From Alberti’s Virtù to the Virtuoso Michelangelo, goodness and badness in drawing in the early modern period

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Summary:
This paper discusses the transit of Virtue from the Moral or Ethical domain to the Aesthetical domain. This happened from the 1400’s to the 1600’s. The paper elaborates about one of the origins of qualifying drawings as Bad or Good. It is suggested that clarity, control were characteristics of goodness in a particular period and fastness and luck were characteristics of Goodness in subsequent. The paper argues that Moral qualifications of Drawings are linked with the epochs Ethics.

“the true virtus, once gone,
do not come back to inferior men”
Horatio

Introduction: From the Stoa to the Duomo

Goodness and Badness have their natural place within Ethics. Being more specific, they can be considered as normally associated with Moral. Moral deals with the goodness or illness of our actions whereas Ethics deals with the justification for human actions. Nonetheless, Ethical is the first synonym for Moral that appears in my MSWord dictionary.

Somehow, somewhere and sometime we started to use Moral concepts to qualify drawings. This is a Bad drawing and this is a Good drawing. Nobody
goes to Heaven just for doing good drawings; nobody goes to Hell just for
doing bad drawings. At least that wasn’t something that I have heard in
confession. But there was a time in which the Protestant sphere of the world
was very keen in burning people for ‘witchcraft’ and the Catholic sphere also
happy to do it to ‘heretics’. Goodness and Badness were matters of life and
dead and science or knowledge were produced in very frail borders between
the two qualities.

The purpose of this paper is not to determine when we started to qualify
drawings as good or bad, or, for that matter, to save souls, but to underline a
period in which drawing had a crucial role in moving a concept from Ethics to
Aesthetics. This concept was Virtue, the Roman Virtus.

In order to pursue this excursion we must remember that in the beginning
of the Renaissance a new word, Disegno, started to be used referring to
several forms of graphic objects, from high technical drawings to sketches.

We can trace Disegno back to Cennino Cennini’s (c. 1370-1440) Libro del’
Arte (c.1400) when it meant clearly “drawing”, (Cennino, 1982) exhorted the
apprentices to practice il disegno di penna with cross etching as observation
drawing that would make them become expert practitioners and full of disegni
inside their heads: ‘Sai che te avverrà praticando il disegno di penna? Che ti
farà sperto, pratico e capace di molto disegno entro la testa tua’ (CENNINO,
p. 10). On the following century, what Cennino had suggested that disegno
was (something both graphic and intellectual) will be clearly established after
the discussions of the primacy of the Arts and the institution of the Accademia
del Disegno in Florence in the mid 16th century, all as part of the vast self-
called modern recovery of the Ancient Classical knowledge.

On the core of this recovery was the concept of Virtue central to the work of
one the most important thinkers of the Renaissance, Leon Battista Alberti
(1404-1472). Alberti’s first incursion in art theory was the treatise De Pictura
(ALBERTI.a) later translated to Florentine and dedicated to Filippo
Brunelleschi by the author himself.

In the early years of the 1440’s Alberti wrote a Dialogue about Virtue: Della
Tranquilità dell’Animo (SMITH, 1992), a dialogue between three Florentine
characters that uses the Duomo’s dome as a metaphor for Virtue: something
that protected humankind from the hazards of Fortuna. To this dialogue we must associate an earlier one written ten years before by Poggio: *De Varietate Fortuna* (GIBBON, p. 485-486). In the piece two friends contemplate the ruins of the Roman Forum from the top of the Capitol Hill. Beholding the destruction and the roofless ruined interiors where vegetable gardens were then planted and the bushes and frantic vegetation on the soil once covered by golden domes, the two friends certified the power of the Wheel of Fortune that now was returning the ancient artificial luxury to Nature, to a large extent, primordial to Rome.

No surprise than that Alberti would use a shiny new building, finally emulating the ancient works, to symbolize Virtue. The new cathedral was identified as a stable structure, durable and harmonious, able to keep humankind safe from the insatiable turns of the Wheel of Fortune. Although as a metaphor, the technical knowledge applied on building such structure is instilled in the meaning of Virtue. The subsequent Alberti’s theoretical works on painting, architecture and sculpture stressed that aspect.

Virtue was an heir of the Greek *Aretê*, a mix of knowledge, wisdom and calm that was pursued by the Stoics in order to achieve the *Apatia*, a state of perfection and excellence attainable by humans through disciplinary rigour. *Apatia*, by no means meant lack of action as in ‘apathy’ but a sort of indifference resulting from excellence. *Virtus* was clearly an active concept, a sort of guiding star for human actions. The emperor Marcus Aurelius was the extreme expression of active virtue. He, Cicero, Seneca, and Horatio expressed the concern with the constant decline of such particular characteristic of Romans.

We can see what Virtue meant, more than a thousand years after, in the novel *Momo, o del Principe* (ALBERTI, b) written in Latin, where Alberti uses the goddess Virtue that comes to Earth by invitation of the humans in order to diminish the damage that Momo, god of distrust, irony and deceitfulness is doing by proclaiming the lousy rule of Jove. Virtue has two sons Trophy and Triumph, and two daughters Praise and Posterity (ALBERTI, b, p.78). Praise would give birth to Fame, a monster with many eyes, mouths and tongues, resulting from a rape perpetrated by Momo (ALBERTI, b, p. 84). In the story,
as a result of Momo’s mischief and wrong deeds, at the end of the first book, Virtue and her sons and daughters abandon Earth. We meet also the goddess enemy of Virtue, Fortuna (ALBERTI, b, p. 85). Although the quality of virtue must win over vice, Fortuna i.e. the hazard, the incident, is the true enemy of Virtue. Virtue is therefore, essentially, control. No doubt that Fame, vice and Fortuna are considered to be Bad or, at least, wrong whilst Virtue is supposed to be good or right. Goodness has, in Alberti, a sense of correctness, of knowledgeable composed attitude.

The great novelty of De Pictura is the explanation of how Perspective works according a Euclidean framework. In this geometrical world, points, lines, surfaces and volumes are apparent both graphic as intellectually in a crystalline organisation. The certitude of the device is enhanced by its purity, evident in so many paintings subsequently made by using the *construzione legittima*.

For Alberti, Painting was composed by “*circonscrizione, composizione, e ricevere di lumi*” (ALBERTI.a,13) (circumscription, composition and colouring/shading). *Circonscrizione* was “*non’altro che lo disegnamento dell’orlo*” (ALBERTI, a, p.13) (nothing but the drawing of the limits, the outlines). He insists that these outlines should be drawn in the thinnest lines and stresses a good painting depends always on a good drawing: “*Niuna composizione e niuno ricevere di lumi si può lodare ove non sia buona ciconscrizione, cioè un buono disegno per sé essere gratissimo*” (ALBERTI,a,13)¹ (No composition nor colouring may be praised where there is not a good circumscription, that is, a good drawing by it self graceful). The subsequent Italian Painting seem to follow this advice, goodness of drawing lies in subtleness and especially on geometric Euclidean correction. Whilst in Cennino goodness is most of the time related with good materials (CENNINO, p.7-21) and with the ‘*buona pratica*’ of drawing from nature, Alberti’s drawing goodness lies on the goodness of concepts originated in what are the applicable mathematics (Perspective and Euclidean or Pythagorean Geometries). Alberti’s works both written and built manifest the concern with human values as if proposing a new world incorruptible. The incorruptibly of
the human generated world must have mathematical consistency and a consequent formal clarity.

Piero della Francesca’s (1410(?)-1492) paintings are epitome of such transparent goodness.

Stressing this Virtuous Goodness, there is a new architecture reviving the clarity of the Roman and Etruscan buildings still visible. The ideal cities attributed to Piero’s circle show this linear *disegno* claming the statute of *Apatia*. Cities so perfect that they are almost uninhabited… Alberti chooses the architect as the paradigm of the new Human and naturally architecture as the Virtuous drawing, a sort of petrified geometry. For him, architecture was constituted of *lineamenta* and *materia*.

According to Rykvert (1988) the lineamenta were:

“In his prologue, Alberti argues that architecture comprises two parts, the *lineamenta* - deriving from the mind - and the *materia* - deriving from nature - mediated by the skilled craftsman: he makes *lineamenta* the subject of hid first book. As Lang has pointed out (Lang, «De lineamentis»), the word lineamenta has been translated variously as *disegni* (Bartoli), meaning drawings and designs; Risse (Theuer); «form» (Panofsky, Idea; and Krautheimer as «definitions», «plan», and «schematic outlines» (krautheimer, «Alberti and Vitruvius» and «Alberti’s Templum Etruscum»; Krautheimer and Krautheimer-Hess, Lorenzo Ghiberti, p.230). Lang defines lineamenta as «measured ground-plan» (p.333), but this reading is not consistently applicable and is too close to our preferred translation of finitio as «outline», meaning «measured outline» (see Concinnitas). We have translated it therefore as «lineaments» for the most part, which encompasses «lines», «linear caracteristics», and so, by implication, design.” (Rykwert, et al. p. 422-423)

To this discussion we might add what Alberti, himself, translated from Latin to Italian in his treatise on Painting. In the Latin version he wrote in section 46:

1 Ibid.
’Pictos ego vultus, et doctis et indoctis consiententibus, laudabo eos qui veluti exsculpti extare a tabulis videantur, eosque contra vituperabo quibus nihil artis nisi fortassis in lineamentis elueat’. (ALBERTI.a, p. 43) Whereas the same sentence in Italian he has written as: ‘Io, coi dotti e non dotti, loderò quelli visi quai come scolpiti parramo uscire fuori della tavola, e biasimerò quelli visi in quai vega arte niuna altra che solo o forse nel disegno’. (ALBERTI, a, p. 19)

(I, with the knowledgeable and the non knowledgeable, will praise those faces that, as they were sculpted, seem to came out of the ‘tavola’, and will criticize those faces in which we can not see any other art than only maybe in the drawing/design).

Alberti struggles with the fact that Disegno is not a Latin word but an Italian word. It is also clear that disegno had become the general designation for different graphic forms in the early days of Renaissance. In the following sentence he writes: ‘Vorrei un buon disegno ad una buona composizione bene essere colorato’ (ALBERTI, a p. 19) translating ‘Bene conscriptam, optime coloratam compositionem esse velim’ (Alberti, a, p. 43). Translating also conscription as disegno. It is reasonable to think that lineamentis could mean both composition and conscription, both made visible through lines.

The genealogy of Alberti’s goodness in drawing, casts its shadow of clarity until our days. We almost have a kinaesthetic reaction beholding a clear descriptive crystalline drawing. We also praise drawings that “are in control” as good. The vibrant but yet quiet spaces and characters in Piero’s, Andrea Mantegna and Boticelli painting, among others, formatted our judgment. Even if we, sometimes, appreciate in a drawing the look of having that clear goodness and judge it to be poor we normally acknowledge the goodness in the intentions of the author.

In conclusion this genealogy of goodness coming from the Albertian Virtue sees badness in Fortunate events. All must be precisely measured and intellectually controlled. Less than a century after De Pictura another genealogy for goodness will emerge from the genius of Michelangelo.

From the Duomo to the Virtuoso
‘When was finishing the funerary monument of Giulio, Michelangelo instructed a stone mason to conclude a portion that later in S. Pietro in Vincoli was placed, saying: «Sculpt this today, flatten here, clean over there» in a way that the stonemason without knowing it, made a figure. When finished and the stonemason gazed at it in wonder, Michelangelo told him: «What do think of it?». «According to me, it looks ok – answers him – and I’m much obliged to you». «And why? – asks Michelangelo. «Because I found by your intervention a virtue that I do not knew to possess.’ (VASARI, p.913)

This anecdote, told by Vasari demonstrates that in the mid sixteen century, Virtue was already a synonym of technical ability.

This is probably the place in this text to stress that virtuoso is different from virtuous in English. The first evolved from the kind of Virtue that we have been talking about and is fully integrated in English language as meaning someone with outstanding artistic technical abilities, like the footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, for instance. Yet, as in Portuguese, “virtuoso” carries also a slight weight of buffoonery and pointless technical abilities, like the first years of Cristiano Ronaldo in Manchester.

Returning to the sixteenth century and to Michelangelo, according to Anthony Blunt:

‘Certain opinions of Michelangelo´s which are recorded by his immediate followers show that he had almost consciously broken with the ideals of the earlier Humanists. He was opposed, for instance, to the mathematical methods which formed an important part of Alberti´s or Leonardo´s theory. Lomazzo records a saying of his that “all the reasonings of geometry and arithmetic, and all the proofs of perspective were of no use to a man without the eye”, and Vasari attributes to him the saying that ” it was necessary to have the compasses in the eyes and not in the hand, because the hands works and the eyes judge”. (BLUNT, pp.74-75)
This last statement determines that a mysterious and surprising aspect of Virtue overcome the mechanical and rigorous aspects. We could confirm that in the whole corpus of Michelangelo’s Drawings only one had a *construzione legittima* scheme (HIRST, and DE TOLNAY).

One of the most surprising Michelangelo’s contributions for the evolution of the artistic form was the glorification of *non-finito*, the ‘not-finished’. In his sculpture or in certain architectural endeavours like the Medici Chapel in S. Lorenzo, Florence, made the sketch as *disegno* one of the signs of the *Maniera* period. As Wazbinski (1984) pointed out:

> ‘All’emancipazione del ‘non finito’ contribuì efficacemente anche la teoria dell’arte che favoriva l’aspetto intellettuale della creazione, cioè poneva l’idea, la concezione e il concetto al di sopra della realizzazione artistica. Un chiaro riflesso di questa situazione in terra Toscana fu il concetto di ‘disegno’. Contava soprattutto l’idea oppure le più semplice espressione fissata nel disegno’. (Wazbinsky, 105)

(At the emancipation of the ‘*non-finito*’ contributed the theory of Art that favoured the intellectual aspects of creation, there is, that placed the idea, the conception and the concept above the artistic concretisation. A clear reflex of this situation in Tuscany was the concept of ‘*disegno*’. The idea or the simplest expression fixed in the *disegno* was greatly valued.)

Michelangelo was undisputedly the most celebrated and influential artist in Italy at the time of his dead in 1564. The year before, 1563, was rich in events regarding our story: In Florence, Cosimo the first, grand duke of Tuscany approved the statutes of the Accademia del Disegno in a process of encapsulating the artist as part of his political strategy, as described by Karen-Edis Barzman (2000, pp. 23-59). The other fact was the publication of the Council of Trento Transcripts. The Council was gathered to face the growing power of the Reform. Like in other times the Roman Catholic Church mended her walls and reacted with fierce essentially. Regarding the arts, the questions of decorum were right on top of the priorities. A few years before, in 1559,
some of the cardinals considered the nudity of Michelangelo’s Last Judgment to be obscene and asked for its destruction. Only after Michelangelo’s death Danielle Volterra was ordered to cover the genitalia of the figures and dress heavily the Mother of God. Volterra gained the nick-name of “Braghettone” that could be translated as “Underpanter” but the discussion about propriety was on the air.

In this context, Giovan Andrea Giglio da Fabriano (1564, cited by Hauser, p.64) in the Due Dialoghe degli Errori de’ Pittori (Two dialogues on the errors of painters) complains that painters don’t’ care anymore about the content of their paintings but only care about showing their Virtuosity.

Virtue had changed dramatically. To Vasari the segno of his contemporary art, later called Mannerism would be prestezza, furia, firmezza and terribilità (Griseri, 1980) (swiftness, ferocity, firmness and terribleness). Nothing could be more different from the Albertian Virtue. All this is evident in Michelangelo’s tormented disegni. But others like Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino pursued a Virtue in which velocity and expression played an important role.

A new form of drawing was now important: The schizzi (sketches). Vasari (1550) defined them in the Proemio of the Vite:

‘Gli schizzi chiamamo noi una prima sorta di disegni, che si fanno per trovare il modo delle attitudini et il primo componimento del’ opera. E sono fatti in forma di una macchia, accennati solamente da noi in una sola bozza del tutto. E perché questi dal furor dello artifice sono in poco tempo espressi, universalmente son detti schizzi perché vengono, schizzando o con la penna o con altro disegnatoio o carbone, in maniera che questi non servono se non per tentare l’animo di quel che gli sovviene.’ (VASARI, 1550), (Schizzi we call a first sort of drawings that are made for finding the way of the attitudes and the first composition of the work. And are made in the way of a stain, suggested only by us in one draft of the whole. And since these, from the fury of the artist are in a short while expressed, universally are called schizzi because they came dabbling [schizzando] or with the pen or any other drawing instrument or
carbon, in a manner that these are useful only for trying to achieve the essence of what it will be.)

The evidence and the value of schizzi was something totally new. Virtue was in velocity and fury! In fact, Fortuna seemed to play an important role on producing these drawings. Chasing the incidental, the uncontrolled by velocity pushed Virtue to the dangerous borders of Fortuna. The good drawing could be the one that had “touched the enemy” and still could be admired as virtuous by really expressing the essence of something to come. In this sense we understand why Vasari collected drawings and organized the Libro de’ Disegni (COLLOBI, 1974), because he wanted to stress the value of drawing not as a final object but as an intermediary between idea and concretisation. Only reflexively it could be found the goodness of a drawing relating it with an existing or putative work.

Two traditions derived from here: On one side for the artists, a new tradition of goodness in drawing was starting still evident until our days, in which the traces of velocity and first impressions are regarded to be good. On the other hand, fully embedded in Aesthetical appreciation, Virtue as a quality of the Virtuoso started not to be praised because of the Trentine atmosphere of decorum.

Since Vasari was one of the founders of the Accademia del Disegno of Florence we might suspect that his vision about drawing could be the basis of the first academic learning and teaching of Disegno.

In the late days of the sixteenth century, Federico Zuccari, reformer of the academy of Rome redefined disegno as the sign of God in us because of Di(o) – God; segno – sign (ZUCCARI, 1607). According to Zuccari, God had an internal disegno and an external disegno understood by Angels that also had an internal disegno deriving from God’s external disegno and also an external disegno understandable by humans that become able to have an internal disegno and an external disegno: drawing. This beautiful attempt to Christianise drawing goodness was also something that enhanced the role of drawing as a mysterious process transmitted by the Angels to Humans and good in essence. Human actions where therefore instilled by god to the Angels
The hordes of artists and aspiring artists that invaded Italy in the following centuries absorbed these meanings of goodness and badness and spread it all around Europe and consequently, a few centuries later all around the world.

**Conclusion**

Maybe we are still dominated by this ethical value of drawings. One cannot deny that goodness and badness are ethical concepts in the same way that beautiful and ugly are aesthetic concepts. Or first conclusive assumption is that the goodness or badness of drawings is connected to drawing as means to an end and not as an end in itself. Drawing as part of a process may be easily designated as good if it performs its role of getting to the end. Also it may be designated as bad if it corresponds to a drawback in the process. This relates drawing to the discipline that is serving at the time. A good architectural drawing is not good in the same way as a child illustration drawing.

However it is more challenging to think goodness and badness as evident in drawing regardless its purpose. That's why it is very important to consider Virtue or any other concept that moved from the Ethical domain to the Aesthetical domain. Stressing also that when we placed the original question we were thinking of ethics aesthetically and vice versa.

Another conclusion is that, considering the drawings, and not the processes, goodness is contingent and influenced by the ethics of the Time. Why? Because the general Moral of the Time is the only framework, outside the specific discipline, that allow us to read the drawing as good or bad. Other than this contingency, one can only admit or assume that, in order to have a timeless notion of goodness and badness of drawing, there was a period in which these concepts were melted. My hypothesis is that the result of such melting is still pertinent.

In my view all was decided in the period when goodness in drawing moved from Virtue to Fortuna, from *schemata* to *schizzi*, from the thoughtful to
the inspirational. Clearly, the two extremes of goodness were extremes of
badness for each other. Nevertheless they ought to soon be integrated and
goodness in clarity becomes co existent with goodness in velocity. So, when is
a good (and by opposition when is a bad drawing)?

1st when we see the drawing as part of a process and it is contributing to
a desired outcome.

2nd when we see the drawing as if it was part of a process and it looks
that it would contribute to a desired outcome.

3th when we see the drawing looking like other drawings stable under the
label of goodness for many years. (Virtuous or Fortunate).

Nevertheless these conditions let us stress again that the period between
the early 1400’s and 1600’s witnessed a great interest in drawing as disegno
but soon, engravings of all sorts created a kind of petrified drawing that would
substitute the action “a la prima”. Whilst Rembrandt was still an
experimentalist regarding the art of multiples, Piranesi controlled the process
with no risk. Little by little drawings become themselves and not something in
the progress towards a work of art.

Goodness, Badness and Drawing is obviously the theme of Peter
Greenaway’s “The Draughtsman Contract”. Control and Power were the new
Ethical epitomes. The drawings are so good that are the instruments of evil
deeds being the author defeated by his elusive power. The drawings as an
end in itself are corrupt and are vehicle of corruption. In the end, the artist is
the victim… Bad drawings, bad.

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