

The Ideal Community

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In the book, *History of the Florentine People*, by Leonardo Bruni, Bruni initially writes about the foundation of Florence and then writes about the state of Florence during the Renaissance in 1292, exploring Florence's social issues in depth. In writing about the social issues of Florence, Bruni reveals the political tensions within Florence in 1292 and nonchalantly provides a solution to non-nobles of Florence who feared to displace the tyranny of the Florentine nobles. Ultimately, I argue that beneath his writing, Bruni has a bold plan for an ideal community, an ideal community that requires and provides three values: participation, equality, and justice.

Leonardo Bruni was one of the great humanists of the Renaissance Era, who held the esteemed position of a notary in Florence. Bruni, who was born way after the period in which the *History of the Florentine People* is set in, hails from Arezzo, was born to a grain dealer, and was imprisoned along with his father in 1384 due to a civil war (eNotes Editorial 2015). After the death of both his parents in 1388, Bruni moved to Florence where he studied law and garnered the attention of Salutati, eventually serving in papal courts, and gaining experience, ultimately leading Bruni to write *History of the Florentine People* (eNotes Editorial 2015). Ultimately, in combination with his turbulent childhood and later success, Bruni gained a unique perspective of what constitutes the best governing, which he nonchalantly writes about in, *History of the Florentine People*.

In writing, *History of the Florentine People*, Bruni lays out his plan for an ideal community, one that requires participation. Bruni accomplishes this by projecting his ideas upon a fictional Florentine noble, Giano della Bella who lives in 1292. In the purported speech of della Bella, he attempts to inspire the non-noble Florentines to tackle one of many, significant social problems. In order to confront these issues, they must take action. In the opening of his oration,

Giano della Bella attempts to move them to action by emphasizing how they all share the same problems when he refers to them as “public affairs” (Dale, Sharon, et al, pg. 269). Bruni, masked beneath the persona of Giano della Bella, establishes the focal point of the oration to be the essential public character of the issues that pertain to the public of Florence. He is trying to break down the idea that people are solely private individuals with only a personal stake in things. Giano della Bella, powerfully argues “But a good citizen, I think, puts aside his own interests when his country needs his advice, and he does not cut down his public statements to suit his private convenience” (Dale, Sharon, et al., pg. 269). Bruni considers the public good to be a vital part of the individual’s welfare. In the statement, Bruni argues that the value of participation in government by all Florentines is essential to their happiness and that the *bene comune* or public good is what makes their well-being and prosperity possible. Thus, a good citizen is not one who casually goes on about their life, but one who actively maintains and improves the conditions of one’s community through their participation. Bruni argues that through citizen participation, the ideal community can be realized.

Along with citizen participation, Bruni states that a well-run state promotes equality. He is most concerned that a few wealthy and well-placed people will garner all the benefits. Such a community does not remain peaceful for long. Bruni writes, “I am convinced that we must either check the arrogance of the powerful families or lose our liberty altogether” (Dale, Sharon, et al, pg. 269). Bruni argues that if the non-nobles of Florence do not tackle the problem of the arrogance of the Florentine nobles, then their liberty is nonexistent and will foster the antithesis of an ideal community. Arrogance in this instance correlates to the power of the nobility, and liberty points to the sovereignty of the non-noble Florentines. Thus, Bruni puts forth, that the inequality of power between the nobles and non-nobles threatens the potential of an ideal

community. If equality is nonexistent, it leads to the benefit of one group or class, in the case of Florence, the nobles, and to the detriment of the others, in the case of Florence, the non-nobles. Ultimately, Bruni argues that the value of equality is essential to his bold plan for an ideal community. Since inequality leads to the benefit of some and the suffering of others, it neither aligns with the idea of *bene comune* nor with the practical need for order and peace. Inevitably, with one small group retaining most of the benefits of living in a community, the remainder and the majority of the people either fight or decide not to live in that community. The question is how to determine what is equitable? This is where having agreed-upon laws and a system of justice comes in.

This is the final value that Bruni puts forth, that of community laws and of the justice needed to implement them. Bruni gives these examples of how laws can make a difference: But laws are not effective without enforcement. To enforce community agreements, laws not only need to be a matter of public record but also need to be managed. Bruni writes, “It seems to me that the liberty of the people consists of two things: its laws and its courts” (Dale, Sharon, et al, pg. 269). Bruni argues that laws and courts go hand in hand with the liberty, or sovereignty, of the non-noble Florentines. Bruni emphasizes the importance of laws by writing, “we see men who deserve prison and punishment strutting like lords around the city with crowds of armed retainers, terrifying us and the magistrates” (Dale, Sharon, et al, pg. 271). Without the existence of laws, those who are above it through their status, are corrupted into doing whatever they may please, which includes harming those of lower status who are not above the law. Thus, an ideal community enforces laws to hold each individual accountable for actions that hurt not many people in the community, but even just one. However, Bruni acknowledges the fact that even if

laws were created to prevent the nobility from freely committing terrifying acts, who or what would be the force to uphold the laws, and ultimately justice in an ideal community?

Bruni provides the solution in his writing, “What good are even the finest laws in a state if legal proceedings are made void?” (Dale, Sharon, et al, pg. 271). Bruni argues that laws are useless if legal proceedings, or the courts to be specific, are weak. Thus, Bruni further writes, “For in what sense are you free when there are people who, with no fear of judgment, can lay violent hands on your property whenever they please?” (Dale, Sharon, et al., pg. 269). Bruni boldly furthers his argument for the importance of the courts by putting forth a question to the Florentines that could be argued as a timeless question for any reader, whether or not someone is free if there is no sense of laws and courts established to uphold justice throughout the community. In Bruni’s argument, the answer is no, justice is an essential value to fostering an ideal community, justice that holds every member of the community accountable for every action that attempts or succeeds in hurting the ideal community. Ultimately, Bruni solidifies his argument for the importance of laws and courts by stating, “if you resuscitate the laws, establish severer punishments against the powerful, and strengthen the courts, you will force them to stop their tyrannous behavior” (Dale, Sharon, et al, pg. 272). Justice can only be implemented in an ideal community, through strict laws, and strict courts that maintain and uphold the laws, without those two facets, justice is nonexistent.

To this end, Bruni’s bold plan for an ideal community underscores the political and social conditions of the Renaissance Era. Bruni’s writing reflects the broader power struggle between the nobles and non-nobles throughout the Italian peninsula during the Renaissance. Furthermore, when considering the fact that Bruni began writing *History of the Florentine People*, in 1415 (Dale, Sharon, et al., 250), it is possible to consider that the oration by the fictional della Bella,

was Bruni's way of penning a letter to the Florentine people and to a greater extent, future generations. A letter that informs 1292 Florence and future generations of the timeless values necessary to develop Bruni's ideal community, ultimately, the *bene comune*. Bruni wrote the oration as if he was traveling back to 1292 and providing Florence with the knowledge, he had at the time of writing the book, which would have been beneficial in helping Florence build Bruni's vision of the ideal community. Additionally, it could also be argued that Bruni wrote his view on the ideal government as a form of criticism of the government he lived through at the time. Lastly, do Bruni's arguments and solutions adhere to the values he puts forth that constitute an ideal community?

No, there are elements of Bruni's ideal community that can be criticized for their radical nature, an example being his interpretation of justice. Bruni writes, "in the case of powerful men, public notoriety must be admissible as evidence" (Dale, Sharon, et al., pg. 271). It is clear that in an attempt to address the potential corruption of laws and courts, Bruni's solution as it pertains to evidence of a potential crime committed by a nobleman is one of differentiating nature compared to the corrupt laws and courts that favored noble Florentines but is equal in radical nature. Since a non-noble Florentine, or anyone of non-noble status, is allowed by Bruni's solution to cultivate a false allegation against a nobleman that stands on the grounds of "notoriety," which is subjective, and ultimately punishes the nobility of crimes that they potentially did not commit for simply being a person of high status. Thus, Bruni's ideal community is not the epitome of the *bene comune*, which is why further study is needed to develop optimal values and arguments that constitute the ideal community. One possible solution is modeling the ideal community based on egalitarian values that serves everyone equally. An egalitarian society that does not seek retribution, but instead rehabilitation of oppressive individuals.

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