enemies of the Medici, and the dialogue opens with swipes aimed at “that deceiver, poisoner, and blasphemer” Cosimo.⁴⁵

The discussion in Book 1 is primarily between Palla Strozzi and his son Onofrio, who sees exile as a severe misfortune, involving a loss of both freedom and reputation. Having abandoned himself to his emotions, Onofrio is no longer able to think rationally about his situation. What he needs, his father declares, is philosophical training.⁴⁶ With this as the task, Palla draws on a wide range of ancient philosophers in the ensuing discussion. The first is Socrates, and Filelfo translates at length from Dio Chrysostom.⁴⁷ People waste time in pointless activities but do not attend to the care of their souls. The soul has two parts – rational and irrational – and both require attention. The irrational part here is not a Platonic faculty of emotion but rather an Aristotelian nutritive capacity.⁴⁸ The lower, nutritive soul concerns itself with “the mutability and filth of time and the body”, while the higher, rational soul reaches towards what is unchanging and divine.⁴⁹ Palla goes on to define emotion (*perturbatio*) as a movement that sets

⁴⁵ *De exilio* 1.11: *circumscriptor, veneficus, sacrilegus*.

⁴⁶ See *De exilio* 1.22-3.

⁴⁷ For example, *De exilio* 1.24-33 is translated from Dio Chrysostom 13.16-26.

⁴⁸ Having said that, Palla also alludes to the Phaedrean image of irrational horses controlled by reason (*De exilio* 1.36).

⁴⁹ *De exilio* 1.50: *corporis et temporis mutabilitati ac loeto*.

people in opposition to their judgement, a definition that he attributes to Aristotle. He combines this with the views of Andronicus and the Stoic Zeno that an emotion is an irrational judgement and an irrational movement of the soul.⁵⁰

These fairly basic philosophical distinctions are merely preliminaries to the main argument. Their aim is to insist on a division between the rational soul, on the one hand, and the nutritive soul and the body on the other. While the rational soul is within our power (*in nostra potestate*), the body, along with all external things, is subject to the whims of fortune. The sage, focused exclusively on the rational soul, is perfectly free: “nothing can obstruct him, nothing can get in his way”.⁵¹ Rather than fear fortune, the sage “considers the power and force of fortune as a sort of training ground for his own virtue”.⁵² Consequently, he does not endure suffering, but welcomes it.⁵³ Here we see echoes – whether deliberate or not – of arguments set out in Seneca’s *De providentia*. However, the central figure in the philosophical consolation that slowly develops during the course of the dialogue is not Platonic, Aristotelian, or Stoic, but instead Cynic. It is Diogenes the Dog (*Diogenes Cyon*) who is presented as the ultimate role model, someone who “assigned all the beauty, splendor, and elegance of wealth to the goodness and excellence of the soul. He thought everything else truly superfluous and at odds with virtue.”⁵⁴ Filelfo has Palla quote translations from the ancient letters

⁵⁰ See *De exilio* 1.42-3.

⁵¹ *De exilio* 1.73-4: *nihil eum impedire queat, nihil prohibere.*

⁵² *De exilio* 1.76: *habet vim impetumque fortunae quasi gymnasium aliquod ac palaestram virtutis suae.*

⁵³ See *De exilio* 1.80.

⁵⁴ *De exilio* 1.90: *quippe qui omne divitiarum decus, omnem splendorem, omnem elegantiam in animi praestantia bonitateque posuerat. Reliqua vero omnia supervacanea quaedam et inimica virtuti iudicabat.*

attributed to Diogenes,⁵⁵ which repeat the well-known Cynic praise of poverty. Going well beyond the Stoic claim that wealth and external circumstances are not necessary for a good life, Palla argues, following Diogenes, that they are in fact hindrances to it. Bearing in mind the opening attacks on Cosimo de' Medici, wealth and virtue are presented as mutually exclusive:

Virtue by itself is sufficiently fortified to secure happiness. It is sufficiently armed against fortune's every blow and disaster. It lacks no resource, requires no assistance.⁵⁶

In reply, Onofrio asks whether wealth ought to be considered a fault, if someone possessed both virtue and riches.⁵⁷ While Palla is prepared to concede the formal point, he nevertheless insists on complete indifference towards external goods. Riches in the hands of someone without virtue are always dangerous and so better avoided. (Cosimo's wealth, it is implied, is the source of his moral corruption.) If someone who is virtuous is also wealthy, it will make no difference. In any case, no one who already possesses virtue will actively pursue riches, for they will know that wealth will bring no further benefits. If, by chance, they acquire money, that ought not to be forbidden, for it might assist in charitable acts, but the true sage, Pallas concludes, will hold wealth in contempt.

⁵⁵ See e.g. *De exilio* 91-2, quoting the *Diogenis quae feruntur epistulae* 13 and 26, which can be found in Gabriele Giannantoni, *Socratis et Socraticorum Reliquiae*, 4 vols (Naples: Bibliopolis, 1990), §§ VB 543 and 556. Later, at 1.106-8, Filelfo also draws on the letters of Apollonius of Tyana for similar sentiments.

⁵⁶ *De exilio* 1.97: *Virtus ipsa satis per sese ad felicitatem munita est. Satis armata adversus omnem fortunae impetum atque naufragium. Nullius opis indiget, nullius subsidii.*

⁵⁷ See *De exilio* 1.97-103 for the question and the response.

In all this, Filelfo may well have been deliberately setting the note a little too high, following the example of Diogenes himself, in order to counter-balance the ubiquitous obsession with material wealth.⁵⁸ He may not have seriously expected readers to embrace such an extreme view. Indeed, as the dialogue progresses, Palla shifts to a more moderate position. The sage, he suggests, will not be completely indifferent to their circumstances after all. They might quite reasonably hope for better days during hard times – such as periods of exile – while remaining untroubled by present difficulties.⁵⁹ This view is closer to the Stoic position of welcoming some external goods as things ‘preferred’ (προηγμένα), while continuing to insist that they are not necessary for a good life.

At this point in the dialogue Poggio Bracciolini joins the discussion. Filelfo presents Poggio as an unashamed hedonist, arguing that all pleasures of the soul originate in pleasures of the body.⁶⁰ Poggio aligns himself not with the moderate Epicurus but with the more extreme Cyrenaics, insisting that the mind is well only when the body is well (*animus recte habet cum corpus recte habet*). He rejects philosophy as a therapeutic or consolatory enterprise. If philosophy claims to take care of the soul, it is of little value, for all one needs to do is to attend to the needs of the body. The more food and wine the better!⁶¹ As we have already seen, the real Poggio was far more sympathetic towards the idea of philosophical consolation. Here he is made to stand in as the philosophical representative of

⁵⁸ See Diogenes Laertius 6.35.

⁵⁹ See *De exilio* 1.136.

⁶⁰ See *De exilio* 1.142-4.

⁶¹ See *De exilio* 1.153. This brings out the Cyrenaic (as opposed to Epicurean) character of Poggio’s hedonism.

the Medicean circle, and then roundly attacked for reducing humans to little more than beasts.

Taken as a whole, the dialogue insists on a stark opposition between a life devoted solely to virtue and one concerned with pleasure. Virtue is a property of the soul and is within our control, while pleasure belongs to the body and depends upon external goods and circumstances, all of which are under the control of Fortune. While the former is secure and stable, the latter cannot be predicted from one moment to the next. A life devoted to pleasure, then, is one in which one's happiness is placed in the hands of a force out of one's control. Material wealth is not only unnecessary for a good life, but in fact an impediment to it. On this point Palla cites an anecdote about the Stoic Zeno of Citium who, when shipwrecked and freed of his last remaining possessions, exclaimed "Well done, Fortune, you who have forced us to the rough cloak and the philosopher's life!"⁶²

This distinctively Cynic-Stoic line of argument continues as Palla moves on to the most important part of his philosophical consolation for exile. He notes that many of the greatest philosophers lived in places far from where they were born, and yet were not wretched for it.⁶³ Socrates had famously proclaimed that he was not a citizen of any particular city but instead a citizen of the whole world.⁶⁴ This Socratic-Cynic definition of cosmopolitanism is better, Palla suggests, than the

⁶² *De exilio* 1.178: *Bene facis, o fortuna, quae nos ad pallium vitamque philosophi compulisti*. Here Filelfo is drawing on Plutarch, e.g. *Tranq.* 467d.

⁶³ See *De exilio* 1.184. On the cosmopolitanism in *De exilio*, see W. Scott Blanchard, "Patrician Sages and the Humanist Cynic: Francesco Filelfo and the Ethics of World Citizenship," *Renaissance Quarterly* 60 (2007): 1107-69.

⁶⁴ See *De exilio* 1.186, with Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.108, noted above.

Stoic definition found in Seneca of a community embracing both God and man.⁶⁵ The reason for this is because the world in which people live does not involve community with God, something reserved for the next life. Instead it is more akin to a prison created by God. The soul is imprisoned within the body, which is, in turn, part of the material prison that is the whole world.⁶⁶ There are thus two arguments against excessive attachment to one's homeland or city of birth. The first, drawing on the Cynic-Stoic tradition, is that one's immediate surroundings ought to be of no concern, for a wise person will be at home anywhere in the world. The second, turning to Platonic and Christian themes, is that, in any case, the whole world is merely a temporary prison and not one's true home at all. Thus two quite different lines of argument are brought to bear on Onofrio's concern that exile is a great misfortune. Palla sums up by saying "For our friendliest homeland is not Florence, not Tuscany, not Italy, not Europe, not the whole earth, not this entire sublunary world, but heaven".⁶⁷ The person exiled from their city of birth should not look backwards to a return to the contingent place where they happened to have been born, but rather forwards to their escape from the material prison of this world.

Towards the end of Book 1 of the dialogue Palla sums up what he takes to be the correct attitude towards Fortune. In terms highly reminiscent of the Stoic Epictetus – although there is no evidence to suggest that this was Filelfo's source – he writes:

⁶⁵ See *De exilio* 1.186, with e.g. Cicero, *Leg.* 1.23 and Seneca, *De otio* 4.1.

⁶⁶ See *De exilio* 1.190.

⁶⁷ *De exilio* 1.191: *Nam nostra nobis amicissima patria caelum est, non Florentia, non Tusciam, non Italia, non Europa, non totus denique terrarum orbis, non mundus hic universus inferior.* In the next line Palla quotes from Plato in support of this view.

One must accept whatever has happened to us or what is happening, as if it befalls us according to our wishes. For people are troubled not at what they do in accord with their free will, but what they do against their will. It is not fair for them to gain whatever they wish, but all things that come about by necessity are to be wished.⁶⁸

Thus the wise person will embrace whatever Fortune brings, because “to resist necessity is to be an arrogant madman”.⁶⁹ Filelfo’s discussion is especially rich, engaging with a wide range of ancient philosophical positions and a number of different forms of consolatory argument, from reflections on value ascription to the futility of trying to fight against necessity.

6. Bartolomeo Scala

In 1463 Bartolomeo Scala – soon to become Chancellor of Florence – wrote a dialogue of consolation addressed to Lorenzo de’ Medici in response to the death of his uncle, Giovanni de’ Medici.⁷⁰ The dialogue purports to be a discussion

⁶⁸ *De exilio* 1.237: *Quidquid acciderit nobis, aut etiam accidat, ita est accipiendum quasi ex sententia contingat. Non enim quae pro libera voluntate, sed quae invite homines faciunt, graviter ferunt. Nec quaecunque cupiunt ut ea contingant, par est, sed omnia quae necessitate proveniunt cupienda sunt.* Compare this with Epictetus, *Ench.* 5 and 8.

⁶⁹ *De exilio* 1.238: *Necessitati autem repugnare et insolentis est et insani.*

⁷⁰ Scala’s *Dialogus de consolatione* is edited in Bartolomeo Scala, *Humanistic and Political Writings*, ed. Alison Brown (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1997), 274-300, and reprinted with a facing translation in Bartolomeo Scala, *Essays and Dialogues*, trans. Renée Neu Watkins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 68-141. I cite the text according to the section numbers printed in the margins of the latter. For a study of Scala’s life and works, see Alison Brown, *Bartolomeo Scala 1430-1497, Chancellor of Florence: The Humanist and Bureaucrat* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), which touches on the dialogue at 36-7 and 268-9. See also McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation*, 135-9.

between Scala and Cosimo de' Medici, Giovanni's father. One might expect to find Scala offering consolation to Cosimo for the loss of his son, but in fact it is Cosimo who dominates proceedings, offering a range of arguments designed to show that neither death nor wider vicissitudes of fortune are to be feared. The discussion is surprisingly complex, containing a number of twists and hinting at a wide range of philosophical precedents. All this is put into the mouth of Cosimo and it is, of course, difficult to know how much of this is Scala's literary fiction and how much it might reflect the historical Cosimo's own views. As McClure notes, Cosimo was still alive at the time of the dialogue's composition, and Scala may even have intended Cosimo to see it, in which case one might expect the ideas presented by Cosimo in the dialogue to reflect at least the spirit of the historical Cosimo's views.⁷¹ Whether they do or not, the discussion is a rich example of philosophical consolation, alluding to a wide range of ancient philosophical positions.

Although, as we have said, the dialogue was presented to Lorenzo de' Medici, Scala opens the text by stating that his motivation was to offer consolation to himself. The process of writing would have itself functioned as a spiritual exercise for Scala, helping him to keep in check his own sorrow, as well as offering consolation for others who might read it later. He begins by insisting that sorrow is a natural human response to the loss of a loved one and he doubts whether any kind of philosophical consolation could alleviate this quite natural reaction. One of his reasons for engaging Cosimo in discussion is the equanimity he managed to display in the face of such a loss, "even beyond ordinary human nature".⁷²

⁷¹ See McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation*, 136.

⁷² Scala, *Dialogus de consolatione* 3: *Quem cum viderem praeter omnium opinionem praeterque mortalium naturam tam aequo ferre animo tantam calamitatem.*

Indeed, it is the topic of human nature that guides the subsequent discussion, for any kind of philosophical consolation must be grounded on a proper understanding of what it is to be human.

Closely connected to this is the role of Fortune in human happiness. Cosimo opens his remarks on this by reflecting that while his life has been blessed with immense good fortune in many ways, he has been all too conscious that bad fortune must never be far away. The more fortunate he was, the more anxious he became that bad fortune might strike at any moment, imagining “all the time that some great evil was bound to strike me”.⁷³ The loss of his son is simply an instance of the bad fortune he has been expecting all along. Cosimo’s opening position, then, is that bad fortune and its accompanying sorrow is simply part of human life. However, he quickly offers the possibility of an alternative view:

Surely either we are totally blind and do not see what is good in life, or life is indeed terribly hard, exposing us to floods and storms and never offering solid ground where we might find some safety.⁷⁴

Cosimo will go on to argue that we are indeed blind to what is good in life, as well as to the truth about human nature, and so the adversity that comes with bad fortune is, in fact, only apparent, and not real. Scala nudges Cosimo in this direction by reminding him that he has always been committed to the view that happiness is dependent on himself and not anything external, initiating a

⁷³ *Dialogus de consolatione* 13: *magni continuo mihi aliquid mali impendere cogitabam.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: *Profecto aut caeci omnino sumus nec quid bonum in vita sit videmus, aut certe misera admodum hominum vita est, quae tot fluctibus procellisque iactetur nec stationem unquam in qua vel paululum modo conquiescat nanciscatur.*

discussion of the relationship between fortune, happiness, and virtue. Does the possession of virtue guarantee happiness? Or can fortune triumph over virtue? Why go through the hard work of cultivating virtue if it can so easily be undermined by fortune? Implicit here is the view that virtue is something pursued for the sake of happiness, rather than for its own sake, for the point is not that fortune can in some way impede virtuous action, but rather that it can undermine virtue's claim to guarantee a happy or blessed life.⁷⁵ Despite being told that Cosimo holds that happiness is indeed dependent on oneself, he nevertheless distances himself from Scala's professed Stoicism. According to Cosimo, the Stoics place too much stress on virtue, forgetting the role of the body. When the body is suffering, the mind is unable to maintain complete control.⁷⁶ Moreover, there are other things beyond virtue that are good by nature and that contribute to a good and happy life.⁷⁷ In other words, Cosimo rejects the Stoic view that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness, instead adopting the Peripatetic view that some external goods both have inherent value and contribute to the quality of one's life. He acknowledges that pain is not an evil – explicitly rejecting the Epicurean view – while at the same time wanting to resist the popular image of the Stoic as someone who feels nothing when facing physical suffering.⁷⁸ The Peripatetic tenor continues when he adds that while it is unrealistic to escape the passions altogether, one should nevertheless try to moderate them.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ *Dialogus de consolatione* 17.

⁷⁶ *Dialogus de consolatione* 18.

⁷⁷ *Dialogus de consolatione* 22-3.

⁷⁸ *Dialogus de consolatione* 24-5. Cosimo goes on to argue that it is impossible for the Epicureans to offer any kind of consolation, given that they hold that pain is indeed a genuine evil.

⁷⁹ *Dialogus de consolatione* 27.

Scala responds by claiming that he is so impressed by Cosimo's arguments that he is prepared to renounce his own Stoicism. The Stoic sage, Scala says, is a superhuman, and so unrealistic, ideal. The reason why Stoicism cannot offer any real consolation is because of its mistaken view of human nature.⁸⁰ Cosimo takes up this idea, namely that any real consolation must be grounded in a proper understanding of human nature. The truth, he says, is that people are all unhappy.⁸¹ They think that wealth, honours, and health are good things when, in fact, they may be better off pursuing their opposites. What people usually take to be goods may in fact harm them, while what they think is bad fortune may actually benefit them. People pursue great wealth, when in fact it leads to self-indulgent pleasure, laziness, and the envy of others. Cosimo, one of the wealthiest men then alive, says "without hesitation I would dare to affirm that poverty is better for anyone than riches".⁸² This reversal of usual notions of good and bad fortune echoes the central theme of Seneca's *De providentia*, which might suggest a residual Stoic element; subsequent quotations from Lucretius have led some to suggest an Epicurean aspect.⁸³ As we shall see, neither is the case.

The next step in Cosimo's argument is to distinguish between three types of goods: those of the body, those of the soul, and external goods.⁸⁴ People who pursue external goods, such as wealth and honours, make their happiness dependent upon fortune. While they pursue the favours of fortune, "fortune often

⁸⁰ *Dialogus de consolatione* 29-30.

⁸¹ *Dialogus de consolatione* 31: *sed re vera miseri omnes sumus.*

⁸² *Dialogus de consolatione* 32: *ut sine dubitatione aliqua audeam affirmare quibusque paupertatem divitiis antefendam esse.*

⁸³ See e.g. Alison Brown, in Bartolomeo Scala, *Essays and Dialogues*, ix.

⁸⁴ *Dialogus de consolatione* 35.

disdains them and rages against them, and they quickly come to realize how far they have strayed from the truth”.⁸⁵ The external goods that fortune offers are never worth pursuing, while the lust they generate is “the very greatest source of human misery”.⁸⁶ People think these external goods are necessary for happiness when in fact, because they are controlled by fortune, their pursuit makes one’s happiness profoundly insecure. Thus Cosimo concludes that external goods are unnecessary for human happiness.

This looks like a move away from his earlier Peripatetic view and Scala responds by noting that Cosimo seems to be embracing the Stoic view that he earlier rejected.⁸⁷ Both agree that the only true goods are those of the soul, but then Cosimo shifts direction somewhat. Philosophy, he says, is, as Plato said, a meditation on death, and the truly wise prefer death to life.⁸⁸ This reference to the *Phaedo* sets the theme for the remainder of the discussion. So long as the soul is joined to the body it will only ever encounter a “shadow of a true and real good”.⁸⁹ Death is, he argues, the only refuge from the evils of human life, and it is in fact not an evil at all. This clearly Platonic position is augmented with references to Scripture, presenting Cosimo as a Christian Platonist, very much in line with his great protégé Marsilio Ficino.

⁸⁵ *Dialogus de consolatione* 36: *saepe superbiente ac saeviente fortuna, quatum ab vero aberrarint facile recognoscant.*

⁸⁶ *Dialogus de consolatione* 39: *ista vel maxima hominum miseria.*

⁸⁷ *Dialogus de consolatione* 40.

⁸⁸ *Dialogus de consolatione* 42: *tamen ea tandem vera philosophia est, ut Platoni quoque placet, quae mortis habet commentationem.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*: *umbram quandam veri solidique boni.*

When Scala responds by again deferentially agreeing with Cosimo and then lamenting about the inevitable sorrow of the human condition, Cosimo chides him for impiety. To describe the human condition as inevitably miserable is to find fault with God. The suffering that people go through is the product of their pursuing external goods. That the pursuit of these goods inevitably leads to suffering and offers only insecure happiness subject to the whims of fortune is itself a lesson that these are in fact false goods. Instead one ought to turn away from external goods and those of the body to focus on the soul, in preparation for the next life. Continuing the Platonic imagery, Cosimo says “we live amid shadow and smoke, and following our spiritual nature, we seek something stable”.⁹⁰

Cosimo’s final position in the dialogue is that there is no consolation for human suffering, for this is simply part of the human condition. However, this is not something to be lamented, for it is a deliberate divine reminder that one ought not to focus one’s attention on the body or on external goods that fortune can give and take as it pleases. Despite this, Cosimo can still offer consolation for the suffering at hand, namely the loss of his son, Giovanni. Death is no evil, just as it was not for Socrates in the *Phaedo*. When Crito wept over Socrates’ corpse it simply showed that he had failed to grasp Socrates’ arguments about the true nature of the human being, namely that the real Socrates was an immortal soul. Philosophical consolation for death requires a proper understanding of the nature of human beings, just as one can see played out in the *Phaedo*. Cosimo’s line of argument is very much in that Platonic tradition. It shares with Stoicism a rejection of the importance of external goods, and so avoids dependence on

⁹⁰ *Dialogus de consolatione* 49: *Ita vero fit in umbra et fumo nos esse intelligentes, dum secuti animi naturam, aliquid stabile conquirimus.*

fortune, but unlike Stoicism it embraces physical suffering as a constant reminder that the soul will be happier once it has departed the body. Giovanni's death was thus in no way a bad thing.

Scala's text draws on philosophical discussions about value, the relationship between body and soul, and the wider metaphysics that these presuppose, all in order to develop his own attempt at philosophical consolation. The Platonic themes in his discussion mark a move away from the consolatory tradition of the earlier Humanists who, as we have seen, drew inspiration primarily from Cicero and Seneca.

7. Marsilio Ficino

It is difficult to know for sure to what extent, if any, the views of Scala's 'Cosimo' overlapped with the outlook of the real Cosimo de' Medici. The broadly Platonist view attributed to him is certainly plausible, and no doubt the real Cosimo discussed similar material with his close associate Marsilio Ficino. Ficino was, of course, a prolific author and translator, producing commentaries on both Plato's dialogues and other works from the late ancient Platonic tradition, as well as his major work, the *Theologia Platonica*. He was also a great letter writer and, following Petrarch and other Humanists, organized and edited his

correspondence for publication.⁹¹ It is among his letters that we find a number of texts offering consolation or discussing consolatory themes.⁹²

Around a decade after the composition of Scala's dialogue, Ficino wrote a letter of consolation to Gismondo della Stufa, whose fiancé had died the day before their planned wedding.⁹³ Like Scala, the consolation Ficino offered was resolutely Platonic: the soul is the real person, not the body, which is a mere shadow.⁹⁴ By withdrawing into one's soul it is possible to possess the soul of another, via an act of contemplation of the idea of the person, and this idea-soul is far more beautiful than the transient physical form that has just been lost.

Elsewhere he reflects more widely on coping with bad fortune, again drawing heavily on Platonism.⁹⁵ A human is composed of a soul and a body. While the soul is in kinship with God, the body is part of the material universe. While the former is guided by providence, the latter is subject to fate. The soul is thus free from the vicissitudes of fate, or at least has the potential to be, so long as it does not become too strongly tied to the body. The way to escape the violence of fate, then, is to withdraw from the body and focus on the life of the mind, "for then fate will

⁹¹ His letters can be found in Marsilio Ficino, *Opera*, 2 vols (Basel: Heinrich Petri, 1561), 1:607-964. There is an incomplete critical edition in Marsilio Ficino, *Lettere*, ed. Sebastiano Gentile, 2 vols (Florence: Olschki, 1990-2010). Eleven books (of twelve) have been translated into English in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, 11 vols (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975-2020); this is based upon the *editio princeps* – *Epistolae* (Venice: Matteo Capcasa, for Hieronymus Blondus, 1495) – and a number of manuscripts, incorporating corrections and alternative readings. The letters are unnumbered in the *Opera*; I follow the numbering in the translation.

⁹² These include Ficino, *Ep.* 1.15, 1.20, 1.50, 1.112, 3.61, 4.33, 5.46, 8.42, 8.49, 9.2, 10.29, 11.31, and 11.32.

⁹³ This is Ficino, *Ep.* 1.15 (*Opera* 1:617), dated 1st August 1473. In *Lettere* 1:38 it is numbered 1.14.

⁹⁴ See Ficino, *Ep.* 1.15 (*Opera* 1:617; *Lettere* 1:38): *certe animus homo ipse est; corpus autem est hominis umbra*.

⁹⁵ See Ficino, *Ep.* 1.50 (*Opera* 1:633; *Lettere* 1:97-8).

discharge its force upon the body without touching the soul”.⁹⁶ His argument is not that bad fortune is not really evil at all; instead he acknowledges it as evil, counselling that one ought to run away from it by retreating into the soul. Strictly speaking this cannot be Ficino’s view and he is probably using the word ‘evil’ in its common meaning rather than a more technical sense, perhaps in deference to his correspondent.⁹⁷ For Ficino *qua* Neoplatonist, evil is nothing at all, an absence of being.⁹⁸ The notion that external misfortunes are genuine evils is the view of those who have not yet extricated their souls from the material world, but it serves the purpose of Ficino’s argument to continue to describe such things as evil if that can act as a spur to encourage withdrawal into the soul.

In a letter to Bernardo Bembo (father of Pietro), Ficino pursues this further, tackling head on the value of fortune.⁹⁹ It often seems, he notes, that fortune attacks good people and rewards the bad. The vicious appear to be rewarded with worldly success, while the virtuous seem, for all intents and purposes, to get punished. But in fact, Ficino argues, the opposite is the case. The vicious person raised up by fortune remains vicious and, unable to learn a moral lesson in such circumstances, suffers the real harm of remaining vicious. The virtuous who suffer at the hands of fortune benefit from the constant reminder that external circumstances are of no consequence at all, and so the primacy of virtue is

⁹⁶ Ficino, *Ep.* 1.50 (*Opera*, 1:633; *Lettere* 1:98): *tunc enim vim suam fortuna explebit in corpore, in animum non transibit.*

⁹⁷ See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Virginia Conant (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 352-3.

⁹⁸ Ficino outlines his philosophical account of evil in his commentary on the *De divinis nominibus* of Pseudo-Dionysius, esp. § 134. Note the edition with translation in Marsilio Ficino, *On Dionysius the Areopagite*, ed. and trans. Michael J. B. Allen, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). See further Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 64-5.

⁹⁹ This is *Ep.* 3.61 (*Opera* 1:748).

reinforced. Thus, “for the evil, good fortune becomes evil; but for the good, evil fortune becomes good”.¹⁰⁰ People can be governed by either chance or wisdom. The person who values external goods will inevitably be at the whim of chance fortune, but the person who values wisdom above all else will be impervious to such ups and downs: “No one is more pitiable than he who places true happiness in fortune. No one is happier than he who does not judge fortuitous prosperity truly to be happiness.”¹⁰¹ Although Ficino does not explicitly make the connection in this letter, it is fairly clear the way in which this contrast between chance fortune and constant wisdom maps onto his distinction between the world of material bodies and the realm of the soul.¹⁰²

Two letters from the 1490s make explicit that it is philosophy that is the antidote to fortune.¹⁰³ The life of the philosopher is all too often marked by poverty – “no philosophers will ever be rich and rich men cannot easily become philosophers” – but this is of no concern to someone who places value in virtue rather than external circumstances.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, according to Aristotle intelligence and good fortune often seem to be mutually exclusive, and the philosopher is happy to

¹⁰⁰ Ficino, *Ep.* 3.61 (*Opera* 1:748): *Malis quidem bona fortuna fit mala, bonis autem mala fortuna bona.* See also *Ep.* 4.33 (*Opera* 1:778): “Fortune can neither benefit the wicked nor harm the good” (*Fortuna neque benefacere potest malis neque malefacere bonis*).

¹⁰¹ Ficino, *Ep.* 3.61 (*Opera* 1:748-9): *Nemo miserius illo qui veram felicitatem collocat in fortuna. Nemo felicior quam qui fortuitam prosperitatem revera felicem esse non iudicat.*

¹⁰² Elsewhere, *Ep.* 10.29 (*Opera* 1:913-14), Ficino gives a more formal definition of fortune, stating that it ought to be identified with fate, which is a succession of celestial causes (*Quae quidem cum fato, id est, cum serie coelestium causarum*).

¹⁰³ These are *Ep.* 11.31 and 32 (*Opera* 1:943-4).

¹⁰⁴ See *Ep.* 11.31 (*Opera* 1:943): *neque Philosophos ullos unquam fore divites, neque rursus divites facile fore Philosophos.*

embrace intelligence at the expense of good fortune.¹⁰⁵ In short, then, the way to escape the vicissitudes of fortune is to embrace a philosophical way of life, focused on the cultivation of wisdom and taking care of one's soul. On such a life, fortune can leave no mark.

Here we can see the way in which the philosophical position underpinning a particular consolatory argument can lead to specific recommendations about how to live. Ficino's broadly Platonic-Aristotelian tone suggests a life of withdrawal focused on intellectual contemplation, something quite different from the Stoic and Cynic responses embraced by some of the other Renaissance thinkers considered earlier.

8. Conclusions

As we have seen, a number of Humanists produced works of philosophical consolation drawing on arguments from a variety of ancient philosophers in order to offer practical remedies for people suffering in the face of bereavement, exile, and other misfortunes brought by fate and fortune. Different ancient philosophical positions made different claims about the nature of human beings, their place in nature, and what has value, leading them to offer different remedies for misfortune. Stoic, Cynic, Platonic, and Aristotelian strategies were all discussed and indeed defended in Renaissance works of consolation. Questions about which type of consolation might be best involved reflection on both which underpinning arguments seemed most convincing and which offered genuine

¹⁰⁵ See *Ep.* 11.32 (*Opera* 1:943), where Ficino cites the Aristotelian *Magna moralia* 1207a4-6, which is probably not by Aristotle himself.

solace in times of distress. As we saw in the case of *Salutati*, sometimes a position that was much admired in the abstract failed to offer any comfort when put to the test in real life.

It should come as no great surprise that Renaissance Humanists became so interested in philosophical consolation, given the ancient texts that they were reading. Notwithstanding the rediscovery of previously lost texts in both Greek and Latin, the already well-known philosophical works of Cicero and Seneca remained key points of reference for Humanist thinkers, not least Cicero's *Tusculanae disputationes*. There, Cicero defined philosophy as a medicine for the soul,¹⁰⁶ mapping out a common therapeutic project shared by the majority of ancient philosophers who came after Socrates. It was Socrates who had defined philosophy as a task concerned with taking care of the soul.¹⁰⁷ Petrarch took up this conception of philosophy as an alternative to the Scholastic model,¹⁰⁸ setting the agenda for subsequent Humanists during the Quattrocento. That Socratic model also stood behind the Platonic approach taken up by Scala and Ficino. Its image of philosophy as a medicine for the soul and a guide to life was thus always in the background. All the Renaissance thinkers considered here were effectively committed to the view that philosophy was able to offer genuine consolation for people facing adversity. The philosophical solutions offered often proposed dramatic changes to an individual's way of life, whether that be giving up allegiance to one's hometown, rejecting the importance of material possessions, reining in ambition, neglecting the demands of the body, or withdrawing into a

¹⁰⁶ Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.1.

¹⁰⁷ Plato, *Ap.* 29d-e, 30a-b.

¹⁰⁸ See Petrarch's *De sui ipsius et multorum ignorantia* 107-8, in Francesco Petrarch, *Invectives*, ed. and trans. David Marsh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

life of contemplation. Different philosophies championed different ways of life. In the Renaissance, many thinkers embraced this idea of philosophy as a way of life and their interest in the consolatory power of philosophy was but one expression of a wider commitment to the idea that philosophy was a practical tool for transforming one's life.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ For further discussion of this final thought, see John Sellars, "Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy as a Way of Life," *Metaphilosophy* 51/2-3 (2020): 226-43.