

Tullia d'Aragona

1. Extracts from the *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* (1547)

The Opening

TULLIA: No one could have dropped by at a better moment, my dear and excellent Signor Benedetto, nor could we have wished to see anyone so congenial and so eagerly anticipated!

VARCHI: I am indeed pleased to hear that, my dear and most esteemed Signora Tullia. All the more because I was afraid that maybe I had, if not totally ruined, at least disturbed your conversation, which I am certain can only have been delightful and must have concerned elevated matters, worthy of the people here and of this place, where the subjects under discussion are always no less useful and important than they are lively and entertaining. So I was already sorry I had turned up, and I said to myself: Woe is me, love takes me whither I wouldst not go, for I was afraid not so much of being presumptuous as of annoying the very person I most desired to please. But if I have not caused you any annoyance, I am happy indeed, as well as grateful for your graciousness and for the good will of these kind sirs and gentlemen in your company, with whose permission I'll take a seat. On one condition, however, that you carry on the discussions on which you had embarked, unless, perhaps, they are such that you deemed unworthy to join in.

TULLIA: On the contrary, that was one of the many reasons why we wanted you here with us. Yet I rather wonder whether you may not end up feeling a little uncomfortable and perhaps regretting the fact that you came over, particularly because it was my turn to speak, and for the reasons that you will shortly hear: not only am I a woman – and you have some complex philosophical reasons for considering women less meritorious and intrinsically less perfect than men – but what is more, I do not possess either sufficient learning or verbal ornaments, as you are well aware.

VARCHI: I can hardly believe, my dear Signora Tullia, that you can consider me as uncouth as Cimone.¹ I am not a fellow so inexpert in worldly matters and the facts of nature as not to know, at least in part, how great the power of women over men is, was, and always shall be, thanks to their spiritual qualities and, even more, to the beauty of their bodies. I would know as much had I not seen or heard any other woman but you! But we'll have plenty of time to discuss this on another occasion.

...

TULLIA: Don't you worry about that. Leave me with the problem and come back to a clarification of the question we proposed just now.

¹ Cimone, a youth bred in the forests by wild animals, is the protagonist of Boccaccio's *Decameron* 5, 1.

VARCHI: What question are you talking about? First tell me and then I can try to satisfy you, if I am able to. On one condition, though: that afterwards you fill me in on the discussions which you said you had commenced a little while before I arrived here. Because I noticed that you were all full of concentration and greatly enjoying yourselves.

TULLIA I'm overjoyed, for if I'm not accustomed to denying something legitimate to most people, to you I can scarcely make or devise a refusal. The question proposed for discussion is as follows: "Is it possible to love within limits?" Can't you give an answer to this?

VARCHI: I wish I hadn't promised in the first place.

TULLIA: Why so?

VARCHI: I don't understand the terms of the proposition, so how can I possibly solve the question?

TULLIA: I know the tricks you are up to. Please do me a favor, if you have the slightest affection for me, and leave your excuses and witticisms to one side. If I can scarcely see the light, that's no reason for you to bandage my eyes completely.

VARCHI: What a splendid way women have! They reinterpret everything after their own fashion. Whoever they deal with, at whatever place or time, the uppermost thing in their minds is to come out the victors. However, since the one with the power around here wants it to be this way, let's make a virtue out of necessity, considering that it is and so will have to be the case. Moreover, I am more than delighted by it, since your entreaty was so framed as to raise all my spirits to a new vigor.

TULLIA: What are you saying now, A whole lot of spirits are in the air, are they? And they're molesting you? I thought that entreaties would exorcize them rather than attract them to a person!

VARCHI: And you say I go in for witticism! All right, let's dismiss the spirits to anyone who wants them and people possessed by spirits to anyone who can bear them. And now tell me: how would you answer if someone were to ask you whether the words "limit" and "end" mean the same thing?

TULLIA: Now I'm the one who can't follow you.

VARCHI: I wonder if these gentlemen won't start laughing at the way we're carrying on: we come from the same town but we can't understand each other, as the saying goes. What I was asking is whether the limit to a given phenomenon can be called its end.

TULLIA: Please just give me an example, if it's not too much trouble.

VARCHI: When a person has arrived at the "limit" of some given object, can it be said that he has reached its "end"?

TULLIA: I'd like that to be made a little clearer.

VARCHI: When a surveyor, as he measures a field or any other area, has reached its furthest limit, in such a way that there is no part of it left over to measure, would you say that he has reached the "end" of it?

TULLIA: Yes, I would say so. To me, phrases like "the final," "ultimate," "limit" and "end," of whatever it may be, seem to have the same meaning.

VARCHI: That's well answered. It means, therefore, that the things that lack an end will also be without a limit and, inversely, those that have no limit will also be lacking an end.

TULLIA: What are you aiming at now? I wouldn't want you to be tying me up inside this plethora of "ends" and "limits."

VARCHI: You seem unnaturally suspicious today and far more so than is your normal manner. Yet you must be aware that once you have conceded the evident truth, namely, that "end" and "limit" stand for the same thing, you can hardly deny what necessarily follows, which is that one who has no end, also has no limit and the clauses can be reversed, of course. What are you worried about? What makes you so hesitant to concede something you know cannot be denied?

TULLIA: I'm afraid I might be embroiled in God knows what. There's one thing I can't get over, and that's the way these logicians fog up the other person's mind at their first opportunity. They start pronouncing affirmative and negatives; they want you to say "yes" and "no" at their prompting; they hardly lay off until their side of the argument gets the upper hand, whether rightly or wrongly. Things come to such a head that I usually compare them with the Gypsies when they carry on with their tricks.

VARCHI: You could not have chosen a better argument to prove to me that I'm not one of those logicians, for the very reason that logical discourse does the precise opposite of what you imagine.

TULLIA: Ha! You shan't catch me out like that. I don't mean the proper brand of logic, but the bogus sophistry which is all the modern vogue.

VARCHI: Let's not get into whether it's modern or not: please answer me one thing. Are you ready to concede in words what you've already admitted to me in effect?

TULLIA: Yes I am, but what will flow from it?

VARCHI: Quite simply that if I can prove to you that love has no end, then your query will be resolved.

TULLIA: Just slow down a second, you're very speedy at resolving a problem! For my part, I believe there are a number of tricky steps still ahead of us. And I can't see my way clear to accepting this conclusion of yours. I would really prefer to have it clarified at greater length by you, and at a relaxed pace, since, in any case, time is not pressing. None of the people around us has a more important engagement they should be going on to, or something they would prefer to do than to hear this out.

...

TULLIA: ... Just carry on as you were, and, if possible, smooth things out and unfold them in minute detail, without taking into account what I might or might not know. To tell you the truth, I don't seem to know anything, except that I know nothing.

VARCHI: That itself would be no mean feat. You could compare yourself to Socrates, who was the wisest and most virtuous man in the whole of Greece.

TULLIA: I didn't mean that mine was the Socratic ignorance. You are putting excessively subtle interpretations on what I say. However, if Socrates was so wise and virtuous, why don't you make a practice of imitating him? For as you know, he discussed everything with his friend Diotima and learned all manner of wonderful things from her, especially concerning the mysteries of love.

VARCHI: And what do you think I'm doing?

TULLIA: Quite the opposite of everything that Socrates did. Since he adopted a learning stance, whereas you're imparting lessons.

VARCHI: No, you've got it wrong. Where do you think I derive my modest utterances, if not...

TULLIA: Come, come. Tone things down. Go back to the main subject and prove to us in a simpler fashion, if that is possible, that "to love" and "love" are the same thing.

[Tullia then mocks Varchi for using 'logic' to argue something that she believes is false: that "love" and "to love" are one and the same thing]

VARCHI: ... Logic was invented for the discovery of truth and the disposal of falsehood, and anyone who uses logic for other purposes may be doing what he wants to, but is not doing what he ought to. This kind of charlatan deserves the same punishment as a doctor who uses his science and skills not to heal the sick but to kill the healthy. Indeed, his punishment should be even harsher, because the soul deserves greater reverence than the body.

TULLIA: I'll tell you what I think: right now, you seem to be beating round the bush, as they say. Maybe it's because you're not too confident of being able to prove to my satisfaction what is impossible, or of making me say what I'm not prepared to admit.

VARCHI: Something that is quite impossible is clearly false and therefore cannot be shown to be true, nor would I try to prove its truth to you. Far less would I seek to make you say something you didn't want to, as this would be grossly discourteous and presumptuous. I'll try my utmost to prove to you, and induce you to affirm yourself, that what I said was quite true. So now, pray, what do you think "love" is?

TULLIA: Do you think you can just fire off a question like that and so suddenly to a woman, especially to a woman such as myself?

VARCHI: You are trying to get me to say that many women are of greater worth than a host of men. Perhaps you want me to touch on your own great merits, for you have always put more emphasis on decking out the soul with exceptional virtues than on embellishing the body with pretty or majestic ornaments. Yours is an attitude rare indeed at all times and worthy of the greatest acclaim. Actually, I didn't ask you what love was, but what you thought love was. For I am well aware that normally women's aptitude for love is feeble.

TULLIA: You're wrong there. Perhaps you were judging women's love from your own.

VARCHI: Imagine what you would have said if I had added (as I was on the point of doing) that women also love rarely and had quoted some lines from Petrarch:

"Whence I know full well that the state of love / Lasts but a short time in a woman's heart."

TULLIA: Oh, what a trickster you are! Do you think I can't see what you are up to? Just think what would have happened if Madonna Laura had gotten around to writing as much about Petrarch as he wrote about her: you'd have seen things turn out quite differently then! Anyway, why aren't you keeping your promise to me?

VARCHI: It's up to you, at this stage. You haven't yet told me what you think "love" is.

TULLIA: "Love," according to what I have frequently heard from other authorities, as well as by my own understanding of it, is nothing other than a desire to enjoy with union what is truly beautiful or seems beautiful to the lover.

...

TULLIA: Well then, for my part I believe that beauty is the mother of all forms of love.

VARCHI: Who, then, would be its father?

TULLIA: The knowledge of that beauty.

VARCHI: And how can I possibly refrain from praising you, Signora Tullia. Even so, you would have come even closer if you had stated that beauty is the father and knowledge is the mother, as we shall propose some other time. This derives from our conviction that the loved one is doubtless the agent and consequently more noble, while the lover is the passive recipient, and therefore less noble, despite the contrary view which the divine Plato appears to hold on this distinction.

Tullia asks Varchi to prove his statement that love is without end: "And that is something you are going to find very hard to do"

VARCHI: ... What reasons can you adduce to prove that love has an end?

TULLIA: No particular reason; but it is as I say.

VARCHI: So you want me to bow down to authority!

TULLIA: No, Sir. I want you to bow down to experience, which I trust by itself far more than all the reasons produced by the whole class of philosophers.

VARCHI: So do I. But what experience would that be?

TULLIA: Surely you know far better than I do that innumerable men, both in ancient and modern times, have fallen in love. Then, because of anger or some other feeling, whatever the reason might have been, they have stopped loving and jilted the women they had loved.

VARCHI: I wouldn't claim to know this better than you. However, yes, it is true that countless men, and countless women, both in antiquity and the present era, have been in love, and that then, whatever the reason may have been, they fell out of love, and many times their love turned into hatred, which is much worse. So what do you wish to infer from this: that love has an end, and so one can love within a limit? I think you'd be deceiving yourself.

However, since I know how intelligent you are and I can see you smiling away there, I'm sure you are trying to catch me out. I'll be satisfied if you acknowledge that I wasn't totally wrong, and also that I wasn't trying to be funny when I said at the outset that I didn't understand the terms of the debate. In fact, I never meant that kind of "end," and I don't believe that you had that "limit" in mind when you first laid the issue before me.

TULLIA: I will admit that much. Otherwise what I put up for discussion would not have been a debatable question but foolishness on my part, since it is obvious that people fall in and out of love at their own volition.

VARCHI: I would not like you to pass as foolish when in fact you are so clever, unless you're really trying to catch me out on this topic too. Actually, it is not quite as obvious as you suppose it to be.

TULLIA: Lord save us, you even want to argue the point on this one!

...

VARCHI: So tell me: suppose I ask you if one can live without eating, what answer would you give?

TULLIA: What a fine question! How do you think I would answer? I would say "Certainly not!" Provided the common run of men and women were not like that Scotsman in Rome in the time of Pope Clement, or that girl who is still alive in Germany and manages to survive without eating. So please don't think you can trap me with a half-swallowed mouthful!

VARCHI: Trust me. I'm doing some serious reasoning here. Not only do I find sophistic tricks distasteful, I actually have a mortal hatred for them. You gave a splendid answer, in fact. However, just let's suppose that somebody cited an instance, or lodged an objection, to show your opinion was wrong, and quoted the fact that the dead do not eat, how would you answer him.

TULLIA: Well, I'll leave you to be the judge of that!

VARCHI: Go ahead and say something.

TULLIA: Somebody is pulling my leg.

VARCHI: No, the jokes are coming from you. I've told you more than once, I'm taking each point seriously. I must insist that you give me a clear answer, or we will go on talking about something else, for I have a greater wish to hear these gentlemen speak and more need to learn from them than I have of doing the talking myself.

TULLIA: But I do not see what good it is for you to ask me why the dead do not eat. Everyone knows they no longer need to eat and they can't. In brief: they are defunct, no longer alive!

VARCHI: You see, you have said by yourself what you didn't believe when you heard it from me. What you ought to answer now is exactly this: just as the living cannot live without eating, so those who are in love cannot love with a set limit. If anyone adduced classical or contemporary examples, telling you that these and those characters, after falling in love,

stopped loving and fell out of love, so to speak, you would have to confute them by saying: these people and those people were once alive and ate; now they are dead and no longer eat.

TULLIA: Ah, I see your point. What you mean is that while one loves, one does not love within limits. But when one no longer loves, the issue simply doesn't arise. This logic is truly manna from heaven!² Now tell me: don't you believe there are some individuals who love, in order to achieve their own end, and then, when they have fulfilled that desire, love no more?

VARCHI: No, Madam.

TULLIA: You show yourself to be a little inexperienced in matters of love. Forgive me for pointing out that I have known a lot about such things, and still do.

VARCHI: I too know, and have known, the vicissitudes of love.

TULLIA: So what do you say?

VARCHI: I say theirs is no love, and they are not enamored.

TULLIA: They would insist that they are.

VARCHI: They do great wrong. They deserve a severe punishment.

TULLIA: Yes, they do, because they just end up leading poor, miserable women astray.

VARCHI: I don't blame them on that score, because there are also a number of women who play the same little game with men. Their real fault is that they give the most beautiful and precious label to what is just a vile and sordid act.

TULLIA: You really don't give me any chances, do you? But I promise you, you will pay for it eventually! So come back to the proof that love is without an end and therefore lacks a "limit" in the sense that we have agreed to use the term "end," in the present disputation. For if you can do this, I shall deem you a worthy hero indeed!

VARCHI: I don't intend to reply, because unfortunately you'll just try to score points against me. I know what you are like!

TULLIA: Yes, of course. Thank goodness you won't have much to say. And if you do have a response, speak up.

VARCHI: For that reason too, I won't answer!

TULLIA: Please continue the discussion! As I said, you'll be a mighty hero, if you can prove to my satisfaction that love is without end.

VARCHI: Is it then such a heroic feat to defeat a woman?

TULLIA: You're not in a contest with a woman. You're fighting against Reason.

VARCHI: And isn't Reason female?

TULLIA: I don't know if it is female or male. Now let me do the talking for a while. Let's see if I can catch you by doing the questions my way. But don't hold it against me if I make a few blunders.

VARCHI: By all means, do begin. I shall answer correctly, and willingly.

TULLIA: If a thing has no end, is it infinite?

VARCHI: Without the slightest doubt.

² Unexpected aid, advantage or assistance: "manna from heaven" is an expression that alludes to the food that miraculously appeared to feed the Israelites on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land (Exodus 16:15).

Tullia on two types of Love

TULLIA: Because this word "love," since it can stand for various types of loving, is a polyvalent noun. And you didn't ask me first what kind I meant.

VARCHI: Ah, Signora Tullia, you have got me there!

TULLIA: You asked for it; it's your loss.

VARCHI: I admit it. So, I ask you now what kind of love you had in mind.

TULLIA: Indeed, I am going to tell you. Leaving all possible subdivisions aside, let me say that love is of two types. We shall call the first "vulgar" or "dishonest" love, the other "honest," that is to say, virtuous. Dishonest love - which is found only in vulgar and low-minded individuals, that is, in those whose souls are low and vile, who lack virtue or refinement, whether they come from noble or insignificant stock - is generated by a desire to enjoy the object that is loved, and its goal is none other than that of common animals. They simply want to obtain pleasure and to procreate something that resembles themselves, without any further thought or concern. Those who are moved by this desire and who love in this guise, as soon as they have reached their goal and have satisfied their longing, will desist from their motion and will no longer love. As a matter of fact, they may quite often recognize that they have made a mistake, or get fed up with the time and trouble they have put into it, and so they turn their love into hate. Of course, I was not considering this type of love.

VARCHI: I certainly believe you, for I know that your noble heart would never stoop so low as even to think of talking about such vile matters. But pray go on.

TULLIA: Honest love, which is characteristic of noble people, people who have a refined and virtuous disposition, whether they be rich or poor, is not generated by desire, like the other, but by reason. It has as its main goal the transformation of oneself into the object of one's love, with a desire that the loved one be converted into oneself, so that the two may become one or four. Many times, this transformation has been beautifully described by Petrarch, as well as by the Very Reverend Cardinal Bembo. And as this transformation can only take place on a spiritual plane, so in this kind of love, the principal part is played by the "spiritual" senses, those of sight and hearing and, above all, because it is closest to the spiritual, the imagination. But, in truth, as it is the lover's wish to achieve a corporeal union besides the spiritual one, in order to effect a total identification with the beloved, and since this corporeal unity can never be attained, because it is not possible for human bodies to be physically merged into one another, the lover can never achieve this longing of his, and so will never satisfy his desire. Thus, he cannot love with a limit, as I concluded earlier.

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VARCHI: ... First of all, I do not understand why you blame and call "dishonest" that kind of love that is not only common to all animate things - I mean earthly creatures - but is proper to them, for they are made more for it than for anything else... For Aristotle says that the man who cannot generate, since he cannot do what nature has created him to do, is no

longer a man. Secondly, I wonder what you would say about those men who love boys, whose urge cannot obviously be a desire to generate something similar to themselves. Furthermore, it does not seem true that all those who love with a vulgar and lascivious love desist from loving as soon as they have satisfied their desires, on the contrary, there are many who seem to burn more ardently afterwards. These three points I have raised in regard to the first type of love are enough for the time being.

TULLIA: These are not casual objections, or points of slight importance, as you made them out to be. I know that you like to conduct a detailed analysis of everything. But I'll reply to the best of my ability. I would answer your first point by saying that I am well aware that we humans cannot be reprehended, or praised, for the instinctive drives that arise from our nature. Hence the first type of love is not to be blamed, either in the plant or the animal kingdom. And it should not be called lascivious or "dishonest" in them, or indeed in human beings. Rather, it can be and should be lauded to a greater extent in humans because they are capable of generating offspring of a more noble and worthy caliber than plants and animals can.

My main proviso is that this appetite should not become unbridled and overpowering, for this often happens with human beings, who are endowed with a free will, while it does not occur in the plant or animal kingdom. It is not just because animals are animals - as an Empress once replied in a famous aside - but because they are guided by an unerring mind. Hence, since no one deserves censure for eating and drinking, but rather should be congratulated, because these processes restore the natural warmth and essential humors which maintain us in life, so people should be praised, and no one censured, for generating offspring that are similar to themselves, thus perpetuating themselves in the species, since they cannot re-produce themselves as individuals. However, just as we can blame and also chastise someone who eats or drinks more than is reasonable, or at the wrong place and time, in a way that things that were supposed to benefit him actually harm him, so we ought to chastise and blame far more vigorously those persons who yield to the passions of the flesh without due limit and moderation. For in doing so, they subordinate reason, which ought to be the queen of the body, to the senses, and thus they quickly turn from being rational men into being brute animals.

...

We'll come now to the second of the points you raised. Here I consider that those men who entertain a lascivious love for youths are not following the true dictates of nature, so they fully deserve the punishments that canon and divine law have imposed on them, as well as the penalties set up by man-made and civil justice. What is more, I can scarcely believe that people who practice such an ugly, wicked and hideous vice, whether an artificial or habitual form of behavior, are real human beings. I shall be glad if later on you could give me your own view on this, for I know full well that in classical Greece the opposite notion was common and that Lucian wrote a dialogue in which he praised this vice, as did Plato.

VARCHI: I want to reply to you now instead of postponing this question until later, for you are mixing things up and taking logs for axes. You are greatly mistaken if you compare Lucian with Plato, and if you furthermore believe that Plato praised such filthy wickedness. For God's sake, get such an ugly belief, such grievous sin, out of your head, for it is unworthy of a person of the lowest mind, let alone of your very gentle soul.

TULLIA: Do forgive me. I had understood that not only did Socrates and Plato make a public spectacle of their affairs with young men, but they also took it as something to be proud about, and they wrote dialogues, as we can see in the cases of Alcibiades and Phaedrus, where they speak about love with great beauty and passion.

VARCHI: I do not say that Socrates and Plato did not show their love for youths in public, that they were not proud of it and did not speak of love with great beauty and passion. I simply maintain that they did not love them the way that people commonly interpret and apparently you also believe. I'll say more: I do not know who speaks more amorously about love than Solomon in his "Song of Songs."

TULLIA: I'll take what you say on trust. But do tell me, were they in fact lovers?

VARCHI: Of course they were lovers! Very much so.

TULLIA: So were they desirous of generating something resembling themselves?

VARCHI: Do you doubt it?

TULLIA: I don't quite know how to respond. You have a way of turning everything around against me. Yet I am sure that, in that case, they could not achieve their goal. Indeed, no one can reasonably long for things that cannot come to pass, and which they cannot possibly obtain.

VARCHI: You customarily appear to be more attentive and of better mind and judgment than you seem today. I am beginning to suspect that all of you here are setting me up to see how far I will go. What makes me sure of it is your keeping so quiet, no matter what I say. I am aware that you know that, just as pregnant bodies long to generate, so do pregnant souls, and even more so. Socrates and Plato, therefore, whose souls were replete with all goodness, overflowing with doctrine, rich in all virtues and, finally, pregnant with all kinds of lofty and venerable habits, desired nothing more than giving birth and generating something similar to themselves. Those who deny it, or believe otherwise, do not describe Socrates and Plato; they rather give themselves away. This is the real and authentic virtuous love. It is as much worthier than the other as the soul is worthier than the body. These lovers deserve far more praise than the others, just as generating a beautiful soul is far more commendable than giving birth to a beautiful body. Do not be deceived by today's customs: be satisfied by knowing that procreators of this type are to be commended, and the more so for not being generally appreciated. But we are treading on very difficult ground, and besides you know everything already. So, do go back to your third question.

TULLIA: I wouldn't like to let that point slip by in such a hurry. Despite my awareness that what you are saying is perfectly true, I should still like to know why a woman cannot be loved with this same type of love. For I am certain that you don't wish to imply that women

lack the intellectual soul that men have and that consequently they do not belong to the same species as males, as I have heard a number of men say.

VARCHI: It was someone's belief - but it is far from the truth - that the difference between men and women is not one of essence. And I myself maintain that not only is it possible to love women with an honest and virtuous love, but that one ought to. As far as I am concerned, I know those who have done it and do it all the time.

TULLIA: You have quite restored my confidence! But please tell me, what is the significance of the fact that these Socratic lovers tend not to love those who are unprepossessing, or simply too old.

VARCHI: I thought I was the one who always wanted to split hairs. Who told you this?

TULLIA: I can see it every day with my own eyes.

VARCHI: Would to God that these lovers we are talking about were as commonly found as they are rare, or that one of them were to be seen at least once in ten years, if not every day. What you say is quite true: the most beautiful people, or those who seem most beautiful, are loved more than the others, and they are loved more up to a certain age than later.

TULLIA: And what could be the reason for that: Please don't quote me the reasons that monks commonly put forward when they try to exculpate themselves.

VARCHI: If these reasons are true and persuasive, why should I not put them forward?

TULLIA: Maybe by hearing them from your own lips I'll be tempted to accept them.

VARCHI: First of all you ought to realize that one may not understand or get to know anything at all except through one's senses, and that, of all the senses, the noblest and most exquisite is sight.

TULLIA: I know and can concede all that. But you're starting off at a very high plane and from propositions that are universal.

VARCHI: When I am with you, I am forced to proceed in this fashion, for you are always picking holes in things and want to find out the whys and wherefores of everything. Since the good and the beautiful are the same ...

TULLIA: I didn't know that and I don't concede it. Otherwise, following this line, we could say that all beautiful people are virtuous.

VARCHI: You well know ...

TULLIA: Be careful, don't be deceived. For myself, I have met many handsome people, but they weren't at all virtuous for that.

VARCHI: So have I. Nonetheless what I say is true, for these people have turned out to be the way they are, not because of their nature but by accident, either through their fathers' fault or their teachers' incompetence or their friends' failing. Remember the proverb "Bad company will teach you bad ways," for it is very true. I furthermore can say that these people, when they are bad, are worse than others, in fact they are evil.

TULLIA: I beseech you to tell me the reason for that.

VARCHI: This is the way nature works. If something is better and perfect in its natural essence, it becomes worse and more flawed whenever it spoils, corrupts, and loses its essential purity. So it follows that, while we cannot find a more blessed, benign, and useful animal than the human animal, when good, by the same token there is none as bad and wicked, malicious and harmful, when bad. If you wish for a more concrete example remember that, as the saying goes, it is the sweetest wine that produces the strongest vinegar.

TULLIA: I like that. But please continue with your syllogism.

VARCHI: My syllogism is good and ready. If it is the beautiful people that are loved, it is because they are usually judged not only the best but of higher intelligence, and it ought to be so, except in the cases I mentioned earlier. I say this only because, believe me, I personally judge it to be so and hold it to be the truth. If I behaved in any other way, I would play into the hands of those who contend that I am no philosopher.

TULLIA: That's fine. So now, if we follow your rule of contraries, all those people who are ugly must be wicked.

VARCHI: No, Madam.

TULLIA: What do you mean by "no"? Surely beautiful and ugly are contraries.

VARCHI: They are and they are not.

TULLIA: That seems to me a clear contradiction in terms, but I won't go into it any further since I am obviously not learned in logic. You tell me how the contradiction can be cured.

VARCHI: It is quite easy. Contraries can be of many kinds. The rule I am considering applies only to contraries of exclusion, not those of inclusion.

TULLIA: I can't follow that.

VARCHI: "Contraries of inclusion" are those that signify two contrary natures, such as "white" and "black," "sweet" and "bitter," "hard" and "soft," and the like. The rule does not apply here, because not everything non-white is black, nor is everything that is not sweet bitter, and so forth. "Opposites of exclusion," on the other hand, do not indicate two different natures, but, rather, one indicates one nature and the other the lack of that nature, as we have in "alive" and "dead," "night" and "day," "sighted" and "blind," and other such contraries. With these, the rule always applies, because what is not alive is necessarily dead, the man who cannot see is obviously blind, and when it is not daytime it must be night time.

TULLIA: I understand now. What is the reason for this disparity?

VARCHI: The reason is that the contraries of exclusion do not have a mean in between, while the contraries of inclusion do. What is not black can be blue or some other color; what is not sweet can be sour, or have some other flavor.

TULLIA: I see that, but "beautiful" and "ugly" seem to belong to the class that admits of no mean between the two opposites.

VARCHI: It would seem so, but it is not so, for many things are found that are neither ugly nor beautiful.

TULLIA: Well, I could also find you some things that are neither alive nor dead, and others that are neither blind nor lit up by light.

VARCHI: Which ones?

TULLIA: Let me see, now: ah yes, these walls, those chairs.

VARCHI: Very ingeniously said but not correctly. An object may not be considered "dead" if it was never alive, or cannot be alive, neither can we call "blind" what is incapable of sight. How can we deprive something of a quality it does not possess, never did and never will possess? Poets are allowed to call rivers, forests, and other things "deaf," although these have no sense of hearing, because they are poets and must speak so [metaphorically]. But we must speak philosophically and therefore we should say that, among men as well as among women, there are some individuals who are neither beautiful nor ugly but who nonetheless by their own nature are made capable of receiving one or the other quality. Therefore, my rule does not apply here, contrary to what you say. So you see why good and wise men are more likely to be in love with people who are beautiful than with those who are ugly. Mind you, I do not wish to deny that beauty itself operates somehow in them too, to a great extent in fact; for beauty is a grace that allures, entices, and captivates those who get to know it. Rest assured that the more exquisite a person is, the more fervently he longs for beauty. As a matter of fact, in all parts of the universe, whatever they may be, wherever there is a greater measure of nobility and perfection, there is necessarily found a better and higher love as well. For this reason, as God is the highest goodness and wisdom, likewise He is the highest love and the highest everything.

TULLIA: I agree thus far and feel you have satisfied all my curiosity. The followers of Plato also turn their love toward those who are most beautiful, because they judge them to be the best and most intelligent individuals, although they are enticed by their beauty as well. In the same way you find that fathers or mothers both normally tend to show a preference toward the more good-looking among their children, though these are often the worst behaved. Hence, we need not infer that there is any latent evil in the Platonic position, All I still have to find out is why they prefer to love those who are youthful, neglecting the aged. If people didn't know the real reason for this, they could harbor suspicions, which would not perhaps be totally unfounded,

VARCHI: They would be suspicious for a very good reason. If what they contend were true, I myself would be loud and clear. But you are mistaken. The reason why Platonic lovers seem to prefer youths is that the benevolence and affection, which we call "love" and see directed to young men, in time becomes friendship. Once its name is changed, it no longer seems to be the same feeling, but only then does love become truly perfect. I know what I am talking about, for when we cannot find pleasure in contemplating beautiful things, we can experience the enjoyment felt in admiring what is good, which is no less. We must remember that all creators, the more outstanding they are, the more delight they feel in their own creations. If natural parents derive great satisfaction from their children when these are good and virtuous, how much more must spiritual parents enjoy them! And as nothing is more useful than knowledge, so nothing is more rewarding than teaching, for those, of course, who do it for pleasure rather than for money.

TULLIA: Today I seem to be hearing things the like of which I never heard before. I feel sure, however, that you won't deny that many among those who love youthful partners, in the manner that you have been describing, cease to love them when the flower of their youthful beauty fades, and sometimes their love may even turn to repulsion...

VARCHI: You are wrong, I say!

TULLIA: Fiddlesticks! I'll have caught you out at the point where I least expected to.

VARCHI: I tell you it is not true. And I am surprised that you do not know that what cannot be, never was.

TULLIA: I am well aware of that, for the poet declares "How can it be, when it could never have been?" So now you must respond to my point about what the evidence suggests.

VARCHI: Great matter indeed! The people that you had in mind could well feign a virtuous love but did not truly love. If they were philosophers, they did not love as philosophers should. When I say that this kind of love is far more complete and, consequently, far rarer than perhaps you think, you must believe me.

The last objection

TULLIA: The originality and beguiling sweetness of your speech had made me forget the third objection. Even now, I'm not sure if my memory serves me well. But I think it was this: not all those who love with a vulgar type of love necessarily desist from their love when they have achieved their goal, because, in fact, many of them become even more ardently enamored after the physical conquest.

VARCHI: Yes, that is it.

TULLIA: There can be no doubt that when a thing is moving toward a particular goal and then reaches that goal, it ceases and no longer moves. This is because when the cause that gave rise to its movement, and which was the original goal, is lacking, then the effect, which was its movement, must also come to an end. Now, all those people who love in the vulgar way and desire merely to be carnally joined with the beloved object, as soon as they have consummated this intercourse, must desist from their movement and discontinue their love. Isn't that the case?

VARCHI: Very true. But let me ask: how is it that some lovers not only stop loving but turn their love into hatred? And others not only do not stop loving, but love more intensely?

TULLIA: Wouldn't you concede that no sooner has the physical act been achieved and intercourse consummated, then movement ceases and love must disappear?

VARCHI: Why don't you want me to grant what is true and cannot be denied, as far as this kind of love is concerned? Since this is desire and carnal appetite, it necessarily follows that, once such appetite is quenched through copulation and physical union, love instantly disappears. But why is it that sometimes it changes into hatred and sometimes into greater love?

TULLIA: To give an answer to this last remark first, I say that you are contradicting yourself, because you do concede that love falls away in all beings when the carnal pleasure has been achieved, but then you ask me why sometimes it not only does not cease, but actually grows in intensity.

VARCHI: I do not know which of us is trying to aggravate the other. You take for granted what is still in dispute. I concede that love disappears in all those lovers, because it is so. Then I ask you why sometimes love grows so that you may answer my question; for experience tells us that many lovers increase their love and, after reaching their goal, love more fervently than before.

TULLIA: I understood your argument, so I imagined that you had understood mine. What I'm stating is that once the carnal purpose has been attained, people are inevitably bound to lack the thrust and the stimulus that tormented and eroded their being up to a moment previously. This follows from the universal and self-evident proposition, which we have cited so often, that any thing that is moving toward a particular goal, once it reaches it, no longer moves. This is also because the senses of touch and taste, in the pleasure of which these lovers principally delight, are material rather than as spiritual as sight and hearing, and so they are satiated with immediate effect. Indeed, there are times when these senses surfeit the lovers so that they cause their love not just to stagnate but to mutate into hatred, apart from the causes that were mentioned a moment ago. In this way we have solved the first problem.

As for the second issue, it is quite obvious that in the very moment when humans attain their desire, they automatically cease from their movement but do not discard their love; in fact, they often cause it to increase, because apart from their never being able to derive complete gratification from it, they retain the desire to enjoy the beloved object on their own, and by [continuing] union (hence this kind of love can never be completely lacking in jealousy). What is more, its acolytes become still more intemperate in their longing for carnal intercourse; they want to enjoy the thrill one more time, and still one more time after that, and so on. I'm not going to deny that this type of love may include a wide variety of possibilities: it may indeed allow for several different levels, according to the character and makeup both of the people in love and of those who are loved. For you may find that not only is one person more amorous than the other, but also that some are more prudent or of a more amiable disposition than others; so that this vulgar and lascivious strain of love can, at times and in some individuals, give rise to a chaste and virtuous love, just as a moral and virtuous love, because of some fault in either the lover or the beloved, may turn into one of the vulgar and lascivious variety. In the same way, many a plant may go from wild to domestic, or from domestic to wild, following its own pattern of growth and the nature of the terrain where it is found or transplanted. This, at any rate, is as much as I can think of saying to help the resolution of your doubts in the matter. I shall take what I say to be right only when I have your approval for it.

VARCHI: As for me, I am quite satisfied...