AP Euro Ch 12: Humanist Philosopher Lorenzo Valla on Morality – Excerpts from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

**Valla on Moral Philosophy:** …In his dialogue, published as *De voluptate* in 1431, when he was still in his mid-twenties, and revised two years later under the title *De vero bono* (*On the True Good*), Valla presents a discussion between an “Epicurean,” a “Stoic,” and a “Christian” on an age-old question: **what is the highest ethical good?** …Valla thus treats Epicureanism as a stepping-stone to the development of a Christian morality based on the concept of pleasure, and repudiates the traditional synthesis of Stoicism and Christianity, popular among scholastics and humanists alike. The substance of the dialogue is repeated in a long chapter in his *Repastinatio* (*Repastinatio*, 73–98; 411–418).

Valla's strategy is to reduce the traditional four virtues— prudence, justice, fortitude, and propriety (or temperance)—to fortitude, and then to equate fortitude with charity and love. **For Valla, fortitude is the essential virtue, since it shows that we do not allow ourselves to be conquered by the wrong emotions, but instead to act for the good. As a true virtue of action, it is closely connected to justice and is defined as “a certain resistance against both the harsh and the pleasant things which prudence has declared to be evils.” It is the power to tolerate and suffer adversity and bad luck, but also to resist the blandishments of a fortune which can be all too good, thus weakening the spirit. Fortitude is the only true virtue, because virtue resides in the will, since our actions, to which we assign moral qualifications, proceed from the will.**

Valla's reductive strategy has a clear aim: to equate this essential virtue of action, fortitude, with the biblical concept of love and charity. This step requires some hermeneutic manipulation, but the Stoic overtones of Cicero's account in *De officiis* have prepared the way for it—ironically, perhaps, in view of Valla's professed hostility towards Stoicism—since enduring hardship with Stoic patience is easily linked to the Pauline message that we become strong by being tested (II Cor. 12:10, quoted by Valla). **The labor, sweat, and trouble we must bear, though bad in themselves, “are called good because they lead to that victory,” Valla writes**, echoing St. Paul (*Repastinatio*, 88–89; 415). **We do not, then, strive to attain virtue for its own sake, since it is full of toil and hardship, but rather because it leads us to our goal**. This is one of Valla's major claims against the Stoics and the Peripatetics, who—at least in Valla's interpretation— regarded virtue as the end of life, that is, the goal which is sought for its own sake. Because virtuous behavior is difficult, requiring us to put up with harsh and bitter afflictions, no one naturally and voluntarily seeks virtue as an end in itself. What we seek is pleasure or delectation, both in this life and—far more importantly —in the life to come.

**By equating pleasure with love, Valla can argue that it is love or pleasure that is our ultimate end.** This entails the striking notion that God is not loved for his own sake, but for the sake of love: “For nothing is loved for its own sake or for the sake of something else as another end, but the love itself is the end” (*Repastinatio*, 417). This is a daring move. Traditionally, God was said to be loved for His own sake, not for His usefulness in gaining something else. Many thinkers agreed with Augustine that concupiscent love was to be distinguished from friendship, and, with respect to heavenly beatitude, use from fruition. **We can love something as a means to an end (use), and we can love something for its own sake (fruition). But because Valla has maintained that pleasure is our highest good, God can only be loved as a means to that end.**

… **Valla states… that there are two pleasures: an earthly one, which is the mother of vice, and a heavenly one, which is the mother of virtue; that we should abstain from the former if we want to enjoy the latter; and that the natural, pre-Christian life is “empty and worthy of punishment” if not put in the wider perspective of human destiny. In other words, we are commanded to live the arduous and difficult life of Christian *honestas*, ruled by restraint, self-denial, and propriety (temperance), and, at the same time, to live a hedonist life, which consists of the joyful, free, and natural gratification of the senses…**

- Write a Short Answer Response that includes two (2) brief quotes to support your answer to the Q below:

What ideas presented by Valla do you find most intriguing? Why?