

# SCHOLARSHIP AS A PHILOSOPHICAL WAY OF LIFE: THE CASE OF LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI

John Sellars

ABSTRACT: I examine a short work by Leon Battista Alberti, his *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, which considers both the disadvantages and the benefits of a life devoted to scholarship. Alberti mocks the scholar whose life is marked by extreme hardship and poverty with little chance of attaining the rewards of fame and wealth. Yet there are also more serious benefits that come from the study of ancient literature, leading Alberti to re-assess his own motivations for wanting to embrace the life of a scholar. It is only through a philosophical clarification of values that the true worth of a scholarly life can be grasped. Along the way Alberti makes plain that the ultimate goal is the cultivation of a virtuous character. This is what makes a life devoted to scholarship a philosophical way of life.

## 1. Preliminaries

Leon Battista Alberti (1404-72) was famously hailed by Jacob Burckhardt as the archetypal universal man of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> When we think about the term ‘Renaissance’ today we probably associate it with two distinct things: a key moment in the history of art and the rediscovery of ancient works of literature by humanist scholars. Alberti was one of the few people to have a foot in both of these worlds.<sup>2</sup> His interests and works covered a wide range of disciplines.<sup>3</sup> He is probably best remembered today for his treatises on painting (*De pictura*) and architecture (*De re aedificatoria*).<sup>4</sup> He was among other things a grammarian, a comic poet, a mathematician, and a practising architect. But was he also a philosopher? According to a number of older commentators, he was not.<sup>5</sup> This view, in part, may simply reflect wider scepticism about the philosophical credentials of Renaissance humanists.<sup>6</sup> Famously, Paul Kristeller once stated that the humanists had ‘nothing to do with philosophy’, claiming that it was not that they were bad philosophers; they simply were not philosophers at all.<sup>7</sup> Recently a number of people have started to question the claim that Alberti had no interest in

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<sup>1</sup> See Burckhardt 1945, 85, and repeated by Gadol 1969, xiii.

<sup>2</sup> Thus McLaughlin 2010, 59, who describes Alberti as ‘the first writer-artist of the Italian Renaissance’.

<sup>3</sup> For overviews see, in the first instance, Gadol 1969; Grafton 2001; Pearson 2022.

<sup>4</sup> These are translated in Grayson 1972 and Rykwert *et al.* 1988 respectively. The Italian version of *De pictura*, the *Della pittura*, is translated in Spencer 1966.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Spencer 1966, 16; Gadol 1969, 232; more recently Pearson 2011.

<sup>6</sup> For recent discussions of such scepticism, see e.g. Sellars 2020; Kircher 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Kristeller 1944-45, 354. Elsewhere he offered a more sympathetic assessment; see e.g. Kristeller 1964, 4-5.

philosophy by doing two things. The first is to pay more attention to his vernacular dialogues and the second is to reflect on what we mean by ‘philosophy’, sometimes explicitly in dialogue with the work of Pierre Hadot.<sup>8</sup> According to Hadot, ancient Greek and Roman philosophy was understood first and foremost as a way of life, a guide to how to live a good life, and seemingly abstract and theoretical speculation was subordinated to that fundamental goal. In Alberti’s vernacular dialogues – especially the *Theogenius* and the *Profugiorum ab aerumna libri* – he discussed a wide range of practical problems connected with how to live: how to cope with adversity, how to manage one’s emotions, how to cultivate the virtues, and a host of other ideas largely inspired by the Stoics.<sup>9</sup> In his *I libri della famiglia*, dealing with a wide range of everyday practical problems, Alberti outlined practices of self-cultivation, probably inspired by Seneca.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows I too want to suggest that the notion of philosophy as a way of life offers a useful lens through which to re-assess some of Alberti’s work. In particular, I want to focus on one relatively short work that explicitly shows Alberti reflecting on his own way of life: the *De commodis litterarum atque incommodis*, *The Uses and Disadvantages of Letters*, or, as Watkins renders it in her translation, *The Use and Abuse of Books*.<sup>11</sup> This was a text Alberti wrote when he was still relatively young, perhaps twenty-five years old, just after he had completed his studies in law at the University of Bologna. Before that, in his teenage years, he had also studied with the famous humanist Gasparino Barzizza in Padua. Barzizza gave lectures on a wide range of ancient texts, including Seneca’s letters, which were a particular favourite of his and on which he wrote a commentary. It is likely from Barzizza that Alberti gained his appreciation of Stoicism.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Kircher 2012; Zak 2014; Ceron 2015. Both Zak and Ceron explicitly draw on Hadot 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Both of these works can be found in vol. 2 of Grayson 1960-73. For detailed bibliographical descriptions of editions and translations, see Cartei 2017, ii, 725-8 (*Profugia*) and 753-60 (*Theogenius*). The *Profugia* is translated into French in Jodogne 2016 and discussed in Mönig 2008 and Schöndube 2011. It is sometimes known under the title *Della tranquillità dell’animo*; on the question of its title see Grayson 1960-73, ii, 422; Cartei 2017, ii, 725. An extract from the *Theogenius* is translated into English in Kircher 2023; it is discussed in Tateo 2005 and McLaughlin 2016, 125-44. For discussions covering both works, see Kircher 2012 and Ceron 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Compare *I libri della famiglia* 3 (Grayson 1960-73, i, 177-8; Watson, 1969, 172-3) with Seneca, *De ira* 3.36.1-3.

<sup>11</sup> The text was first printed in Alberti’s *Opera* (Florence, c. 1499), ISTC ia00211000. I have relied upon the critical edition in Goggi Carotti 1976, hereafter ‘GC’, and refer to its chapter and section divisions. I quote from the translation in Watkins 1999, hereafter ‘W’. It is also printed in Cardini 2010, 21-50, and there is a more recent critical edition in Regoliosi 2021, now reprinted with an English translation in McLaughlin 2023 (which appeared just as this chapter was being sent to press). For further information on its publication history, see Cartei 2017, i, 225-8.

<sup>12</sup> Barzizza’s substantial commentary on Seneca’s *Epistulae* survives in multiple manuscripts. It was composed c. 1408-12; Alberti studied with Barzizza 1415-18. Barzizza also composed a commentary on

The *De commodis* has been read in a variety of ways. A number of commentators have suggested that this is either an ultimately pessimistic text or that it expresses Alberti's deep ambivalence towards book learning, reading, and writing.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that we approach it from a different perspective. It is, I suggest, in many ways a humorous text, a work of satire, but, like most works of satire, one with a serious point.<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that Alberti wrote a number of works of comedy. His very first piece of writing, composed when he was just twenty years old and still a student, was a play entitled *Philodoxeos*, modelled on the ancient comedies of Plautus and Terence.<sup>15</sup> He also wrote a series of comic dialogues often touching on philosophical topics known as the *Intercenales*, short pieces to be read over dinner (the title has been translated as *Dinner Pieces*), which were modelled on the satirical dialogues of Lucian.<sup>16</sup> In the preface to Book 1 of the *Intercenales*, written just after *De commodis* and addressed to the physician Paolo Toscanelli, Alberti says that just as Paolo has a range of medicines for the body, Alberti is now offering in these writings some medicine for the mind. He says, 'I, through my writings, provide a way of relieving the mind's maladies which works through laughter and hilarity'.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in the preface to his comic novel *Momus*, written a little over a decade later, he suggests that his aim in that work is to 'equip his readers to enjoy a better life (*vitae melioris*), instructing them with weighty sayings and varied and choice material, while at the same time charming them with laughter, pleasing them with jokes, and diverting them with pleasure'.<sup>18</sup> It is in the light of these comments that I suggest we approach the *De commodis*. It is a work of satire in which Alberti pokes fun

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Cicero's *De officiis*, another key source for Stoic ethics. See further Panizza 1977; Mercer 1979, esp. 43-4, 80, 82-9.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Grafton 1997, 55, who calls it 'mordant', and McLaughlin 2009, 76, who describes it as 'pessimistic'. Boenke 2010, 61, comments that 'a pessimistic undertone frequently breaks through in Alberti's writings on moral philosophy'. Similarly, Ceron 2015, 12, suggests that his works 'present a gloomy, pessimistic account of the human condition'. Pearson 2011, 10, and Zak 2014, 230, both suggest that Alberti had an ambivalent attitude towards reading and writing. For a more positive assessment, see Grayson 1988.

<sup>14</sup> On this topic see the papers collected together in Casanova-Robin *et al.* 2020, a number of which touch on Alberti, and especially Marsh 2020, which examines the *De commodis* and outlines how it lampoons a number of Alberti's contemporaries.

<sup>15</sup> The *Philodoxeos* is edited and translated in Grund 2005, 70-169.

<sup>16</sup> The *Intercenales* has a complex textual history, on which see Marsh 1999. An incomplete version was first edited and published in Mancini 1890. Further pieces were discovered in the 1960s and published in Garin 1964. I have consulted the text printed in Cardini 2010, 223-617, and the translation into English in Marsh 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Alberti, *Intercenales* 1 Pr. (Cardini 2010, 223; Marsh 1987, 15): 'ego vero his meis scriptis genus levandi morbos animi affero, quod per risum atque hilaritatem suscipiatur'.

<sup>18</sup> Alberti, *Momus* Pr. 4 (Brown and Knight 2003: 4-5).

at ‘men of letters’, which is to say at himself as much as anyone else.<sup>19</sup> But as well as being humorous, it also wants to achieve a serious and ultimately philosophical goal. Indeed, I suggest that what Alberti is really doing in this work is asking himself the fundamental question ‘how should I live?’. Along the way, he engages in philosophical reflection about what matters most for a good life and outlines an example of a philosophical way of life.

## 2. Arguments Against the Scholarly Life

The *De commodis* is addressed to Alberti’s brother, Carlo. In it he describes how he has dedicated his life to scholarship, guided by the great writers of antiquity, reading and writing every day.<sup>20</sup> Here, ‘scholarship’ translates *litterae*, which one might render as ‘letters’ (as in the phrase ‘man of letters’), ‘books’, or, more broadly, the study of texts. As we shall see, Alberti has all types of book learning in mind, whether it be the study of literature, philosophy, theology, or law. Many people enter into this kind of study, he suggests, under the misapprehension that it will either be enjoyable or that it will improve their future career prospects. Alberti is writing to warn his brother against holding such expectations.

There are three things in particular that Alberti thinks students naively expect to gain from their studies: pleasure, financial reward, and social prestige. He argues that in all three cases they are mistaken. In the light of his own experience of being a student over the past decade, Alberti has learned the hard way that a life devoted to scholarship brings none of those things. In order to demonstrate this, he addresses each one in turn.

### 2.1. Pleasure

The life of the scholar is, says Alberti, ‘necessarily hard and harsh’; it is a life of constant hard work, ‘never free of anxiety and striving’.<sup>21</sup> The principal task, reading, is time intensive, leaving little time over for relaxation or vacations. If the scholar tries to take a break from their work, they are unlikely to enjoy it, because they will just be thinking about the unending amount of work still waiting to be done. The more the scholar makes progress, the more they become aware of how much they still do not know. The scholarly life thus quickly becomes an endless treadmill and there is never any sense of finality or completion. The work is literally endless.<sup>22</sup> One might note, as an aside, that this was written probably around 1430, *before* the invention of printing that led to an exponential

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<sup>19</sup> Thus I disagree with McLaughlin 2023, ix, who suggests that there is ‘little that is comic’ in *De commodis*.

<sup>20</sup> *De commodis* 1.1 (GC, 37; W, 15).

<sup>21</sup> *De commodis* 2.9 (GC, 46; W, 18) and 3.3 (GC, 50; W, 20).

<sup>22</sup> See *De commodis* 3.13-17 (GC, 53-5; W, 22).

explosion in the number of books in the second half of the fifteenth century. Even in the era of manuscripts, there was the perception among scholars that there was just too much to read.

The relentless time demands of the scholarly life, together with the often obsessive nature of the work, make it largely incompatible with a meaningful social life or developing romantic relationships, both of which are equally time consuming and distracting, and so probably best avoided by any serious student. As Alberti puts it, ‘who, with a mind occupied by love, will be able to focus whole and steadfast attention on texts?’.<sup>23</sup> In any case, there are few opportunities for those kinds of things, given that most of the scholar’s time must be spent in solitude in the library. Although there may be some pleasure gained from the process of study, it is significantly outweighed by the many pains. The scholar is, Alberti says, ‘sedentary all the time, reading all the time, thinking hard, always alone, renouncing festivities and plays’.<sup>24</sup> And don’t forget the backache from being hunched over a desk all day.

The life of the scholar is also one of poverty. Most students have little money and what they do have must be spent on books. Little is left over for even basic luxuries that might make life a little more comfortable. It also comes with moral risks. The expectation of constant productivity creates the risk that the scholar might compromise their principles. If they want success and glory, they must write no matter what, even if they have nothing to say. Erudite silence is of no value to anyone. Rather than follow Socrates, who famously wrote nothing, the scholar is more likely to end up becoming like Isocrates who, in order to earn a living, resorted to writing works praising tyrants.<sup>25</sup> Just asking questions like Socrates won’t cut it.

It can also lead to serious harms to health through overwork – lack of sleep, anxiety, depression. Alberti hints that he suffered himself in this manner. As he comments at one point, ‘the scholar’s daily anxiety [...] is perpetual and immense’.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in his autobiography, written anonymously and in the third person, Alberti describes more than one episode of illness brought on by overwork.<sup>27</sup> Part of the problem, he suggests, is that

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<sup>23</sup> *De commodis* 3.11 (GC, 52; W, 21).

<sup>24</sup> *De commodis* 3.32 (GC, 63; W, 25).

<sup>25</sup> See *De commodis* 1.4 (GC, 40-1; W, 16).

<sup>26</sup> *De commodis* 3.33 (GC, 64; W, 26).

<sup>27</sup> See *Autobiografia* 6-10 (Cardini 2010, 990; Watkins 1989, 8). This text is also known under the title *Vita* or *Vita anonima*. It is edited in Fubini and Menci Gallorini 1972 and Cardini 2010, 989-97. It is translated into English in Watkins 1989. Cardini’s text is now reprinted with an English translation in McLaughlin 2023. For further bibliographical information, see Cartei 2017, i, 207-12. I follow Cardini and Cartei in using the title *Autobiografia*. For discussions, see Watkins 1989; Marsh 2007; Zak 2014, esp. 232-9. Alberti suffered from breakdowns at the ages of nineteen and twenty-four (Watkins 1999, 5). When describing his ill health, Alberti uses the term *valitudo*. Compare this with another Renaissance text devoted to the health of the intellectual, Marsilio Ficino’s *De vita libri tres* (in Kaske and Clark 2002). Ficino was

all this effort goes into something that has only a vague and uncertain sense of future reward. Over time the scholar comes to realize that they are deluded and that these rewards are mere mirages: ‘no success is going to come their way’, he comments.<sup>28</sup> Other career paths offer a much surer route to financial and social success, often with less effort. However, once someone has gone so far into the world of scholarship, it soon becomes the only thing they know, and so there is nothing else that they are left qualified to do. The scholar, however unhappy they may be, is all too often trapped.<sup>29</sup> Thus, Alberti concludes that many people who embark on a scholarly life become alienated from their studies, come to regret it, and, given a second chance, would do something else.<sup>30</sup> ‘No prudent person’, he comments, ‘will be lured into it by the hope of pleasure’.<sup>31</sup> Summing up his case against the claim that a scholarly life is pleasurable, he writes:

The scholar [...] neither physically nor mentally ever, or hardly ever, gets any rest. Bleak solitude, hard labour, endless hours, great anxiety, difficult questions, total absorption, intense anxiety – as there is no pleasure to be found in this man, so in his whole life there is almost no break in the onslaught of work and worry.<sup>32</sup>

## 2.2. Wealth

Alberti next turns his attention to the issue of financial reward. If one ever meets a wealthy scholar, Alberti comments, they must have already been wealthy, because they certainly didn’t gain it from their time spent studying books. Scholarship does not pay. The obsessive behaviour that it encourages leads most scholars to neglect almost all practical matters, including their finances. What money they do have must be spent on books and the paraphernalia of academic life, such as graduation gowns.<sup>33</sup> Yet despite all this expense – often justified as an investment against future earnings – the student’s studies are unlikely to generate any income. Indeed, the costs associated with study are so great that they are rarely fully recouped by a subsequent career as a scholar – if the student is fortunate enough to have one.<sup>34</sup> Thus, ‘book learning is not of the slightest use for gaining wealth, but just the opposite, a great financial drain’.<sup>35</sup>

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concerned with treating *melancholia* by medical means, whereas Alberti, in the spirit of the Stoics, will go on to offer a cognitive psychotherapeutic cure for mental disturbances. I thank Valery Rees for the pointer.

<sup>28</sup> *De commodis* 2.11 (GC, 47; W, 18).

<sup>29</sup> See *De commodis* 3.21 (GC, 59; W, 23).

<sup>30</sup> See *De commodis* 2.1 (GC, 43; W, 17).

<sup>31</sup> *De commodis* 3.36 (GC, 65; W, 26).

<sup>32</sup> *De commodis* 3.35-6 (GC, 64-5; W, 26).

<sup>33</sup> See *De commodis* 4.7-11 (GC, 67-9; W, 28-9).

<sup>34</sup> See *De commodis* 4.19 (GC, 71-2; W, 30).

<sup>35</sup> *De commodis* 4.81 (GC, 96; W, 42).

Indeed, few will even have a chance to earn anything from all their hard work. Assuming a group of a thousand people, Alberti estimates that (in the fifteenth century) only a hundred or so will survive to that point in middle age when they are qualified enough to make a living from their scholarly work. Of those hundred, perhaps only ten will actually be gifted enough to produce the sort of work required in order to have a shot at a scholarly career. Of those ten, perhaps three will have the strength of character to keep going in the face of the many challenges they will encounter. For the one or two that might actually succeed in earning a living from their studies, this won't be due to their innate genius or all their hard work, but simply due to 'the stupidity of fortune' (*stultitiam fortune*).<sup>36</sup> If the one or two who do make it go on to achieve worldly success – fame, promotion, accolades – they are unlikely to be the most praiseworthy individuals, given the compromises they will inevitably have made along the way. Thus, anyone who pursues the scholarly life in the hope of great wealth – or even just making a modest living – is, Alberti says, 'extremely foolish'.<sup>37</sup>

Having said all that, Alberti acknowledges that there are some exceptions. There are some branches of study that naturally lead on to careers; he mentions law, medicine, and clerical work, and later on he adds to this list theology.<sup>38</sup> However, those who devote themselves to the liberal arts won't have those kinds of careers open to them. Writers and philosophers work just as hard but see no financial reward for their efforts. Instead, they are forced to beg for teaching positions. But, Alberti quips, what else should one expect: 'philosophers despise wealth as an ultimate evil, so they deserve to be penniless and wretched'.<sup>39</sup>

### 2.3. Prestige and honour

Alongside financial reward, Alberti suggests that many students also wrongly believe that their studies will bring them social prestige and honour. However, he argues that the scholar is universally held in low esteem precisely because most people can see the hardship, poverty, and constant work of the scholarly life and so cannot comprehend why anyone would choose to follow it. The scholar neglects all those things that are usually thought to be essential for a happy life – their finances, their families, their health – and so the typical person is unlikely to consider a scholar very wise.<sup>40</sup>

As time goes on, the scholar is likely to become increasingly resentful of the fact that all their hard work has not brought any money or prestige. If they go back out into a world where these things are valued above all else, it is unsurprising that some scholars start to

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<sup>36</sup> See *De commodis* 4.37-46 (GC, 78-83; W, 33-5).

<sup>37</sup> See *De commodis* 4.53 (GC, 85; W, 37).

<sup>38</sup> See *De commodis* 4.56 (GC, 86; W, 37) and 5.14 (GC, 102; W, 46).

<sup>39</sup> *De commodis* 4.57 (GC, 86; W, 38).

<sup>40</sup> See *De commodis* 5.24 (GC, 106; W, 48).

desire money and prestige more than they do the pursuit of knowledge. But other scholars don't fall into that trap. They remain committed to the study of their subjects and the pursuit of knowledge in their field. The problem they face, however, is that when they find themselves in social situations with ordinary people, they tend to let forth with excessive passion about whatever it is they are obsessively working on, to the bemusement of their audience. Quickly they become an object of ridicule. Consequently, the true scholar is not often admired and rarely feels comfortable in the wider world.<sup>41</sup>

Pulling the threads together, Alberti summarizes his satirical account of the scholarly life by commenting that 'in devotion to books you will find much work, no pleasures, great expense, little profit, many difficulties, and very little authority'.<sup>42</sup>

### 3. The True Benefits of a Scholarly Life

The scholarly life, then, fails to deliver pleasure, wealth, or fame. I noted earlier that Alberti had spent time studying with the famous humanist teacher Gasparino Barzizza, and it was no doubt then that Alberti became acquainted with the ideas of the Stoics, to which he seems to have been quite sympathetic. Alberti draws on key Stoic sources throughout his works: first and foremost, the philosophical works of Cicero, including *De finibus*, *De officiis*, and the *Tusculanae disputationes*, along with many of Seneca's works.<sup>43</sup> He was also familiar with the *Vitae philosophorum* of Diogenes Laertius, although, as we shall see later, its influence was slightly different.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, a number of commentators have characterized Alberti as a Stoic.<sup>45</sup>

For the Stoics, although external goods such as wealth and social prestige are acceptable things to pursue, they are not genuine goods and are not required for a happy life. According to them, only virtue is genuinely good, for it is the only thing that consistently benefits people, no matter what circumstances they might face.<sup>46</sup> Conventional external goods such as wealth and social prestige are, for the Stoics,

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<sup>41</sup> See *De commodis* 5.17-23 (GC, 103-6; W, 46-7).

<sup>42</sup> *De commodis* 6.1 (GC, 111; W, 51): 'multos labores, nullas voluptates, multas impensas, minima lucra, multas difficultates, multa discrimina, perexiguam auctoritatem in litteris comparari'.

<sup>43</sup> For a detailed list of Alberti's references to Cicero, see Cardini 2005, 397-402; for Seneca, see *ibid.* 466-8. Goggi Carotti 1976, 7-10, notes the importance of Cicero as an influence on *De commodis*, especially *De officiis*, *Brutus*, and *De finibus*.

<sup>44</sup> As the list of references in Cardini 2005, 440, implies, Alberti did not draw on Diogenes Laertius as a source for Stoicism; there are no references at all in his works to Book 7 containing the Stoic doxography. His principal points of reference were overwhelmingly the philosophical works of Cicero.

<sup>45</sup> See e.g. Spencer 1966, 17; Jarzombek 1989, 10; Panizza 1991, 64-5; Waktins 1999, 9; Grafton 2001, 18; McLaughlin 2009, 79; McLaughlin 2010, 41-2; McLaughlin 2016, 125-44; Martin 2020, 139-43. For some doubts see Ceron 2015, 13, who nevertheless stresses Alberti's debt to Seneca.

<sup>46</sup> See e.g. Cic. *Fin.* 3.51-3; Diog. Laert. 7.101-3.



classified as ‘indifferents’ (*adiaphora*).<sup>47</sup> These things do not possess any intrinsic value, the Stoics argued, although it is natural to pursue some of them in so far as they benefit us. Something like wealth is classified as a ‘preferred indifferent’, and its opposite, poverty, a ‘dispreferred indifferent’.<sup>48</sup> Other things being equal, one would naturally prefer wealth over poverty. However, it would be a mistake to put too high a value on such things and a grave error to pursue them at the expense of one’s rational and virtuous character.<sup>49</sup> If the pursuit of these things leads to frustration, resentment, or any other negative emotional response, that would count as damaging one’s virtue and so ought to be avoided. It looks as if this is precisely what happened to Alberti, where his ambition led to overwork and exhaustion, and his frustration led to some kind of depression.<sup>50</sup> Alberti’s pursuit of worldly success proved to be profoundly damaging.

In the case of pleasure (*voluptas*), the Stoics classified this as one of four principal emotional disturbances that ought to be avoided. According to the account made by Cicero, the emotion of pleasure is the product of judging that something good is present.<sup>51</sup> Yet, as we have just seen, conventional external goods are not really good according to the Stoics, they are merely ‘indifferents’; only virtue is good. Thus, any experience of pleasure in response to some external state of affairs is the product of a mistaken value judgement and, as such, ought to be avoided. It too is also sometimes classified as an ‘indifferent’.<sup>52</sup> The ideal Stoic will avoid pleasure, but in its place will experience the good emotion of ‘joy’ in their own virtue.<sup>53</sup> Virtue, and virtue alone, is the necessary and sufficient condition for a good, happy life.

In Stoic technical terminology, then, many of the disadvantages that Alberti describes in *De commodis* would be classified as ‘dispreferred indifferents’, things that one might rather avoid but not things that cause any genuine harm. As Cicero put it, ‘when it comes to a happy life, the amount of bodily advantages has no relevance at all’.<sup>54</sup> If Alberti was indeed sympathetic to the Stoics, then we might expect him to question whether the pursuit of these things is in fact appropriate. There are a number of hints in this direction early on in Alberti’s text. When arguing that the scholarly life won’t bring pleasure, money, or fame, he often adds as an aside that all it will bring is knowledge. Yet this is of course the key to understanding the true benefits of a life devoted to books. As Alberti comments, the prudent student will read his text as ‘a valuable reminder that books can

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<sup>47</sup> See e.g. Diog. Laert. 7.104-5.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Cic. *Fin.* 3.44.

<sup>50</sup> See his *Autobiografia* 6-10 (Cardini 2010, 990; Watkins 1989, 8).

<sup>51</sup> See Cic. *Tusc.* 3.24.

<sup>52</sup> See the lists of ‘indifferents’ in Diog. Laert. 7.102 and Stob. 2.7.5a.

<sup>53</sup> See Cic. *Tusc.* 4.13.

<sup>54</sup> Cic. *Fin.* 3.43 (trans. R. Woolf): ‘certe minus ad beatam vitam pertinet multitudo corporis commodorum’. It seems worth noting that in this passage, which contrasts the Stoic and Peripatetic views, Cicero uses the term *commodum* and the issue at stake is the role that *commoda* play in a happy life.

give them true guidance and a real understanding of things, while all the rest is not worth thinking about'.<sup>55</sup>

Alberti later elaborates on what he means by 'knowledge' (*cognitio*) by specifying knowledge of human and divine things, a guide to good conduct, and knowledge of the best things in life; all these come from philosophy, 'mother of learning' (*alumna litterarum*).<sup>56</sup> Alongside knowledge, Alberti also points to other things that we gain from study, namely wisdom (*sapientia*) and virtue (*virtus*). At one point he states that what we gain from study is 'modesty, magnanimity, virtue, and wisdom', while at another point he says that the goals of the scholar ought to be 'peace of mind, good conduct, virtue, and wisdom' (*animi quietem, mores, virtutem, sapientiamque*), adding that it is these at which the liberal arts aim.<sup>57</sup>

There is also, he suggests, a therapeutic benefit. One of the reasons why people ought to engage in scholarship, he comments, is in order to improve their minds and by this he does not seem to mean just intellectual development. It brings, he says, 'peace of mind and stability of character' (*animi quieti et stabilitati virtutis*).<sup>58</sup> The liberal arts that the scholar devotes their time to 'are meant to cure and eliminate diseases of the spirit (*animi morbos*), such as avarice, greed, and lust, and to develop and strengthen, in the soul which inclines toward evil, love of liberty, a sense of honour, nobility of spirit, and disdain for transitory things'.<sup>59</sup> In other words, they are supposed to cure the vices and cultivate the virtues. The true scholar comes to realize that this kind of learning is in fact more valuable than pleasure or worldly success. They have made the choice to pursue 'knowledge rather than cash', 'character rather than precious metals', and 'a richly furnished mind rather than a richly furnished home'.<sup>60</sup> Here one can see Alberti's text take a shift in tone. The mockery of the naive scholar is replaced with a more serious defence of the importance of virtue. However, the humour is not entirely absent: Alberti jokes that it is a good job that the scholarly life offers these benefits because these are precisely the things the scholar will need in order to be able to cope with all the hardships that have already been described.<sup>61</sup>

Alberti also comments that when he first embarked on his life as a scholar, he certainly did not have all this in mind. His own pursuit of scholarship was shaped in part by a desire for knowledge, but also a desire for worldly success, he comments.<sup>62</sup> This is where he went wrong. Through both the study of Stoic philosophical ideas and hard-won

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<sup>55</sup> *De commodis* 2.15 (GC, 48; W, 19).

<sup>56</sup> *De commodis* 5.38 (GC, 111; W, 50-1).

<sup>57</sup> See *De commodis* 4.4 (GC, 66; W, 27) and 6.7 (GC, 113; W, 52) respectively.

<sup>58</sup> *De commodis* 6.11 (GC, 114; W, 52).

<sup>59</sup> *De commodis* 4.84 (GC, 96; W, 42).

<sup>60</sup> *De commodis* 4.23 (GC, 73; W, 31).

<sup>61</sup> See *De commodis* 2.6 (GC, 45; W, 18).

<sup>62</sup> See *De commodis* 2.4 (GC, 44; W, 17).

experience of the realities of scholarly life, he came to realize that it was a mistake to pursue both of these ends at once. His study of Stoicism taught him that worldly success is not a worthwhile goal because it is not inherently good, as well as being something outside of one's control, while his lived experience taught him that a life of scholarship was highly unlikely to deliver it.<sup>63</sup> Alberti's text, then, might be described as a reflection on what the appropriate *telos* ought to be for someone tempted by the scholarly life.

Throughout the text there are warnings against pursuing both ends at once, knowledge *and* worldly success.<sup>64</sup> Alberti exhorts the scholar to 'flee from those false values of money, vain fame, and corrupt popularity that you introduce into your scholarly work'.<sup>65</sup> Equally damaging is to let the affairs of the world interfere with scholarly leisure, and so Alberti counsels scholars to avoid administrative work at all costs.<sup>66</sup> He emphatically states that 'nothing is worth pursuing except wisdom and virtue'.<sup>67</sup> The prudent scholar, he comments, knows that this is the true purpose of study, and, knowing this, they happily bear the pain and poverty of the scholarly life for the sake of these higher goods. They will also know that, although the wider world may not pay them much respect, they nevertheless ought to 'rank above all other men' due to their commitment to 'excellent morals' (*prestantissimi mores*) and 'wisdom' (*sapientia*). Alberti is all too aware that he lives in a world where people are admired for their wealth and few are admired for their virtue. Echoing Aristotle, he comments that if humans are natural pursuers of knowledge, then the scholar, in so far as they fulfil this function, is in fact the most perfect human being.<sup>68</sup>

By the end of *De commodis*, then, the mockery of the scholarly life is firmly set to one side. Although Alberti comments that when he first started out on his scholarly journey he had his eye on worldly success alongside the pursuit of knowledge, he is now

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<sup>63</sup> On the relationship between lessons learned from books and from lived experience, see also Alberti's *I libri della Famiglia* 4 (Grayson 1960-73, i, 287; Watkins 1969, 268). One of the characters in this dialogue comments that the acquisition of virtue rarely comes from the study of books alone; 'one has to learn it in the public marketplace, at the theatre, and in people's homes, through another kind of diligence and experience'. Compare this with Cicero's famous comment about how Socrates brought philosophy down into the city and into people's homes (Cic. *Tusc.* 5.10).

<sup>64</sup> See especially the passage at 4.23 (GC, 73; W, 31), which says 'What if they [scholars] pursue both literature and wealth? They will hardly be equally outstanding at both. Any why not? Because the passion of a man dedicated to knowledge is different from that of the man whose passion is for acquisition, and totally opposite'.

<sup>65</sup> *De commodis* 6.12 (GC, 115; W, 53): 'fuge istas divitiarum et futilis fame corrupteque laudis famulas quas litteris adhibes operas'.

<sup>66</sup> See *De commodis* 5.31 (GC, 108; W, 49).

<sup>67</sup> *De commodis* 6.15 (GC, 116; W, 53): 'nihil admodum probatissimis viris preter sapientiam et virtutem persequendum'.

<sup>68</sup> See *De commodis* 5.1-10 (GC, 97-101; W, 44-5) and esp. 5.3-5 (GC, 98-100; W, 44), where he describes reason (*ratio*) as the special ability of humans.

‘consistently on the side of virtue’.<sup>69</sup> He has coped with hardship, poverty, and hostility all for the sake of his love of learning, which he now pursues not for pleasure or for money, but for the knowledge that will guide him through life’s adversity.<sup>70</sup> It is a life devoted to virtue, inspired by the study of books, that brings the genuine goods of ‘peace of mind, praise, dignity, and happiness’ (*quietem animi, laudem, dignitatem et felicitatem*).<sup>71</sup>

#### 4. Scholarship as a Way of Life

These, then, are the true benefits of a life devoted to scholarship. In my title I have suggested that we ought to see this as a philosophical way of life – indeed, as an instance of philosophy as a way of life. Let me try to justify that claim further.

Despite a number of commentators doubting the extent to which Alberti was interested in philosophy,<sup>72</sup> it seems fairly clear that when he talks about letters, scholarship, and books (*litterae*), he has philosophy in mind. It is true that he mentions other academic disciplines such as law, medicine, and clerical work, but he places these in a lower category of studies because they aim at some external practical goal, rather than something that is an end in itself. Whenever he defines the ultimate goal of scholarly activity, as we have seen he usually defines it as either wisdom (*sapientia*) or virtue (*virtus*). It is also supposed to bring peace of mind (*quietus animi*). These are all the province of philosophy and, as we have seen, at one point Alberti refers to philosophy as the mother of all the arts, standing above the others but also encompassing all intellectual activity. Here he was probably following a well-known definition of philosophy in Cicero that was popular among humanists at the time, including Alberti’s own teacher Gasparino Barzizza.<sup>73</sup> In his *De oratore*, Cicero had written ‘the most learned men hold what the Greeks call *philosophia* to be the creator and mother, as it were, of all the reputable arts’.<sup>74</sup>

So, when Alberti is talking about book learning he is above all thinking about studying philosophical texts that will guide him in how to live. As we have seen, Cicero and Seneca were key points of reference for him. A slightly different form of inspiration came from reading the *Vitae philosophorum* of Diogenes Laertius, which had just been translated into Latin by Ambrogio Traversari.<sup>75</sup> It has been suggested that Alberti’s own short autobiography was modelled on the biographies that he read in Diogenes Laertius.

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<sup>69</sup> *De commodis* 6.2 (GC, 112; W, 51).

<sup>70</sup> *De commodis* 6.7 (GC, 113; W, 52).

<sup>71</sup> *De commodis* 6.13 (GC, 115, W, 53).

<sup>72</sup> See n. 5 above.

<sup>73</sup> See Mercer 1979, 120.

<sup>74</sup> Cic. *De or.* 1.9 (trans. Sutton, modified).

<sup>75</sup> For Alberti’s interest in Diogenes Laertius, see the list of references in Cardini 2005, 440, along with discussion in Marsh 2007, 132-6; Vasoli 2007, 21-2; McLaughlin 2009, 84; Schöndube 2011, 140-4; Zak 2014, 235-7.

Unusually for an autobiography, Alberti's is written in the third person. Along with an account of his life, presented as a series of anecdotes, it also includes a series of sayings, as one often finds in Diogenes' biographies of the ancient philosophers. Some have suggested that Alberti modelled his own biography on Diogenes' portrait of Thales, while others have pointed to the lives of Diogenes of Sinope and his follower Crates.<sup>76</sup> Either way, this looks to be Alberti consciously wanting to present himself as a philosopher and choosing to do so through an account of his way of life. In the autobiography he describes how 'he was always examining his own conduct (*mores*)' down to 'every gesture and every word'.<sup>77</sup> In the face of the various adversities that befell him in his own life, he comments that he responded to these difficulties 'solely by cultivating virtue' (*solo virtutis cultu*).<sup>78</sup> He also describes the ways in which he engaged in both physical and mental training, echoing passages in Diogenes Laertius' life of Diogenes of Sinope. Just as Diogenes had embraced marble statues in winter in order to strengthen his resilience, Alberti describes similar training that he undertook in order to overcome his aversion to the cold.<sup>79</sup>

It seems that Alberti was keen, then, to present himself as a philosopher and, in particular, as a philosopher in the mould of someone like Diogenes of Sinope who lived a distinctive way of life forged through practical training. In Alberti's own scholarly studies, he both learned arguments about why virtue is the highest good and encountered vivid examples of what living a philosophical way of life devoted to virtue might actually entail. For him, the scholar who studies philosophy and the other liberal arts is learning nothing less than 'the foundation and the pillars of a good and happy life'.<sup>80</sup> This is in marked contrast to scholastic philosophers who, elsewhere, Alberti lampoons in typical humanist fashion as being tied up in nothing more than linguistic subtleties.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> For the claim that Diogenes' life of Thales was an inspiration, see Grafton 2001, 23-4. For the life of Diogenes of Sinope as a point of reference, see Marsh 2007, 132-6; Zak 2014, 235-6. Zak also notes parallels with Diogenes' life of Crates. The figure of Crates evidently caught Alberti's imagination because he wrote a letter to him, *Leonis ad Cratem philosophum*, in Paris BnF MS Latin 6702, 159r (see Cardini 2005, 362-4). McLaughlin 2010, 49-51 also notes the influence of Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and perhaps Diogenes' life of Socrates' associate, Simon the Shoemaker.

<sup>77</sup> Alberti, *Autobiografia* 17-18 (Cardini 2010, 991; Watkins 1989, 9).

<sup>78</sup> *Autobiografia* 23 (Cardini 2010, 991; Watkins 1989, 10).

<sup>79</sup> *Autobiografia* 80-3 (Cardini 2010, 996; Watkins 1989, 15). Compare with Diog. Laert. 6.70-1. In *Profugia* 1 (Grayson 1960-73, ii, 132-3), Alberti explicitly draws the parallel between Diogenes' behaviour and his own training to cope with the cold.

<sup>80</sup> Alberti, *De commodis* 6.8 (GC, 114; W, 52): 'ad bene beateque vivendum fundamenta atque robur sunt'.

<sup>81</sup> See Alberti's *Momus* 4.26-70 (Brown and Knight 2003, 294-326). This contains an extended dialogue between Charon, ferryman to the underworld, and Gelastus, the spirit of a philosopher trapped in limbo. Gelastus is presented as a typical scholastic philosopher. Charon mocks him for his lack of useful knowledge and incomprehensible use of language. Charon contrasts Gelastus' broadly Aristotelian quest to understand causes in nature with his own commitment to Socratic self-knowledge. Charon makes clear

## 5. Reading and Writing as Spiritual Exercises

Alberti's *De commodis* was written at some time around 1430, when he was about twenty-five years old. He wrote his autobiography around 1440, at the still relatively young age of thirty-five or so. It was also around this time that he wrote two vernacular dialogues, the *Theogenius* and the *Profugiorum ab aerumna libri*.<sup>82</sup> The *Theogenius* is especially interesting for the way in which it picks up and develops some of the themes that we have seen in *De commodis*. Alberti begins by noting in the work's dedicatory letter that he wrote this book for himself as a work of self-consolation: 'I wrote these little books not for others but for myself, in order to console myself in my adverse fortune'.<sup>83</sup> If the *De commodis* ultimately stressed the benefits of studying ancient texts – reading as a spiritual exercise – then here, in the *Theogenius*, Alberti engages in writing as a spiritual exercise. However, Alberti quickly adds that by writing in the vernacular he hopes that his efforts might reach and help a wide range of others too.<sup>84</sup> His decision to do this came from his sense that 'this work helped me and relieved my distress'.<sup>85</sup>

The work itself is a dialogue between two characters, Teogenio and Microtiro. During the course of their discussion, Teogenio reports another dialogue that he witnessed between Genipatro and Tichipedo, nesting one conversation within the other. In this reported dialogue, Genipatro plays the role of wiser, elder mentor, while Tichipedo is depicted as young, wealthy, and arrogant. Indeed, Genipatro is said to follow a philosophical way of life (*vive filosofando*), spending his time reading and writing.<sup>86</sup> In what follows, Genipatro contrasts two ways of life: the life of youthful ambition led by Tichipedo and his own former self, and the life of virtuous simplicity that he now enjoys in older age. In his youth, Genipatro says, he was troubled by many desires and anxieties but, over time, he managed get these under control; in the process he made himself impervious to the vicissitudes of fortune. Now, in older age, he lives a much simpler life,

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that his goal is to learn how to live a good life, and he will happily turn to poets and painters if they can offer better guidance on this than the (scholastic) philosophers. It would, of course, be a mistake simply to identify the views of Charon – a mythical figure in a comic dialogue – with Alberti's own, but even so the exchange makes clear that Alberti had no qualms about poking fun at scholastic philosophers who, he implies at one point, rarely have deeds that match up to their words. On the portrayal of philosophy in *Momus*, see further Pearson 2011, who, however, takes Alberti's comments as a rejection of philosophy as such.

<sup>82</sup> See n. 9 above.

<sup>83</sup> *Theogenius*, prefatory letter to Leonello d'Este (Grayson 1960-73, ii, 55; Kircher 2023, 106): 'io scrissi questi libretti non ad altri che a me per consolare me stessi in mie avverse fortune'.

<sup>84</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*: 'me questa opera giovò, e sollevommi afflitto'.

<sup>86</sup> *Theogenius* 1 (Grayson 1960-73, ii, 62; not in Kircher 2023).

free from cares, devoting his time to learning and the cultivation of the virtues.<sup>87</sup> In particular, he comments, ‘I take delight in our discussion here; I take delight in reading these books by myself; I take delight in thinking and writing about these matters I discuss with you’.<sup>88</sup> These are the things that constitute a happy life.

Although ventriloquized through multiple characters, here we find Alberti even more emphatic in the conclusions he reached in *De commodis*. In his alter ego Genipatro, he has fully moved on from his youthful ambition, embracing a life devoted to reading and writing that is no longer tinged with the trials and tribulations associated with his time as a young scholar at Bologna. Away from the ambitions associated with university life, Alberti’s Genipatro enjoys a life of learning in the quiet solitude of the countryside that is unambiguously happy. With the great writers of the past as his company, he is never alone and always has access to useful advice. He comments that during the time he spends reading the works of the philosophers, he ‘becomes not only a more learned, but also a better person’.<sup>89</sup> Their works, he adds later, offer teaching for living well (*bene e beato vivere*).<sup>90</sup> What Alberti describes, then, through the character of Genipatro, is a life devoted to the practices of reading and writing, aimed at self-cultivation and a happy life. It is through the study of the works of the ancient philosophers that he – Genipatro, but also Alberti – has learned how to live.<sup>91</sup>

As we can see, Alberti’s vision of an ideal way of life here does not involve the rejection of book learning. He remains committed to the study of ancient literature but wants to go about it in a different way and for different reasons. He proposes a life of quiet, rural solitude, away from the ambition and competition of the schools and universities.<sup>92</sup> His goal is not wealth or career advancement but instead the cultivation of

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<sup>87</sup> See *Theogenius* 1 (Grayson 1960-73, ii, 67-8; Kircher 2023, 108).

<sup>88</sup> *Theogenius* 1 (Grayson 1960-73, ii, 68; Kircher 2023, 109): ‘godo teste qui ragionando con voi, godo solo leggendo in questi libri, godo pensando e commentando queste e simili cose de’ quali io vi ragiono’.

<sup>89</sup> *Theogenius* 1 (Grayson 1960-73, ii, 74; Kircher 2023, 110): ‘divenire più dotto anche e migliore’.

<sup>90</sup> *Theogenius* 1 (Grayson 1960-73, ii, 82; Kircher 2023, 111).

<sup>91</sup> Kircher 2012, 140-2, argues that for Alberti lived experience is equally, if not more, important in learning how to live well. This is certainly the case in *De commodis*, and here, in the *Theogenius*, Kircher notes that the character Genipatro is not merely reporting what he has learned in books, but also what he has gained from lived experience during the course of his life. In the *I libri della Famiglia* 3 (Grayson 1960-73, i, 213; Watkins 1969, 204), Alberti has one of his characters comment ‘Many things in this world are better understood by experience than by speculation and theory. We who are not schooled in books become erudite through practice and time.’

<sup>92</sup> Beyond what we have seen in *Theogenius*, note also *Profugia* 1 (Grayson 1960-73, ii, 129). Kristeller 1966/1985, 122, notes Alberti’s preference here for a quiet life of philosophical reflection, placing it within the wider context of debates about the relative merits of the *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. It is perhaps also worth noting that Cristoforo Landino made his friend Alberti the defender of the contemplative life in his *Disputationes Camaldulenses*, on which see Kristeller 1985/1996, 210-11.

virtue and mental tranquillity. In this, it has been suggested, Alberti may have been inspired by the example of Petrarch who had his own rural retreat at Vacluse, away from the busyness of the papal court at Avignon, as a place for reading and writing.<sup>93</sup>

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In the introduction to his translation of Alberti's famous treatise *On Painting*, John Spencer commented that 'it would be an exaggeration to dignify Alberti with the title of philosopher; certainly he had no system'.<sup>94</sup> It is the last part of this statement that is telling: 'he had no system'. For someone who thinks that philosophy is about developing systems, then Alberti might indeed not look like much of a philosopher. But for someone who thinks that philosophy is about learning how to live a good life, I think Alberti certainly does look like one. It should, of course, be no great surprise if it turns out that Alberti understood philosophy as a guide to living a good life, given that his favourite authors Cicero and Seneca had done just the same.

With all this in mind, we are now better placed to re-assess *De commodis*. As we have seen, it is only a short text and, in part, intended as a satire of university life based on Alberti's own experience as a student. However, it also does two important things. First, it reflects seriously on Alberti's own lived experience and the way of life to which he had committed himself. Is this a worthwhile way to live? As noted earlier, Alberti suffered more than one bout of serious mental illness as a result of overwork, as many scholars continue to do today. This no doubt raised serious and urgent questions about whether this was indeed the right way for him to live. Second, it responds to this serious question by drawing on Stoic ideas from the books Alberti had been studying, in order to engage in a process of value clarification. What is the highest good? What is worth pursuing? What is the *telos* of this scholarly way of life and is it compatible with human happiness? By going through this process of philosophical therapy, Alberti comes to see that much of his suffering was caused by his own multiple and conflicting motivations for embracing this way of life, trying to pursue both knowledge and worldly success at the same time. By accepting that it is not only unrealistic to expect external goods such as money and status from a life devoted to scholarship, but also philosophically mistaken to see these things as good, he is able to move beyond the internal conflict and disappointment that led to his own suffering and instead to focus on goals that matter

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As McNair 1991, 320-7, notes, Alberti was somewhat ambivalent about the idea of *otium*, preferring *studium* over genuine idleness.

<sup>93</sup> See Grayson 1988, xxxvii.

<sup>94</sup> Spencer 1966, 16. Note also Gadol 1969, 232, who suggests that Alberti avoided 'overtly philosophical issues and metaphysical speculation', in contrast to Ficino's Neoplatonism which was 'first and foremost "philosophy"'.



most and are within his control, namely knowledge for its own sake and developing a virtuous character. For Alberti, philosophy was a vital source of guidance in how to live.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were read to the 'Philosophy as a Way of Life, New Research Directions' online conference in December 2022, organized by Matthew Sharpe, and the 'Columbia University Seminar in the Renaissance' in November 2023, organized by Cynthia Pyle. I thank both organizers and the audiences for their comments.

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