

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



# The Political Use of Epicureanism in Filelfo's *Commentationes Florentinae de exilio*

Mariano Vilar

Volume 42, Number 2, Spring 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065128ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065128ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Vilar, M. (2019). The Political Use of Epicureanism in Filelfo's *Commentationes Florentinae de exilio*. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(2), 141–164. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065128ar>

### Article abstract

Francesco Filelfo's *Commentationes Florentinae de exilio* (ca. 1440) presents us with a dialogue among a group of nobles and scholars who debate several issues in moral philosophy to console themselves on their defeat by Cosimo de' Medici. The role of pleasure in human happiness is treated in several sections of the work in relation to three of Filelfo's main goals: the condemnation of his rivals Poggio Bracciolini and Niccolò Niccoli (both of whom were connected with the Medicean circle), the exaltation of his own philological erudition, and the attack on Cosimo's regime. There is textual evidence that Filelfo used some of the ideas presented by Valla in his *De voluptate* (1431) for the purpose of satirizing his rivals and showing that their interest in Epicureanism was morally and intellectually flawed.

# The Political Use of Epicureanism in Filelfo's *Commentationes Florentinae de exilio*

MARIANO VILAR

Universidad de Buenos Aires

*Francesco Filelfo's Commentationes Florentinae de exilio (ca. 1440) presents us with a dialogue among a group of nobles and scholars who debate several issues in moral philosophy to console themselves on their defeat by Cosimo de' Medici. The role of pleasure in human happiness is treated in several sections of the work in relation to three of Filelfo's main goals: the condemnation of his rivals Poggio Bracciolini and Niccolò Niccoli (both of whom were connected with the Medicean circle), the exaltation of his own philological erudition, and the attack on Cosimo's regime. There is textual evidence that Filelfo used some of the ideas presented by Valla in his De voluptate (1431) for the purpose of satirizing his rivals and showing that their interest in Epicureanism was morally and intellectually flawed.*

*Les Commentationes Florentinae de exilio (ca. 1440) de Francesco Filelfo prennent la forme d'un dialogue parmi un groupe d'érudits et de nobles qui débattent de différents problèmes de philosophie morale visant à les consoler de leur défaite face à Cosimo de' Medici. Le rôle du plaisir dans le bonheur humain est abordé dans plusieurs sections de cette œuvre en relation avec trois des buts principaux que poursuit Filelfo, soit : la condamnation de ses rivaux Poggio Bracciolini et Niccolò Niccolo (tous deux liés au cercle médicéen), l'exaltation de sa propre érudition philologique, ainsi qu'une attaque contre le régime politique instauré par Cosimo. Il existe des preuves textuelles démontrant que Filelfo a utilisé certaines des idées présentées par Valla dans son De voluptate (1431) afin de dresser un portrait satirique de ses rivaux et de démontrer que leur intérêt envers la philosophie épicurienne présentait des défauts intellectuels et moraux.*

## Filelfo and ancient hedonism

Francesco Filelfo's contribution to the reevaluation of Ancient philosophy in the fifteenth century has been widely acknowledged. Eugenio Garin considered him one of the main representatives of the "serious" reappraisal of Epicureanism, and before him, Giovanni Gentile had already pointed out that his letter to Bartolomeo Fracanzano was a testimony to his interest in redefining hedonism in the first half of the Quattrocento.<sup>1</sup> However, the most recent books

1. Eugenio Garin, "Ricerca sull'Epicureismo Del Quattrocento," in *La Cultura Filosofica Del Rinascimento Italiano: Ricerche E Documenti* (Florence: Sansoni, 1961), 72–93. From Gentile's point of view, however, Filelfo's interest in Epicureanism was related to his lack of a deep philosophical

regarding this subject (which over the years has become an important topic of research for Renaissance scholars) usually downplay Filelfo and do not deal extensively with any of these works. Here we propose to analyze the subject of pleasure and its relationship to the reappraisal of Epicureanism in one of his main prose works, the *Commentationes Florentinae de Exilio*.<sup>2</sup> As we will see, this text includes reflections about the issue of pleasure in relation to the *summum bonum* that resonate with the debates that were common in the humanist milieu of this period and that would continue into the following century.

Although there is no certainty regarding the date of the *Commentationes*, it is believed that it was written around 1440.<sup>3</sup> We will not enter here into historical details that have been thoroughly described by previous studies, but it is important to briefly summarize the political situation of Filelfo in this period to understand this text.<sup>4</sup> Filelfo had arrived in Florence in 1429 to teach in the *Studio* when he was thirty-one. By this age he was already an experienced teacher, and the time he spent in Constantinople had allowed him to master the Greek tongue in written and spoken form. Although Cosimo de' Medici had supported his appointment in the *Studio*, they soon started to grow distant. Carlo Marsuppini and Niccolò Niccoli, who were both very close to Cosimo

---

knowledge and to his own moral flaws. His words are: "Di che si risente anche il suo epicureismo, che non è intelligenza simpatica del pensiero di Epicuro, ma simpatia inintelligente per quella filosofia che metteva al sommo della vita spirituale il piacere. Vano sarebbe ricercare i motivi razionali, serii, filosofici di cotesta simpatia." Giovanni Gentile, *Storia Della Filosofia Italiana. Fino a Lorenzo Valla* (Florence: Sansoni, 1962), 337–38.

2. Most likely this is in part because the first modern edition (and the first translation to a vernacular language) of the *Commentationes Florentinae de Exilio* is very recent: Francesco Filelfo, *On Exile*, ed. Jeroen De Keyser, trans. W. Scott Blanchard (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). All Latin and English quotes are from this edition. For a detailed description of the manuscript transmission of this work, see also Jeroen De Keyser, "The Transmission of Francesco Filelfo's 'Commentationes Florentinae De Exilio,'" *Interpres: Rivista Di Studi Quattrocenteschi* 30 (2011): 8–29.

3. Giacomo Ferraù, "Le «Commentationes Florentinae de Exilio»," in *Francesco Filelfo nel quinto centenario della morte: atti del XVII Convegno di studi maceratesi*, ed. Rino Avesani et al., *Medioevo e umanesimo* 58 (Padua: Antenore, 1986): 370.

4. A more detailed account can be found in Ferraù. For a good description of Filelfo's situation regarding his position at the Florentine *Studio* see Jonathan Davies, *Florence and Its University during the Early Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 83–90. Finally, for a biographical overview, see Paolo Viti, "Filelfo, Francesco in 'Dizionario Biografico,'" 1997, online, retrieved September 22, 2017, [treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-filelfo\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-filelfo_(Dizionario-Biografico)).

and Lorenzo, disliked Filelfo and desired his position. In 1433, after several conflicts and mutual accusations, an assassin believed to be working for the Medici tried to murder Filelfo. When the representatives of the nobility, led by Palla Strozzi and Rinaldo degli Albizzi, condemned Cosimo in 1433, Filelfo sought to have him executed, but instead Cosimo was exiled to Venice. After his triumphal return in 1434, Cosimo exiled Filelfo and the main representatives of the nobles associated with him. In order to end the Medicean power in Florence, the exiles sought the military intervention of the Milanese Filippo Maria Visconti. After the defeat of the Milanese forces in the battle of Anghiari in 1440, however, Cosimo's power was secured and the exiles' hopes crushed. Filelfo only returned to Florence in 1481, shortly before his death.<sup>5</sup>

The *Commentationes* was most likely written after the defeat in Anghiari, and dedicated to Vitaliano Borromeo, one of the most important members of Filippo Maria Visconti's court.<sup>6</sup> The text is composed as a dialogue between the exiles before they leave Florence. Filelfo meant to write ten books, but he only finished the first three, which deal with the discomfort (book 1), the infamy (book 2), and the poverty (book 3) associated with exile. The main characters are Palla Strozzi and his son Onofrio, Rinaldi degli Albizzi, Giannozzo Manetti, Leonardo Bruni, and (to a lesser degree) Poggio Bracciolini. The discussion among these characters has a consolatory nature which echoes texts like Seneca's *Ad Helviam Matrem de Consolatione* and Boethius's *De consolatione philosophiae*.<sup>7</sup> As Palla Strozzi (the leading voice in most of the dialogue) states several times in the text, the best way to endure the hardships of exile is to

5. See Diana Robin, *Filelfo in Milan: Writings, 1451–1477* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), for a description and analysis of Filelfo's activities in Milan and the circumstances of his exile.

6. Filelfo had already written the *Oratio in Cosmum Medicem ad exules optimates Florentinos* in 1437, where he openly solicited the aid of Filippo Maria Visconti to remove Cosimo from Florence. A brief summary of its contents can be found in Remigio Sabbadini, "Notizie Su La Vita E Gli Scritti Di Alcuni Dotti Umanisti Del Sec. XV," *Giornale Storico Della Letteratura Italiana* 5 (1885): 162–69.

7. According to Ferraù, the *Commentationes* "si strutturano sul duplice registro della consolatoria morale e della giustificazione politica" (381; are structured on the dual register of moral consolation and political justification). Cesare Vasoli, however, believes that Filelfo's true interest ("l'argomento che, certo, stava più a cuore al Filelfo") was the defense of the noble's political party. Cesare Vasoli, "Le Commentationes de Exilio Di Francesco Filelfo," in *Exil et Civilisation En Italie*, ed. Jacques Heers and Christian Bec (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1990), 127. For a thorough analysis of the consolatory literature in Italian humanism, see George McClure, *Sorrow and Consolation in Italian Humanism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

distance oneself from the movements of Fortune and to live according to the true virtue and wisdom of the *sapiens*. All the discomforts of losing one's position or good fame are irrelevant to the Stoic sage, which is frequently associated with the teachings of the Cynic Diogenes and with Christian wisdom as well.<sup>8</sup>

The significance of pleasure (*voluptas*) and Epicurus's philosophy are not among the central themes in the dialogue. However, the continuous efforts by Palla, Manetti, and Leonardo to establish the true nature of the happy life and the *summum bonum* against the vulgar notions advanced by Poggio Bracciolini lead to a significant discussion regarding this topic. Also, the attraction for pleasures of the lowest kind is used as a way of condemning Cosimo de' Medici and his plebeian followers. However, even if a great deal of what is said in the *Commentationes* about hedonism is part of this anti-Medicean propagandistic and satirical effort, Filelfo also wished to establish himself as the most authorized voice to interpret Greek philosophy and the significance of *hedone* in the context of the humanists' debates.

### Poggio Bracciolini and vulgar Epicureanism

The longest debate about pleasure in the *Commentationes* appears in the first book ("De incommodis exilii") and has Giannozzo Manetti and Poggio Bracciolini as main speakers. After a question from Onofrio regarding what is acceptable for a wise man under hardship, Palla, his father, begins a lengthy exposition about the moral superiority of the *vir sapiens*, who "will never do anything, will never say anything, for which he cannot deliver both an acceptable and correct justification" (*CFE* 1.133).<sup>9</sup> This exposition ends with a description of the sufficiency of nature to provide for our basic needs which can be interpreted as a quote from Epicurus: "But if we consider with how little nature is satisfied,

8. According to Blanchard, "Filelfo's capacity to sift through the events of his time in order to evaluate their moral dimensions was not unique among fifteenth-century intellectuals, but his ability to interpret these experiences through the ethical categories of Stoicism and Cynicism makes his work especially valuable." W. Scott Blanchard, "Patrician Sages and the Humanist Cynic: Francesco Filelfo and the Ethics of World Citizenship," *Renaissance Quarterly* 60.4 (2007): 1111, doi:10.1353/ren.2007.0414. In this study we wish to complement this valuable hypothesis by adding the Epicurean tendencies in his thought as well.

9. "At vir sapiens idemque constantissimus nihil profecto unquam facturum sit, nihil dicturus, cuius non possit et probatam et rectam reddere rationem." Filelfo, *On Exile*. Hereafter cited in the text as *CFE*. See note 2 for the full reference.

how much the earth freely furnishes us, even without our effort—not just the bare need for food but enough for our enjoyment—we should doubtless realize that nourishment cannot be lacking for any human being” (*CFE* 1.138)<sup>10</sup> There is a clear similitude between this idea and what Epicurus says in his letter to Menoeceus, where he describes natural and necessary pleasures (the only ones truly essential to the wise man) as something that Nature easily provides.<sup>11</sup> There is no opposition between necessity and *voluptas* as long as we measure correctly what it is needed for the satisfaction of our basic needs. The connection with Epicureanism appears more clearly in Onofrio’s answer, which states that “There is one kind of flavour and enjoyment in meats and fish and in the most delicate sauces, and another in vegetables, fruits, and nuts” (*CFE* 1.139).<sup>12</sup> This culinary division could be another reference to Epicurus, who was cited in several sources as a consumer of vegetables.<sup>13</sup> The answer of Palla is significant: “Convention (*opinio*) fabricates pleasure of this kind, not nature” (*CFE* 1.139).<sup>14</sup>

This brief exchange of opinions between Palla and his son conveys a sense of the overall dynamics of the *Commentationes*, where one of the younger participants advances a thesis about the pitiful condition of the exiles, which is in turn answered by one of the most experienced members of the group appealing to an idealized version of the *vir sapiens*.<sup>15</sup> In this case, this exchange also sets the theme for the following discussion between Poggio and Manetti which will have a less serious tone. Although Epicurus is not explicitly

10. “Quod si quam parvo natura contenta es consyderemus, et quanta nobis nullo etiam nostro labore terra sua sponte suppeditat, non ad victus necessitatem modo, sed etiam ad voluptatem, sane intelligamus deesse alimentum nemini posse.”

11. “Again, we regard independence of outward things as a great good, not so as in all cases to use little, but so as to be contented with little if we have not much, being honestly persuaded that they have the sweetest enjoyment of luxury who stand least in need of it, and that whatever is natural is easily procured and only the vain and worthless hard to win” (*Diog. Laer* X, 130). Diógenes Laercio, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Robert Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

12. “Verum alius quidam sapor atque iucunditas in carnibus est et piscibus delicatissimisque obsoniis quam in olusculis et pomis et nucibus.”

13. Richard P. Jungkuntz, “Christian Approval of Epicureanism,” *Church History* 31.3 (1962): 279–93, doi:10.2307/3163320. As Jungkurtz points out, this adherence to an ascetic diet was one of the things that the Church Fathers were willing to appreciate from Epicurean doctrines. See for example Jerome’s *Against Jovinianus* 2.11.

14. “Istiusmodi voluptates facit opinio, non natura.”

15. According to Ferraù (375) this consolatory tone is inspired mainly by the fifth book of the *Tusculanae*.

mentioned (his name will appear later in the dialogue), Onofrio's commentary about the different kinds of pleasures and the sharp distinction by Palla between pleasures that depend on nature and pleasures that are the consequence of human opinion could be easily interpreted by the humanist readers of this dialogue as a reference to his philosophy.<sup>16</sup>

Poggio Bracciolini, a close friend to Niccolò Niccoli and to the Medicean circle, was one of Filelfo's worst enemies.<sup>17</sup> The confrontation between them started with the attack of Filelfo on Niccoli in one of his *Satyrae* and continued for many years, during which Poggio wrote three *Invectives* against him. The *Commentationes* were a perfect opportunity for Filelfo to continue his attack on both of his enemies. It is not, we believe, a coincidence that he chose to do it in a debate about pleasure with Epicurean overtones. It was, after all, Poggio Bracciolini who rediscovered a full copy of Lucretius's *De rerum natura* in 1417, and Niccoli was the one who received and copied the text in Florence.<sup>18</sup>

16. Lucretius is mentioned only once in the *Commentationes* but his theories are not discussed. In the context of the discussion in book 3 regarding voluntary and involuntary action, Palla uses the death of this poet as an example: "Dedit Lucretio poetae amica veneni quippiam, credens id esse philtrum quo ille in amorem sui magis accenderetur. Lucretius eo poculo insanivit" (3.135). This legend regarding the death of Lucretius, widely accepted during the Renaissance, was taken from St. Jerome's *Chronicle*.

17. For a general description of this confrontation, see Jeroen De Keyser, "Francesco Filelfo's Feud with Poggio Bracciolini," in *Forms of Conflict and Rivalries in Renaissance Europe* (Göttinga: V&R unipress-Bonn University Press, 2015), 13–27; online, retrieved September 22, 2017, [lirias.kuleuven.be/handle/123456789/422768](http://lirias.kuleuven.be/handle/123456789/422768).

18. In recent years, Renaissance Epicureanism has been the subject of much scholarly work. The most well-known publication on the subject is Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), which deals with the circumstances surrounding Poggio's rediscovery of Lucretius. In his perspective, the importance of this fact cannot be sufficiently emphasized if we wish to understand the birth of modernity. Although this study had a very substantial impact and contributed to make the issue of Renaissance Epicureanism an interesting field of study, some of its findings have been questioned by later investigations. For instance, Ada Palmer's recent study, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) points out that the use of Lucretius's text in the fifteen hundreds was actually concerned more with grammatical issues and with extracting *notabilia* from ancient history and mythology. Other studies, such as Alison Brown's *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010) and Gerd Passanante's *The Lucretian Renaissance: Philology and the Afterlife of Tradition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011) focus on specific works of authors from this period and provide an interesting background to understanding the different uses of Epicurean philosophy. None of these studies is specifically focused on Filelfo.

However, according to Filelfo, both of them were thoroughly incapable of understanding its true message, as the debate that follows makes evident.

Poggio enters the conversation with the following statement that summarizes his views on the subject of *voluptas*:

If you do not mind, Palla Strozzi, listen briefly to your friend Poggio Bambalio, for I have something to say. If all the pleasure of the soul, than which nothing better nor more divine been given to the human race by immortal God, originates in the pleasure of the body (a view that the Cyrenaics also held), yet the body takes the greatest pleasure in eating and drinking of this kind, then why do you so strongly disapprove of the enjoyment of meats and fish and the pleasurable quaffing of wine? (*CFE* 1.142)<sup>19</sup>

"Bambalio," the name that Poggio uses here to present himself (and that Filelfo systematically used to deride him in his letters and satires), was the nickname of Marcus Fulvius, the father-in-law of Marcus Antonius, and it means to stutter or to babble. First of all, Poggio introduces the views of the Cyrenaics, which contrasts with the Epicurean notions (such as the artificiality of immoderate pleasures) that were discussed above. The leader of this school, Aristippus, had been mentioned several times before by Palla and his son, mainly because he was a source of ingenious sentences that dealt with the difficulties that the wise man encounters in the practical world.<sup>20</sup> Poggio is the first to introduce the body-centred Cyrenaic philosophy as a doctrine about pleasure that should be taken into account in the discussion.<sup>21</sup> By introducing

19. "Audi, Pallas Stroza, paulisper, nisi molestum est, Poggium tuum Bambalionem. Habeo enim quod dicam. Si omnis animi voluptas, qua nihil est humano generi ab immortali Deo neque divinius datum nec melius, a corporis voluptate profiscitur (id quod Cyrenaicis etiam placet), corpus autem ex huiusmodi aesculentis atque potulentis voluptatem maximam capit, quid est quod tantopere cum carnum et piscium usum tum suavissimum vini haustum non probes?"

20. The source of these stories is Diogenes Laertius's *Lives*, a text that Filelfo knew very well and that also contains the only surviving letters of Epicurus. The first Latin translation of the entire text was completed in 1433 by Ambrogio Traversari. See Charles L. Stinger, *Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439) and the Revival of Patristic Theology in the Early Italian Renaissance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977).

21. As was frequently the case, the notion that for Aristippus and his followers bodily pleasure was the *summum bonum* in itself is a simplification of their theories. Lampe has recently argued that Aristippus



the “pleasurable quaffing of wine” (*suavissimum vini haustum*) as a part of his argument, Filelfo clearly marks his intervention with a humorous and self-incriminating tone. During the totality of the *Commentationes*, Poggio will be presented as a man only concerned with the physical satisfaction of his basic desires. In contrast with the elevated speeches of the exiles, he presents him as a sort of grotesque buffoon who uses philosophy only to validate his appetites.<sup>22</sup>

Just below the lines we quoted, Poggio uses the examples of Homer, Ennius, and Gaius Marius, who enjoyed wine and used it as a way to increase their vigour.<sup>23</sup> He concludes with the maxim “the mind is well when the body is well” (“*animus recte habet cum corpus recte habet*”), which contrasts with the vision of the *sapiens* that was defined by his ability to summon his *recta ratio* in any circumstance. Rinaldo, after asking for Palla’s permission, decides to answer Poggio by insisting on the impossibility of reconciling philosophy with his hedonistic views. Instead of attempting to ground his views in the Cyrenaic school that he previously mentioned, now Poggio states that he dislikes philosophy in general (“*Nam ego philosophis durioribusque hominibus minime delector*”). Regarding the relation between *voluptas* and *sapientia*, he declares: “Moreover, he is not wise who knows nothing of pleasure, who gives no thought to the condition and strength of his body, who does not know by what arts and remedies he can repair a mind weighed down by cares and, so to speak, alienated from itself” (*CFE* 1.148).<sup>24</sup>

As with many other Renaissance dialogues, it often happens that positions that are included only to be discarded carry some of the most attractive notions for modern readers.<sup>25</sup> The idea advanced here by Poggio, that stipulates that

---

did not conceive bodily pleasures as the only true end (*telos*) for human life. Kurt Lampe, *The Birth of Hedonism: The Cyrenaic Philosophers and Pleasure as a Way of Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 55.

22. Ferraù, 375.

23. Poggio quotes Horace’s *Epistles* 1.19.6–8 (“*Laudibus arguitur vini vinosus Homerus [...]*”) and Juvenal’s *Satires* 1.49.50 (“*exul ab octava Marius bibit et fruitur dis iratis*”) to support his claim that the drinking of wine is a noble endeavour.

24. “*Non autem sapit qui voluptatem ignorat, qui non corporis habitudini et firmitati consulit, qui animum curis pressum ac veluti a se distractum quibus artibus, quibus remediis colligate non tenet.*”

25. This happens once again in this dialogue with Francesco Soderini’s interventions about the importance of wealth in book 3 (3.40–45) which contrasts with Bruni’s traditional praise of *paupertas*. According to Ferraù, “Si ha alle volte l’impressione che il Filelfo sia in fondo più simpatetico con le

wisdom includes the correct management of pleasure, appears in many ways more original (even if it can be traced back to Aristippus and Epicurus) than the repetitive declarations of Palla and Rinaldo about the absolute moral superiority of the *vir sapiens*. Poggio's intervention echoes the most important text about *voluptas* written in the first half of the Quattrocento: Lorenzo Valla's *De voluptate* (later renamed *De vero bono*), written in 1431 in Pavia.<sup>26</sup> This text includes some of the characters that appear in the *Commentationes*, namely Leonardo Bruni (who is the spokesman of Stoicism in the first version of the dialogue), Giannozzo Manetti, and Poggio Bracciolini, although these two last characters barely speak in Valla's text. It is Antonio Beccadelli, who was replaced by Maffeo Vegio in the 1433 version of the dialogue, who presents some similarities with Poggio's ethos in the text written by Filelfo. Beccadelli argues in favour of *voluptas* as the *summum bonum* and he equates it with *utilitas* in opposition to *honestas*. In his long speech, which occupies more than half of the *De voluptate*, he also praises wine using the same verses from Horace that Poggio quotes here, and he presents a very similar conception about the wise man as someone who is capable of understanding and managing his pleasures (*De vero bono* 1.25.2). The Stoic *sapiens*, instead, is a man afraid of nature and incapable of enjoying its gifts, an idea that had been developed in some detail by Cosma Raimondi before Valla.<sup>27</sup> Both Valla and Raimondi wrote before the *De rerum natura* started to circulate widely, and modern critics agree that they only knew Epicurus's teachings by second sources such as Cicero, Augustine, and Lactantius. However, this did not stop them from defending Epicureanism against all other philosophical schools. Although this defense cannot be taken at face value, it is undeniable that these texts show an interesting reappraisal

---

posizioni degli oppositori, piuttosto che con quelle dello stoico Palla" (377; In some occasions the impression is that Filelfo is basically more sympathetic to the positions of the opponents, rather than to those of the Stoic Palla).

26. For a detailed analysis of the context in which this work was produced, see Mario Fois, *Il pensiero cristiano di Lorenzo Valla nel quadro storico-culturale del suo ambiente* (Rome: Libreria Editrice dell'Università Gregoriana, 1969).

27. Cosma Raimondi was the author of an epistle known as *Defensio Epicuri contra Stoicos, Academicos et Peripateticos* written in 1429. This letter is usually considered as one of the first testimonies of the reappraisal of Epicurean ethics in the Quattrocento, and is also believed to have had an important influence in Valla's *De voluptate*. See Ricardo Fubini, *Umanesimo e secolarizzazione da Petrarca a Valla* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1990), 376–81.

of Epicurean doctrines in the *studia humanitatis*.<sup>28</sup> It is also worth noting that Filelfo dedicated one of his *Satyrae* (2, 4) to Lorenzo Valla. In order to advise his colleague to moderate his attacks if he wished to have a happy life (advice that Valla received many times during his lifetime), Filelfo mentions Epicurus as a counter-model. According to him, Epicurus was hated because he, like Valla, wasted his energies criticizing the texts of other writers.<sup>29</sup> Valla should stop questioning the *auctoritates* (such as the Ancient Stoics, Aristotle, or Cicero) and dedicate himself to writing praises for Alfonso.<sup>30</sup>

In the *Commentationes*, the clearest similarity between Poggio's speech and Valla's *De voluptate* appears when the former defines *voluptas* by opposing it to the "shadow of virtue" (*umbra virtutis*) (CFE 1.151).<sup>31</sup> The demolition of the Stoic vision of *virtus/honestas* is perhaps the main goal of Valla's book, in which this notion is opposed first by the Epicurean and finally by the Christian speaker.<sup>32</sup> Although these ideas could have come from a different text, we believe that this is enough textual evidence to assert that Filelfo was deliberately making a reference to Valla's *De voluptate* through the character of Poggio, who was an enemy of both Valla and Filelfo.<sup>33</sup> In a broader sense, Filelfo is making

28. Although nowadays it is widely accepted that Valla was not an "Epicurean," the extent of his sympathy for some of the ideas about *voluptas* that appear in books 1 and 2 of *De vero bono* it is still debatable. See Maristella Lorch, "The Epicurean in Lorenzo Valla's *On Pleasure*," in *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquility*, ed. Margaret J. Osler (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 89–114.

29. "Non aliud certe cunctos, Epicure, perosos / te fecisse reor, quam quod dum caetera carpis / nomina doctorum sensumque et scripta virorum, / cunctos iure tuis fecisti laudibus hostes." Francesco Filelfo, *Satyrae*, ed. Silvia Fiaschi (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2005).

30. See Blanchard, 1135–38, for a brief analysis of this satire, and Revilo P. Oliver, "The Satires of Filelfo," *Italica* 26.1 (1949): 36–37, doi:10.2307/476056, for a broader discussion.

31. "Nec istam [voluptas] sentio quam umbra quaedam virtutis inani honestatis nomine conficere dicitur, sed hanc potius quam sensus accipiens quadam titillatione movetur et suavi iucunditate perfunditur."

32. Valla states in the Proem that "we hope and believe that we shall destroy our enemies—that is, the philosophers—partly with their own swords, partly by inciting them to civil war and mutual destruction," and that this will be accomplished by assuming the defense of Epicureanism. According to Fois, this intention should be taken literally and we should not assume any interest in Epicureanism beyond this instrumentation (Fois, 104). The quotes from Valla's *De voluptate* / *De vero bono* are from Lorenzo Valla, *De Voluptate* / *On Pleasure*, ed. Maristella Lorch, trans. Kent Hieatt (New York: Abaris Books, 1977).

33. Filelfo tried to reconcile Poggio and Valla by writing them a letter in 1453 from Milan (PhE 10.52). Here Filelfo acknowledges that he himself has committed the mistake of writing against other men. All the references to Filelfo's epistles are taken from De Keyser's edition of the *Epistolarium*: Francesco Filelfo, *Collected Letters: Epistolarum Libri XLVIII*, ed. Jeroen de Keyser (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2015).

here a contribution to one of the debates that attracted many scholars of this period: the relation between *voluptas* and the supreme good. There is a very significant difference between Valla's handling of his Epicurean speaker and Filelfo's characterization of Poggio. In 1433, Valla rewrote parts of his dialogue and replaced all the characters. Beccadelli, who was by then his enemy, was replaced by Maffeo Vegio, who in contrast with his predecessor was not associated with a hedonistic lifestyle in any way.<sup>34</sup> When his speech defending *voluptas* ends, Antonio da Rho (who was replacing Leonardo Bruni) interprets all that his colleague said as a form of role play and as an imitation of Socratic irony.<sup>35</sup> In other words, it is clear that Valla did not desire to accuse the real Vegio of being an "Epicurean" (in the historically inaccurate sense of the word that appears in most of the dialogue) or a hedonist of any kind. On the contrary, this seems to be the exact intention of Filelfo when he chose to represent Poggio as a drunkard with a superficial knowledge of philosophy. This allowed him, as De Keyser has shown, to answer Poggio's *Invectives* against him.<sup>36</sup>

The limitation of Poggio's ability to understand ancient hedonism is further developed in the dialogue when he attempts to justify his views by alluding to Homeric verses. Here he introduces the figure of Niccoli and he refers to the author of the *Commentationes*:

I would easily prove to you how much value Homer attached to the strength and power of wine if, like you, I had learned Greek from Filelfo, namely by those very verses which Niccolò Niccoli frequently praises to the skies. For my friend Niccolò asserts, and used to invoke the point frequently in conversation, that once, when he heard Homer from the lips

34. Antonio Beccadelli, also known as "il Panormita," was the author of a famous collection of bawdy poems named *Hermaphroditus* (1425). The poems were dedicated to Cosimo de' Medici, but he did not enter his service. Beccadelli was Valla's friend when he arrived in Milan, and later they both entered the service of King Alfonso of Naples. According to Lorch, the rift between Valla and Beccadelli was one of the reasons why the former changed the characters in his dialogue. Maristella Lorch, "Introduction," in *De vero falsoque bono*, by Lorenzo Valla (Bari: Adriatica, 1970), xl–xli. On the other hand, Filelfo was a friend and correspondent of Beccadelli. See Jeroen De Keyser, "Nec tibi turpe tuum ducas audissee poetam". Francesco Filelfo all'amico Antonio Beccadelli il Panormita," *Schede Umanistiche* 22 (n.s.) (1 January 2008): 39–68.

35. "Proinde suspicor non serio te fecisse sed ioco, que tua consuetudo est, more Socratis quem eirona greci appellabant" (Lorenzo Valla, *De vero bono*, 3.7.2).

36. De Keyser, "Francesco Filelfo's Feud with Poggio Bracciolini," 15.

of Manuel Chrysoloras, nothing delighted him so much as those famous verses with which Hecuba addresses her son Hector as he returns from a hard-fought battle to the city to offer sacrifice. (*CFE* 1.161)<sup>37</sup>

This is one of the occasions in which Filelfo used his *Commentationes* to stress his knowledge of Greek and his ability to teach it.<sup>38</sup> In the dialogue, however, it is Giannozzo Manetti who rectifies Poggio (and Niccoli) by correctly quoting *Illiad* 6.250–65, in which Hector refuses to accept the wine offered by his mother Hecuba because it might weaken him for battle. After this, Poggio's arguments about pleasure in general (and wine in particular) are utterly discredited.

Poggio does however reappear in the second and third books of the *Commentationes*, and he is now explicitly accused of being an "Epicurean" by Palla Strozzi and Rinaldo degli Albizzi. In the second, which deals with the topic of infamy (*De infamia*), the characters retake the issue of the *summum bonum* in a more technical and philosophical fashion. Poggio's intervention is very brief, but very important to our interpretation. After Manetti and Niccolò Luna ask Palla to explain the different types of goods (particular or general), Poggio exclaims:

*Poggio.* But I warn you, Palla, if you are smart, to lay aside all such sophistic loquacity and take into consideration at long last our friend Epicurus, who alone understood what is good.

*Palla.* Perhaps, Poggio, provided that we understand what he held pleasure to be. (*CFE* 1.161)<sup>39</sup>

37. "Nam quanti vini vim atque virtutem Homerus fecerit, si quemadmodum tu e Philelfo tuo Graecas litteras didicissem, facile tibi probarem illis ipsis versibus quos laudibus in caelum Nicolaus Nicolus crebro effert. Ait enim et creberrimo usurpare sermone meus Nicolaus consuevit nihil sibi tantopere, cum e Manuele Chrysolora Homerum audiret aliquando placuisse quantopere versus illos quibus Hecube Hectorem filium e difficiliore quodam praelio in urbem sacrificii gratia redeuntem alloquitur."

38. De Keyser ("Francesco Filelfo's Feud with Poggio Bracciolini," 19) points out that Filelfo mentions himself three times in the *Commentationes*, and in every occasion he underlines his knowledge of Greek. In two of the three occasions he mentions his relation to Manuel Chrysoloras.

39. "Poggius. At ego te, Pallas, moneo ut, si sapis, sophisticam omnem istiusmodi garrulitatem omittas, et Epicuri nostri aliquando memineris, qui solus quid bonum esset intellexit. Pallas. Fortasse, Poggi, modo quam ille voluptatem posuisset teneremus."

Poggio is quickly silenced by Rinaldo (*Ommite, Pallas, Poggium*), but this exchange shows that Filelfo wished to establish a connection between Poggio and Epicureanism. At the same time, however, it shows that the former purported that knowledge of this doctrine is deeply flawed. Filelfo's vision of Epicureanism, sketched in his letter to Francanzano, was entirely different. This happens again in a very similar way in book 3 in an exchange between Poggio and Rinaldo after the former demands that the discussion should end early because he is attending a banquet that evening (*CFE* 2.126–27).<sup>40</sup>

With his display of erudition and mastery of Greek, Filelfo was attempting to show that the group of intellectuals who were closer to Cosimo and who would remain under his wing in Florence were thoroughly incapable of achieving a true knowledge of ancient philosophy.<sup>41</sup> The mention of Poggio and Niccoli in relation to hedonism is not casual, since both of them were directly linked with the recovery of the *De rerum natura*. In other words, the exchanges that we just analyzed seem to show that the pre-Christian theories of pleasure are in the hands of drunkards with an insufficient knowledge of Greek and Latin, who will use the ancient schools' doctrines to justify their sybaritic lifestyle.

### Cosimo de' Medici: the politics of hedonism

Attacking Poggio and Niccoli was one of the ways in which Filelfo wished to show his superiority over those humanists who were closer to the Medicean regime. However, his reflection on the nature of *voluptas* was not limited to these personal attacks. He also wished to show that Cosimo's attitude towards pleasure was destroying the city itself. The nobility's morality, on the contrary, is defined by their willingness to pursue the high standards of the best ancient philosophers even if this goes against their political needs.

40. "Si maluisses, Poggi, te Socratis quam Epicuri simile, eruditum hunc Pallantis nostri prudentemque sermonem reliquis tuis omnibus deliciis facile antefendum existimares. Set tu omnia voluptate definis, non ea quae est animi et quam vel Epicurus fortasse sensit, sed corporis potius ea, qua sensus laeviter demollitus et tanquam soporatus moveri solet."

41. The attack on Marsuppini appears in book 3 (140–44). He is accused of being ignorant of both Greek and Latin and of having a slow intelligence (*tarditas ingenii*). Naturally, the relation between Filelfo and the Medicean intellectuals changed when he wished to gain the favour of Cosimo's grandson, Lorenzo. He was a correspondent to Marsilio Ficino, the leading Platonist of his time, who approved of his letter *De ideis*. See Jill Kraye, "Francesco Filelfo's Lost Letter *De ideis*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 42 (1979): 236–49.

The basic premise for this stance is that Cosimo's personal morality (or lack thereof) has a direct effect on the well-being of the Florentine Republic. The clear opposition between moral nobles and immoral merchants does not allow for any kind of Machiavellism *avant la lettre*. The situation of Florence when Cosimo was exiled is opposed to the present condition of the city in the most radical terms in the Proem of the *Commentationes*:

Thus with the relegation of Cosimo alone, and that nearly without hardships, and after the commonwealth was liberated as if from the presence of some foul omen and unspeakable prodigy, soon such civility, such peace flowed into the entire state, and all were so transported by the moderation, blamelessness, and justice of the nobles from those previous storms and tempests of hatred and fury to the love of peace and tranquility that, as the poets tell about Saturn's reign, the Florentines seemed to be living in a golden age. [...] All things were done by law, by ancestral custom, by equity. (*CFE* 1.9–10)<sup>42</sup>

The contrast could not be laid out in more explicit terms, and Filelfo does not seem to be interested in any level of subtlety in his analysis. The extremely idealized version of the government of the *optimates* is equivalent to the mythical golden age, while Cosimo's ascent to power represents the debasement of every possible feature of the civil life. With him in power, everything is subject to his *furor* and *libido*, which spread like a disease. The great failure of the nobles was their inability to contain him in time.<sup>43</sup>

The radical opposition between the nobles' and Cosimo's morality appears clearly in the speech that Rinaldo presented to Pope Eugenius IV defending the exiles' cause, and that is included in the second book of the *Commentationes*.

42. "Unius igitur Comi relegatione, eaque poene libera, perinde atque alicuius teterrimi auspicii abominabilisque prodigii praesentia posteaquam est respublica liberata, tanta mox mansuetudo, tanta quies universam civitatem influxit, et ita omnes moderatione, innocentia et iusticia optimatum e prioribus illis odii et furori procellis et tempestatibus ad pacis tranquillitatisque amorem traducti sunt, ut quod poetae de Saturno rege fabulantur quondam quasi aetatem auream vivere Florentini viderentur. [...] Omnia lege, Omnia more maiorum, Omnia aequo bonoque fiebant."

43. Filelfo, as many of the nobles after 1434, felt that Cosimo should have been executed instead of exiled. This topic is developed in Filelfo's *Satires* 4.1, where Filelfo contrasts the nature of Palla and Cosimo, but criticizes the former for his excessive pity. See Blanchard, 1122–23.

According to Rinaldo, the nobles follow the honourable (*honestum*), while the followers of Cosimo are only occupied with *utilitas*:

But since I believe I have said enough concerning the side of the honourable, I shall briefly touch individually on the points pertaining to expediency. There are and often have been persons who have, out of a false and empty pretext of gain, committed themselves to every crime, disgrace, outrage, and dishonour. (CFE 2.40)<sup>44</sup>

Although Rinaldo mentions that according to the ancient Stoics, the honourable and the truly expedient are one and the same, he is most interested in showing their divergence. In this way, the results of the political conflict are taken out of consideration: it only matters to identify which group followed a just cause. As W. Scott Blanchard points out, this is the exact opposite of Cosimo's desire to lay aside this distinction in the actual political practice.<sup>45</sup> In the *Commentationes*, Poggio states that Cosimo does not spend his wealth in "shadows" (*umbras*), which echoes what he declared earlier about the "shadow of virtue" as a mere illusion that hinders the way to true pleasure (CFE 3.59).<sup>46</sup>

The contrast between *honestas* and *utilitas* is explicitly linked to pleasure in Valla's *De voluptate*. In this text, the speaker who defends the "Epicurean" cause states that *voluptas* should be considered equal to *utilitas* since both of them are opposed to the idea that virtue is an end in itself (*honestas propter se expetenda*). To sustain this, Valla's character quotes a passage from Lucan in which one of King Ptolemy of Egypt's political advisors suggests that Pompey should be killed treacherously to gain Caesar's favour.<sup>47</sup> Filelfo's Rinaldo uses a very similar example: when he was in an embassy to Emperor Ladislao (a famous enemy of the Florentine Republic), he had the chance of poisoning

44. "Sed quoniam de honestatis parte satis mihi dixisse videor, iam quae separatim ad utilitatem spectant paucis perstringam. Et sunt et fuerunt persaepe non nulli qui falsa quadam et inani emolumentum specie se omni facinori, flagitio, probro, dedecori addixerint."

45. Blanchard, 1159. For Cosimo's words regarding this subject in a meeting concerning Florence's choice of alliances with either Milan or Venice, see Riccardo Fubini, *Quattrocento fiorentino politica diplomazia cultura* (Ospedaletto: Pacini, 1996), 80.

46. "At apud Cosmum Medicem, Leonarde, minime omnium valeat qui rem malit quam verba expendere. Huius divitiae sunt amplissimae, nec eas tamen consumit in umbras."

47. *Bellum civile* (8.468–87). Valla quotes this in *De vero bono* 1.xiv.



him by using the father of one of the Emperor's lovers. This would have been expedient but, obviously, not honourable, and therefore Rinaldo rejected the proposition with disgust. This analogy does not mean that Filelfo wished to equate *voluptas* and *utilitas* like Valla did in his dialogue, but it is clear that in his view Cosimo and his followers are at the same time looking to increase their profits and satisfy their insatiable libido. On the other hand, the nobles can find satisfaction through the *consolation* offered by their moral probity and their intellectual superiority.

The difference between the nobles and Cosimo is apparent in the symbolic representation of their bodies. According to Rinaldo's speech to the pope, this difference can be observed without effort, since it should be evident to anyone who gazes at the countenance of the nobles that the rumours spread against them by Cosimo's followers are lies (*CFE* 2.29).<sup>48</sup> Their bodies and faces express their frankness, moral probity, and moderation. By contrast, Cosimo is a loathsome sight. He is constantly associated with wine (which was closely related to the basest pleasure in the discussion with Poggio that we analyzed above) and lust. Leonardo refers to "his tongue, thick and broken by wine, as it were like a fan stirring up sedition and civil strife" (*CFE* 3.61).<sup>49</sup> Cosimo's grotesque corporality is also associated with a plague that spreads through the city (and through Italy) in some passages of the text (*CFE* 1.99).<sup>50</sup> Cosimo is accused of giving dowries to young girls who wish to marry in exchange for taking their virginity, and to promote prostitution and adultery in every level of society. This is expressed by Rinaldo:

Or should it be obscure to anyone that Cosimo is in the habit of hunting  
after foolish and lazy men, that he may not only excel those who measure all

48. "Itaque si me dicentem attenderis, si aut oris aut totius corporis motum atque habitum animadverteris, quantum rumorum vel vanitati vel perfidiae credendum sit, pro tua ista acutissima mentis acie divinaque sapientia facile perspicias" (Therefore if you [Eugenius] pay close attention to me as I speak, if you take note of the movement and state of my face and my entire body, with your mental keenness and unparalleled wisdom you may easily perceive how much stock to place in the speciousness or treachery of rumors).

49. "Et eius lingua vino etiam crassa ac fracta quasi quodam seditionis discordiarumque flabello ventilator."

50. "Videmus in hac urbe nostra, cum alias alios saepe multos, tum maxime hoc tempore Cosmum Medicem, qui vi pecuniarum quas omni sibi flagitio, omni scelere et comparavit et comparat, quantas calamitates, quantos ignis, quantas pestes in rempublicam intulit."

things by unbounded pleasure and lust not only in the size of his cups and in every category of wickedness, but upon violating all laws and duty and humanity use them as tools for all his crimes and outrages? (CFE 2.54)<sup>51</sup>

There is a stark contrast between the order of *honestas* and the chaos of *immanis voluptas*. The only type of *voluptas* that is occasionally associated with the noble life is the Epicurean ascetic ideal of “natural and necessary pleasures” that we quoted above. Happiness, states Filelfo in several sections of the *Commentationes*, can only be associated with stability. *Voluptas*, on the other hand, is from the genus of desire (*cupiditas*), and therefore it will never be the *summum bonum*.<sup>52</sup>

In order to present the nobles as a particularly powerful example of restraint and moderation, Rinaldo states that Florence's economy offers temptations on a larger scale than other cities: “Next, where in any land could a more perfect pleasure or enjoyment be obtained than in Florence? In this one place, all goods or advantages which we call of the mind, the body, or external, not only flow but overflow and do so unceasingly” (CFE 2.47).<sup>53</sup>

The political stability of the noble party and its attachment to Roman Stoic values acts like a counterbalance to the unceasing growth of the proto-capitalist economy of the city. In contrast, Cosimo's greed and his direct involvement with the goods that overflow the city imply the destruction of any type of order. Filelfo does not appear to detect any incompatibility in the city's expanding economy and the rigid political system that his party represents. They speak for the *mos maiorum*, and they “have considered nothing good except moral

51. “An esse cuiquam obscurum debet, solere Cosmum aucupari fatuos et inertis homines, quos Omnia immani voluptate et libidine metientis non modo magnitudine poculorum et omni genere nequitiarum supersit, sed violatas omnibus officii et humanitatis legibus pro facinorum et dedecorum omnium instrumentis habeat?”

52. The argument that pleasure is unstable *per se* and because of this cannot be equated with happiness has a long tradition and can be found in Plato's *Gorgias* and *Philebus*. Aquinas also argued in this direction in book 3 of his *Summa contra Gentiles*, specifically to show the superiority of intellect over the instability of will. On the other hand, Valla proclaims in the third and last book of his *De voluptate* that the contemplation of god in heaven is a pleasure that is perpetually growing (3.25.25).

53. “Deinde ubi usquam gentium cumulator aut voluptas aut delectatio quam Florentiae parari queat? Quo uno in loco quaeque omnia vel ad animi vel ad corporis vel ad extraria sive bona sive commoda accedere dixerimus non modo affluunt, sed redundanter et peremniter affluunt.”

goodness, virtue, and intellectual excellence” (CFE 2.48).<sup>54</sup> These moral values and the political values are subverted by the effects of wealth gained by usury, as Bruni and Palla explain in the third book of the *Commentationes*.

The discussion about wealth with Soderini, who defends the idea that even for wise men money is a necessity, includes a brief philosophical tale taken from the twelfth book of Sextus Empiricus’s *Against the Mathematicians*.<sup>55</sup> Once more, Filelfo wishes to show his direct knowledge of sources that are still obscure for those who were unable to read Greek, and therefore he quotes an argument exposed by Crantor, an Academic philosopher whose works are only known through secondary sources.<sup>56</sup>

But even Crantor, Soderini, disagrees with you in this regard, since when by universal consent he brought Wealth onstage in that public pan-Hellenic spectacle to plead her case, so again he has Pleasure advance to centre stage and plead the case against Wealth to prove that she is quite rightly to be preferred to Wealth, since the latter is neither strong nor long lasting nor sought by men for her own sake, but because of the enjoyment and pleasure that follows from her. Therefore by the votes of all the Greeks Wealth was defeated by Pleasure and not by Pleasure alone but also by Good Health. (CFE 3.46)<sup>57</sup>

The tale in Sextus Empiricus is slightly longer and includes a progression between the different allegorical figures that appear before the crowd and try to explain their right to the first place in the order of goods. Wealth is the first

54. “Si nihil sine honestate sibi, sine virtute, sine animi praestantia in bonis duxerint.”

55. Gian Mario Cao, “The Prehistory of Modern Scepticism: Sextus Empiricus in Fifteenth-Century Italy,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 64 (2001): 249, doi:10.2307/751563.

56. Crantor (ca. 340–275 BC) was the first author to write a commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*, but his most famous work was his *On Grief*, a consolatory work. For more information see John Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato: A Study of the Old Academy (347–274 BC)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 218–31.

57. “At idem Crantor, Soderine, hoc abs te plurimum dissentit, qui ubi Divitias in illo universe ac publice Graecorum spectaculo cum maximo omnium consensus pro se causam egisse introduxisset, ita rursus Voluptatem in medium procedentem facit causam contra Divitias pro se dicere, ut probet se iure optimo Divitiis praefarendam, quippe quae nec firmæ sint nec diuturnae, nec etiam propter sese ab hominibus expentatur, sed propter illum qui ex iis fructus ac voluptas sequitur. Itaque suffragiis Graecorum omnium a Voluptate Divitiae convincuntur, nec a Voluptate solum, verum etiam a Bona Valitudine.”

to enter and is proclaimed the favourite, but then Pleasure appears and states that: "In whom is love, is desire, is intimacy, / Allurement, which steals the sense even of shrewd thinkers. / For wealth is not steady, but lasts just a day; It blooms a short time and then flies away" (12.55).<sup>58</sup> The crowd chooses Pleasure, but when Good Health enters and proclaims that pleasure cannot be enjoyed if it is missing, the crowd puts it in first place. Filelfo omits the ending of this fable: Courage (*andreia*) appears on stage and it is declared the winner, since without courage all the goods of the city could be taken by a foreign enemy.<sup>59</sup> Because of this, the full order of goods is courage (associated also with virtue), good health, pleasure, and wealth.

The main purpose of quoting this story is to show how devalued wealth is compared with other goods. But it also shows how fickle are the crowd, since each apparition is proclaimed the best good. In Florence, Cosimo has inverted the order and turned the attention of all citizens towards wealth, the same wealth that he, as a banker, has spread throughout Europe. The differentiation that appears here between pleasure and wealth is a subtle way to underline that not all pleasure should be spurned as something low and contemptible. The characterizations of richness and pleasure are negative in most sections of the *Commentationes*. However, in both cases there is still the possibility of a proper use and understanding of them. In the case of wealth, this is exemplified briefly by Vitaliano Borromeo and Palla himself, who make a virtuous use of their gold that is explicitly opposite to Cosimo's. In the case of pleasure (which is higher in the order of goods than wealth, which is entirely external and depends on Fortune), there are no figures that are specifically related to its proper and noble use. We can only speculate that this virtuous pleasure would be similar to those that Filelfo associates with a Christianized Epicureanism in his letter to Francanzano. There he states that:

58. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists: (Adversus Mathematicos XI)*, trans. Richard Bett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

59. Bett (pages 90–91 of his edition of Sextus Empiricus) points out in the notes of his edition that the philosophical consistence of this scale is difficult to establish, particularly because the criteria for proclaiming each winner vary. Also, while "courage" (*andreia*) appears as the winner in the first part of the exposition (57), afterwards it is named "virtue" (*arête*) (58), which implies a broader significance than the simple military courage that is capable of safeguarding one's goods and health.

The life, however, that strives for enjoyment is connected with pleasure, whose nature is difficult to ascertain. This is not surprising, since it is beleaguered by valiant assailants. Indeed, the person who declares that pleasure is completely alien to reason is no better than a feeble brute. The kind of pleasure which conforms to decency is, in my opinion, hardly inferior to decency itself.<sup>60</sup>

A similar idea appears at the beginning of book 3 of his *De morali disciplina*, which he began writing in 1473.<sup>61</sup> This time, though, the book is dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici, Cosimo's grandson. Much had happened in Filelfo's life in the years between these texts, but his interest in asserting that there is a form of *voluptas* that not only does not contradict true wisdom but enhances it remained constant. The fact that this form of high pleasure does not appear explicitly treated in the *Commentationes* is mostly due to the emphasis in questioning all forms of pleasure related to the baseness of Cosimo and his followers. Also, the consolatory tone of the book implies an effort to underline the moral righteousness of those who need comfort. This *honestas* is certainly a source of *beatitudo*, but its relation to pleasure is only presented through the Epicurean *topoi* of the complete satisfaction that Nature can provide without any effort. It is the serenity and autonomy of the *vir sapiens* that dominates the picture.

60. "Quae Vero in fruendo versatur, eam referent ad voluptatem, quae ipsa qualis sit, difficile est dictum. Et ne id quidem mirum habet enim magnos oppugnatores. Nam qui ita statuis voluptatem, ut nihil habeat cum ratione coniunctum, is ab enervate pecude nihil differ. Sed quae voluptas est secundum honestatem, hanc non multo ea puto inferiorem, si recte velimus interpretari, quae vera est voluptas et Christiana" (PhE, 01.46). Filelfo wrote another letter to Francanzano on the topic of *voluptas* (PhE, 01.57). It should be noted that there are also many other appearances of Epicurus and the significance of pleasure in his other works that we would not discuss here.

61. "Sed hoc interest inter eorum animalium voluptatem, quae ratione carent, et nostram; quod illa ducuntur sensu et impetu quodam duntaxat; nos autem ratione et intellectu. Quo fit ut ea referant omnia ad corporis voluptatem; nos vero hanc habeamus in laude pro recto animi iudicio. Nec me praeterit, quo pacto interpretentur Aristotelis scripta nostrae huius tempestatis philosophi plaerique fere omnes, vel si qui sunt horum similes; non quod Aristoteles senserit, sed quod ipsi probant, voluntaque; pertinacius inculcantes. Nam quod ad voluptatem attinet; quae maior ulla, quae suavior, quae permanentior voluptas afferri queat; qual illa, quae vel ex honestis actionibus, vel ex rerum coelestium atque diuinarum speculatione percipitur?" (3.37). Francesco Filelfo, *Francisci Philelphi. De Morali disciplina libri quinque. Averrois paraphrasis in libros de Republica Platonis. Francisci Robortelli in libros politicos Aristotelis disputatio*, ed. Francesco Robortello (Venice: Apud Gualterum Scottum, 1552).

## Conclusion

We have seen that most of the discussion about pleasure in the *Commentationes Florentinae de exilio* revolves around personal and political attacks. Filelfo was deliberately trying to show that Poggio Bracciolini was intellectually unable to justify his sybaritic lifestyle. This condemns him to act like a straw man for hedonism in the dialogue, and his attempt to use Greek sources in his favour makes him and his colleague Niccoli objects of ridicule in front of the rest of the participants. As we have said, this critique is more than a personal vendetta against Filelfo's rival and enemy. The reappraisal of Ancient hedonism was definitely influenced by Poggio's discovery of Lucretius, and by 1440 this text had begun to circulate among the humanists. By showing that the people directly involved in this process were blatantly incapable of understanding the ethical precepts of the Ancients, Filelfo presents a picture of the moral and political corruption of Medicean Florence that is tied to its intellectual decline.<sup>62</sup> The moral equilibrium can only be preserved by the *optimates*, who can act as a moral compass for the whole society, and by the true humanists, who read and speak perfect Greek and Latin and can therefore distinguish the ways in which ancient doctrines can contribute to this process. Once both groups are exiled, the incessant flow of pleasures that is possible due to Florence's wealth and independence becomes an unstoppable and destructive force that consumes the souls of the citizens like a plague.

Cosimo's intellectual agenda, once he had secured his power in the city, was not specifically related to ancient hedonism. In 1463 he took the young Marsilio Ficino under his wing and asked him to translate the writings of Hermes and Plato.<sup>63</sup> Filelfo's career would continue in Milan for several decades, where the change to a courtly environment will influence his later

62. It is worth noting that this moral decline also affects the relation between the Medici and their alleged servants. Poggio bluntly states in the *Commentationes* that what Cosimo believes are praises many times are hidden attacks (2.107–11). See De Keyser, "Francesco Filelfo's Feud with Poggio Bracciolini," 20–21.

63. Ficino's interest in Epicureanism is well documented. He includes several quotes of Lucretius in his first preserved text, the *Liber de voluptate* from 1457, and he declared later in life that he wrote a full commentary on the *De rerum natura* that he later burned. He would continue to quote Lucretius and Epicurus in his later writings, frequently to attack the former for denying the immortality of the soul (see for instance *Theologica Platonica* 14.10). See Raymond Marcel, *Marsile Ficin (1433–1499)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2007), 220–33.

fame as a flatterer of princes.<sup>64</sup> Ancient hedonism does not seem to have been a fundamental part of his interest in his later years, when he continued to teach Aristotle and Cicero, as well as Greek, under different patrons.<sup>65</sup>

However, the theories he discussed in his *Commentationes* regarding the relation of *voluptas* to *summum bonum*, as well as the influence of these theories on the moral balance of the state, would continue to be the object of a lively debate in the following years. The best example comes from a humanist who, like Filelfo, suffered the enmity of those who were in power. Thomas More's *Utopia*, written in 1517, includes a long section about the conception of *voluptas* of his imaginary citizens. There, he used some of the basic tenets of Epicureanism to present a city in perfect homeostasis, in which lust, greed, and all of the passions that Filelfo saw in Medicean Florence are expurgated.<sup>66</sup> The moral values are fixed by a direct appellation to "natural" pleasures, which are the opposite of those that come from the conventions of men. This same argument appeared in the *Commentationes*, where the tale from Crantor served as a way to point out simultaneously the inferior nature of wealth and the fickleness of the crowds. On the island of Utopia, however, the opportunities for pleasure were much more limited than in opulent Florence. The symbolic construction of the opposition between the *optimates* and the base crowds of workers that, in Filelfo's view, were the basis of Cosimo's power, is inextricably tied with their respective conceptions of pleasure. In More's text, the opposition is presented between the virtuous citizens of his imaginary island and the corrupted higher classes of modern European societies.

Filelfo's *Commentationes de exilio* is perhaps not as obviously relevant to understanding the role of ancient hedonism in the theories of pleasure prominent during the Renaissance as Lorenzo Valla's *De voluptate* or Cosma Raimondi's *Defensio Epicuri*. Epicurus, Lucretius, and Aristippus of Cyrene have minor appearances and their doctrines are not thoroughly discussed. There is not any explicit attempt to conjoin Ancient *hedone/voluptas* with

64. This laudatory trend is perceivable in many of his *Odae*, particularly in relation to Charles VII of France. Robin (*Filelfo in Milan*, 60–61) analyzes the origin of this prejudice that unjustly condemns the complete production of Filelfo.

65. Viti, "Filelfo, Francesco in 'Dizionario Biografico.'" When he approached Lorenzo de' Medici years later, he would attempt to retire his *Commentationes* from circulation. See also Vasoli, 134.

66. Edward Surtz, *The Praise of Pleasure: Philosophy, Education and Communism in More's Utopia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

Christian ethics, and the main preoccupation of the speakers in the dialogue is not directly concerned with the pleasures of life. However, the specific combination of personal invective, political attack, display of erudition, and consolatory dialogue that defines the tone of the *Commentationes* makes it an extremely interesting text to analyze how the multiple facets of pleasure were interconnected with the concerns of Renaissance scholars.