1 Cardano’s Life and Writings

Our knowledge of Cardano’s life and work comes primarily from his own writings. They abound with accounts of his personal experiences and turns of fortune. These serve him as examples for his teachings or as a means of showing that his doctrines are based on his own experiences. Unlike those of many of his contemporaries, Cardano’s personal statements have always proved to be truthful, insofar as they can be checked. His love of truth, in which he took pride, is beyond doubt.¹

With the aid of this autobiographical material, Henry Morley² wrote a vivid and sympathetic account of the life of Cardano. At the age of seventy-five Cardano himself wrote The Book of My Life (De Vita propria liber).³ This is, however, not so much an autobiography as it is a self-portrait; it is a unique document of captivating liveliness. Jakob Burckhardt’s⁴ description of this work is unsurpassed:

Whoever reads this book will be bound to its protagonist until he has finished it. Cardano does confess to having been a perfidious gambler, vengeful, hardened against all remorse, deliberately insulting in speech—but he acknowledges this with neither impudence nor humble contrition nor in an attempt to draw interest on himself. Instead, he is guided by the simple, objective sense of truth of the natural scientist. Most shocking

¹ M. Fierz, Girolamo Cardano
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of all is, of course, that the seventy-six-year-old man who lived through most horrendous events with a deeply undermined confidence in his fellow men, nonetheless considers himself reasonably fortunate: after all, he has a grandson living, he still possesses his vast knowledge, he is enjoying prosperity, high rank and esteem, he has powerful friends, mysterious things are revealed to him, and most fortunate of all—he has his belief in God. As an afterthought he counts his teeth: there are still fifteen.

A wisdom which, in its way, is quite grandiose—although not everyone will benefit from it—fills this book of life. Cardano acquired it at great pains in the course of a difficult life; he was a problematic character and lived at a time of many dangers and great cruelty. Even his contemporaries considered him an odd figure in many respects. But as Henry Morley correctly points out: "His eccentricity consisted perhaps more in the extent of his candour than in peculiarities of conduct and opinion."

Subsequent ages were often unable to understand him. Gabriel Naudé (1600–1653), who published the Vita propria for the first time in 1643, draws in his preface a sketch of Cardano’s character where his traits are unquestionably distorted toward the pathological. On the other hand, he holds Cardano the scholar in high esteem, noting: "Not only was he beyond dispute an outstanding physician, he was also probably the first and only man to distinguish himself in all sciences at once. He is one of nature’s illustrations of what man is capable of achieving. Nothing of significance was unknown to him in philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, history, metaphysics or the social sciences, or in other more remote areas of knowledge. He, too, erred, of course, that is only human; it is marvelous, though, how seldom he erred."