

Sophia and Philosophia

Volume 1
Issue 3 *The Ever-Expanding Issue*

Article 7

10-1-2017

We Scholars

Mark Anderson
Belmont University, mark.anderson@belmont.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/sph>



Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), [Logic and Foundations of Mathematics Commons](#), and the [Metaphysics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anderson, Mark (2017) "We Scholars," *Sophia and Philosophia*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 3 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://repository.belmont.edu/sph/vol1/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Belmont Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Sophia and Philosophia* by an authorized editor of Belmont Digital Repository. For more information, please contact repository@belmont.edu.

We Scholars

Mark Anderson

As a graduate student in my late twenties, I began one winter to experience attacks of migraine fever while conducting research preliminary to the writing of my doctoral thesis. Long hours sitting alone in the basement rooms of university libraries, hunched over a creaking desk, chasing down references to obscure manuscripts, translating ancient languages from small-print editions of old books, copying extended extracts into my notes, formulating and recording my own insights and arguments—all this intellectual labor executed while hidden away from the sun drained me of the vigor I'd acquired as a child on walking tours with my father. I lost weight; I grew sallow and weak; my eyesight deteriorated and the pains in my head, ranging from mild but persistent annoyances to incapacitating afflictions, befell me at least once a month. During the worst periods I suffered every fortnight. Sometimes I could not leave bed for whole days through. Yet despite these nagging aggravations I persevered, and my thesis was very well received. Just six months after I took my degree I assumed the professorial chair that I occupy even to this day.

My first three years in the position were extraordinarily productive, despite the persistence of many physical infirmities. Publication followed publication, and my reputation as a meticulous scholar amplified with each new work. I was invited to lecture at neighboring universities, and students enrolled in my department to study with me and my colleagues. My own work centered on comparative analyses of argument forms in the Platonic dialogues, but in our department we specialized in every branch of ancient philosophy, particularly as practiced by the Greeks. Through our efforts, with the invaluable assistance of colleagues in the department of philology, a steady issue of keen young Hellenists flowed forth to enrich the cultural life of university towns throughout the region. Would that their influence had persisted through the barbaric years of war! But I have said as much as I intend to say for now regarding the state of contemporary culture. Here I mean to discuss my own situation, particularly as pertains to my intellectual-spiritual condition.

During the early years of my professorship, my health improved somewhat. Thoroughly disabling spells of pain were rare. Yet my headaches did not cease altogether, and they often interfered with my work. Moreover—whether as a consequence of my pain, or originating in a still more fundamental source, I could not then say—I was subject to dreary melancholic moods. These facts were evident to my colleagues, who worried for my health, and my closest friend among them regularly

encouraged me to take a cure at a celebrated sanatorium in the mountains of southern Switzerland. Eventually I relented and heeded his advice.

Thus it was that eight years ago this month, on the morning of the summer solstice, I boarded a train bound south for Locarno by way of the St. Gotthard Pass and a transfer at Bellinzona. That night I slept in a rustic old hotel beside the shore of Lake Maggiore, and early the following morning I lumbered up the steep switchback road into the mountains in a post-chaise carriage, an anachronistic mode of transportation which evoked in me the dreamlike impression of travelling back through time into the heart of the previous century.

I quote the following observations of my ride into the mountains from the notebook I kept that summer:

Maggiore is vast, seems endless. To the north, high forested mountains with exposed granite walls slope down to the water. Villages and isolated farms along the shore. Lazy herds of grazing cattle. Bleating sheep. Architecture reminds me of my youth, somehow rather of my father's youth. Mercury-silver water. Wind. Whitecap waves. (Water dark green when calm.) Small fishing boats. ... Oh, I nodded off for a time into semi-consciousness, a hypnogogic state. Heavy head. How long was I out? ... Here apparently a resort town. Yellow and cream colored houses with clay-tile roofs built into the slopes. Hotels. ... Taller snow-capped mountains now, the high Alps looming. Into the massive foothills, the incline gradually increasing. ... The road now twisting up alongside a ravine through which flows a broad stream, or rather a moderate cascade, translucent green water, sun bleached rocks, white water splashing, at intervals infused with narrow run-off falls from the surrounding peaks. ... My head bobs with the rocking carriage. Meditative state, a sort of waking dream. ... Here a small plateau, a quiet hamlet, the central descending falls dammed up to form a lake. Distinctive alpine flowers now and architecture too (wood-framed windows, elegant designs carved into the plaster quoins). Beyond this the incline steepens and the turns sharpen. Colder now. Pressure in the head. My ears explode. High peaks in the distance before us appear quite near. Goats. Hollow bells. Approaching our destination now, steeper still, hairpin turns. ... At last! Level ground and open skies. The Val di Sogno! Spreading meadows carpeted with shining yellow flowers. High mountain peaks massed along either side of the valley, running north. Lakes between reflecting the scene.

Upon entering the little village at the near end of the valley, five-thousand feet above the sea, I rented a room in a small hotel nearby the sanatorium grounds. I was reluctant to reside in the establishment's available rooms, for as I was unfamiliar with the regimen and routine of such a place, and therefore somewhat wary of it, I had no desire to commit myself entirely to its discipline. I secured reservations for the afternoon sessions of gymnastic training and hot-spring bath immersions, these activities followed by a modest meal of greens prescribed by the staff nutritionist. I intended to

participate more fully if I experienced notable improvements. In the meantime, however, I reserved my mornings and evenings for time alone in study and relaxation.

I had arranged to arrive a few days prior to the beginning of my sessions at the sanatorium, my intention being to take the time to explore my new surroundings at my leisure. Therefore after signing for my room and resting an hour with a cold compress on my eyes, I unpacked my luggage and stepped outside for a walk. The experience was stimulating, simultaneously calming and invigorating. The expansive meadows blooming in a profusion of color; lakes lapping serene on tufted shores; towering chains of mountains forested green, granite scored, and peaked with snow; the sky a rounded canopy of an infinitely translucent blue—an hour's perambulation in the thin delicious air was as a passage through a master's living portrait of nature sublime. That afternoon I did not doubt that the sun really is an offspring of the Good.

I returned to my room in the early evening psychologically refreshed but weary, also with a throbbing behind my eyes. The activities of the day, as delightful as they had been, drained me. Therefore after consuming a thick slice of bread with wine, I sat some time in the dark to rest my eyes, then went to bed. Thankfully I had no trouble falling to sleep, and for ten straight hours I floated in a dreamless state of unconsciousness. I awoke the next morning slowly, but feeling thoroughly revitalized. I was excited by the prospect of a day unburdened by the nuisances of travel and with long stretches of free time to occupy according to the velleities of my mood.

My first thought on rising from bed was of the research in which I was then engaged. Therefore, since I had carried my papers and several volumes of relevant scholarship with me in my luggage, I sat down to study before giving thought to breakfast. After less than an hour of close reading, however, an acute pressure behind the skin butted against the backside of my forehead, causing my vision to waver and blur. The experience was not unfamiliar. Immediately I laid the book aside and closed my eyes, and I sat very still in this posture for several minutes, breathing with intention. This therapeutic was generally efficacious if initiated promptly on the first surge of discomfort, as on this occasion I had managed to do. Hence the pain subsided, at which point I dressed and went downstairs to eat.

After breakfast, in accord with the maxim that he who takes one hundred steps after a meal will live ninety-nine years, I left the hotel for a walk outside. I intended to explore the grounds of the sanatorium, which were vast and handsomely manicured, but on the way I was distracted from my goal, captivated by a man proceeding in the opposite direction. He nodded politely as he passed, a mischievous gleam in his eye, and he rolled lightly in his stride with a gay sort of musicality. Yet there also moved about the man a regal spirit of seriousness, as if his brightness emanated from a core of molten steel. Most striking of all was the book he carried under his arm, for although my view was obstructed, I was sure the spine was impressed with the words, "PLATONIS DIALOGI." The Dialogues of Plato.

I turned around to watch the man as he walked away, intermittently eyeing his book and scrutinizing his singular comportment. His head sat ponderously on his shoulders, its weight accentuated by his manner of hanging it over his chest as he walked. Yet his feet moved almost like a dancer's, his step expressive of cheerfulness. I watched him until he disappeared behind an outcrop of fir trees on the far side of which the path wound through a meadow toward a nearby lake. Twice he stopped to study his book, and on each occasion, after closing the volume and tucking it under his arm, he withdrew a little notebook from his jacket pocket, stood for a moment in concentrated thought, then jotted down his musings and moved on. Eventually, as I say, I lost all sight of him behind the copse of fir.

Later that evening back in my room I thought much of the man. The spirit of his surprising demeanor enchanted me—the harmonization of apparent opposites, the reconciliation of shadow and light, resembling less a twilit dusk than breaking dawn. In brief, the partnered notes of depth and joy. Of course all this might well have been a fantasy of my own projection. I knew nothing of the man after all, had seen him only once and for only a few minutes at that. But there was also the intrigue of the book. Reckoning all the relevant facts, I could not dismiss the thought that here was a mystery I must pursue, and that moreover in its resolution lay something like my own salvation.

The following morning, after another attempt to study foiled by pain, I left the hotel and encountered the man once again. Again we were headed in opposite directions, I toward the sanatorium grounds, he toward the lake. And again he greeted me with an air commingled of gravity and joviality, then passed on, stopping from time to time to read his book and take his notes. On this day, however, when he paused on the path just prior to passing behind the outcrop of trees near the lake, as he removed his notebook from his pocket another item slipped out and fell to the ground. Apparently the accident escaped his notice, for he soon walked on without retrieving his property. Overcome by curiosity, and taking the event for an opportunity to introduce myself, I hurried down the path toward the abandoned article on the ground—a folded piece of paper, quite obviously covered front and back with penciled printing. Resisting the urge to read it, I slipped the paper into my own pocket and continued along the path in pursuit of the man.

He was now not too far ahead of me, for he had stopped to sit on a bench in the meadow beside the path. He was neither reading nor writing but staring straight ahead, contemplating—or so it seemed to me—the sublime scenery before him, the multicolored streaming bands of wildflowers, the mountains rising in magnificent piles of green, grey, and white, their frozen summits shimmering against a bright blue sky, and all this beauty enjoying too a mirror-existence reflected in the crystalline waters of the lake. I did not want to startle the man, so I approached to the side of his bench and waited for him to notice me. When he did, I smiled and said, “Excuse me, sir. I don’t

mean to disturb you, but I believe you dropped this back there on the path,” and as with one hand I gestured toward the trees, with the other I removed the folded paper from my pocket and held it out to him.

“Ah, oh, yes, I believe you may be right,” he said, reaching out to take the paper from my hand. And after inspecting it he stood up and shook my hand, a broad smile expanding beneath his thick moustache. “Yes, yes!” he beamed. “Quite right you are! And my thanks to you for it, sir. *Grazie! Grazie infinite!* You have done me a most thoughtful kindness, most thoughtful indeed, so hard-won are the thoughts I’ve recorded here, so vital to my well-being, past and future alike. And for the present, too, naturally.”

My first impression of the man was of one possessed of an amiable spirit, generous with an evident store of goodwill. Yet his manner was charged with an undercurrent of severity, as if he deliberately held some part of his soul in check. The result of this tension was electric, magnetic even, and I confirmed then my earlier suspicion that this was a man I very much wanted to know.

As we stood exchanging introductions, I stole a glance over his shoulder at the book on the bench behind him. PLATONIS DIALOGI: Vol. I. So I was right! But then who was this man before me? Who was this stranger reading Plato in the Greek while ambling among the wildflowers? I knew, or knew of, most all the scholars of ancient philosophy worth knowing in Europe. But I had never before seen this man, nor ever encountered his name.

Reasoning that no lover of Plato would scruple to share his passion with a fellow admirer, I inquired of him directly, “How comes it, sir,” I asked, indicating the book on the bench, “how comes it that you are walking through this striking landscape with a volume of Plato under your arm? That is—if you don’t mind my asking—are you by chance a student of the Greeks?”

“Ah, yes, well, but aren’t we all?” he replied, and the gleam I’d noted the previous morning shone once again in his eye. “That is to say, is not every one of us educated Europeans a student of the Greeks, for better or worse?” And speaking thus he retrieved his book and with a gesture suggested that we walk as we conversed. I followed his lead and walked beside him toward the lake.

“But, to be quite serious,” he resumed, “I was once something of a professional student of the Greeks. For every teacher is a student, is he not? Every earnest teacher, to be sure.”

He then proceeded to explain that he had once been employed as a professor at university, but he was vague as to the details. He seemed to have retired, though he was not at all the age for it. From what I could make of his account, I inferred that his discipline must have been either philosophy or philology, and this prompted me to speak of my own work, to which he responded with, “Ah, a practicing *Chiarissimo Professore*, then. I see. But then what are you doing away from your desk? That is to say,

if I may put your question back to you, what are *you* doing under this radiant sky *without* a volume of scholarship under your arm?"

We laughed together at his remark then turned onto the path that wound around the lake. Later, when the way sloped into a forested stretch on a rise above the shoreline, I directed our conversation to the beauty of the meadows and lake below. I was reluctant to continue speaking of my professional life, for that must lead to the subject of my recent malaise, the burden of which I preferred not to impose on a stranger. But we conversed of many things besides, subjects high and low, and we had a grand time together, moving easily between solemnity and humor. After rejoining the path that ran through the meadow toward the village, I thanked him for the company and conversation, then headed back to my hotel. He for his part returned to the bench where we had met, bidding me goodbye until tomorrow, in case we should meet again, which he assured me he hoped we would do.

The rest of the day I remained indoors, and I managed to read and write productively for hours without pain. Later, after dinner, I prepared for my inaugural session at the sanatorium, scheduled for the following afternoon. I laid out a suit of clothes and canvas shoes for exercise, and a pair of linen shorts to wear in the baths. Then I washed my hands and face in the porcelain basin on the washstand and lay down to sleep. The next morning I awoke with the intention of studying before breakfast, but again I was driven to shut my books and close my eyes against a menacing migraine. An hour's rest dispelled the pain, and I fled the hotel to cool my head in the bracing alpine air. I did not however take my usual route toward the sanatorium grounds. I would visit the place later that very day, and, besides, I reckoned my chances of encountering my new acquaintance better by the lake. And I was right. I spied him as soon as I rounded the trees. He was sitting on his bench in the meadow beside the path, the little volume of Plato by his side.

I approached and bid him good morning, and he greeted me warmly, enthusiastically even. He was in good spirits, as I had come to expect of him, and again we walked together around the lake. Initially we spoke of many things, flowing from subject to subject; but in time he inquired about my presence in the valley. "For," he said, "I have spent a few summers here over the years, and I do not recall having seen you before. Am I right?"

I confirmed his observation, explaining that this was indeed my first occasion to visit. "I have come to take the cure," I said.

Although we had only just met, our conversation the previous day had somehow drawn us together. I was entirely at my ease in his company, and I sensed I could disclose to him even my most private thoughts. Therefore I proceeded to relate the facts of my situation, the strains of my professional life, my headaches and melancholia, my specific business at the sanatorium. He in turn listened empathetically, grimacing now and then, even confessed to having suffered kindred

ailments in the past until a friend had helped to heal him. Then, with reference specifically to my own headaches, he said, “Ah, well, all right, then. I suppose we shall have to treat you as a contemporary Charmides. No?”

I laughed at his joke, which really did surprise me, striking me not only as funny but apt. He laughed too and took my arm as we turned on the path that curved around the far shore of the lake.

“Now, I will not say that I have recently been reading about you,” he continued. “This volume I carry does not contain that compact little gem of a work. But if I may play the Socrates for just a moment, I believe that I might have a charm for your disorder. But to be certain of it, I propose we examine your condition more closely. If, that is, you have no objections.”

I assured him I was willing to discuss the matter, which was true, for he had won me over utterly with his reference to Plato’s *Charmides*. But for the benefit of those who are unacquainted with this dialogue, I should explain that early in the *Charmides* Socrates claims to possess a healing charm to alleviate the headaches plaguing the eponymous central character of the work. The charm is no herb or potion, but rather certain “beautiful words,” which is to say, apparently, the very conversation that is the content of the dialogue, the central topic of which is *sôphrosynê*, which we may translate as temperance or self-control. Socrates explains moreover that his charm must be applied directly to the soul, for, he says, an unhealthy body cannot be healed independently of the soul.

With these facts in mind I expected to be subjected to a psychic dissection. And right I was, too, but my friend’s initial line of inquiry addressed my physiology. That is to say, he began by asking when last I’d suffered a headache, and when I mentioned the pain I’d recently experienced while trying to study, he smiled and said, “Ah, well, yes, of course. And there we have it, don’t we? But listen: even the ancient Charmides aspired to be a philosopher and a poet. Are you then content to be merely a scholar?”

The question took me aback. I had no idea what to make of it. Did he mean to attribute my headaches, and perhaps even my melancholia, to my being a scholar? I failed to see the connection, and I said as much in reply.

“Well,” he explained, “the scholar is something of an unnatural kind, is he not? In any case, he certainly is at least a late-comer.”

To this I replied, “I suppose that depends upon one’s conception of lateness. For one might argue that the first great age of scholarship originated among the Alexandrians, which is of course to say among the ancients.”

He not only accepted my point, he expanded on it, remarking that “one could even push the origin further back in time, back at least to Aristotle. You’re right about that. But,” he continued, and here he presented the gravamen of his case. “But what I mean to say, to state the matter frankly, if somewhat crudely, is that the scholar is a parasite. Being small himself, he feeds on the host of former greatness. Or, with the example of

Aristotle now before us, we might say that the scholar is no self-mover. The creative man, the man whose life and work the scholar scrutinizes, placing him under the microscope of his myopia—this man, the poet, the philosopher, the artist, he alone is self-moving. The scholar by nature is inert, and he is set in motion by another, specifically by the active impetus deriving from the authentic originator, the prime mover, the poet or the philosopher. Is this not so?”

Here he turned to look me in the face, and in my expression I’m sure he read a tangled amalgamation of agreement and repulsion, in my eyes a confusion of emotions.

“So this,” he continued, perceiving that I was unprepared to speak, “this is what I mean by ‘unnatural.’ The scholar is less a natural kind than an offshoot, an outgrowth, a derivative type. Moreover, to return to Aristotle, since the nature of a thing—nature as *physis*, you understand—since nature is at bottom an internal principle of motion, which the scholar lacks, as I have said, he must then be unnatural in this sense as well. And of course I’m speaking now of the scholar *qua* scholar, not *qua* animal or human being.”

With this he fell silent, and I reflected on his words while following our twinned reflection moving on the surface of the water. “I take your general point,” I said. “Or anyway I think I do. But still I fail to see its bearing on my condition. I am after all quite satisfied with my scholarship.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are,” he replied. “I don’t doubt it.” He did not mean to question my contentment with my work, “but,” he explained, “my worry is whether your life as lived moves you to exult in your being, in your being here and now. Satisfaction and scholarship are distinct from cheerfulness and life, no? A man might well be satisfied with his work while nonetheless pained by the conditions of his existence, and the virtues of an industrious scholar can produce an inferior man. Or more to the point, the scholar’s virtues might—and it is my contention that they do—inhibit the growth of the philosopher. And here I must ask you directly: is it really your life’s aspiration to gather and collate information about the ancient lovers of wisdom, rather than to embrace the goddess yourself?”

As he put this final question to me we paused on the path, and he spread his arms expansively to encompass the totality of the landscape around us. Nature entire, but not simply as the world, the physical realm of established material being. Rather, nature as an ever-fertile upwelling multifariousness; a ceaseless flux of creative becoming; a manifold moving like water, self-diverse, surprising and forever fresh, forever new and renewed. This anyway is the impression his gesture made on me, my mind primed as it was by his provocative words, my own mutable mood, and the wild surrounding atmosphere.

As moved as I was, however, still I resisted the thrust of his argument; and I protested that in my life as a scholar I expressed the love I’d felt for the Greeks since my youth.

“Do you mean to tell me, then,” he asked in reply, “that as a boy you cherished metrical analyses of Homer’s hexameter and studies of Plato’s use of particles? I must say I find that hard to believe. Were you not rather moved by Homer’s savage beauty, Plato’s creative profundities? And did you not fancy yourself in daydreams an Achilles or a Socrates, or even as a Homer or Plato remanifest? For surely a passion for the ancient poets and philosophers has never inspired a healthy child to imagine himself a scholar.”

Of course he was right, and his words reminded me of my own youthful aspiration to inhabit a thought-world similar to Plato’s. For years I’d longed to plumb the depths of Plato’s character and mind, to excavate the hidden core of his creative intellectuality, and not for the sake of scholarly discovery or documentation, but rather to chart a course to a similar source of ideas and experiences within myself. University training had diverted my passion, however, and even my studies as a schoolboy had concentrated more on the mastery of grammatical minutiae than on cultivating my aesthetic or emotional sensitivities. Certainly I was never encouraged in school to nurture my own philosophical or artistic impulses, much less instructed how to do so.

This, he said, was precisely the point. “And of course this hasn’t changed since you became a professor,” he continued. “In fact, I’m sure your professional work has distanced you even further from every thought of developing your own intellectual and literary inclinations. The natural creative instincts that attract the authentically thoughtful mind to philosophy as a vocation are discouraged, even actively suppressed, through the training required to succeed in philosophy as a profession. And let’s be frank and acknowledge the reality of the situation, which is this: the philosophy professor does not profess philosophy—instead he is a drone for pedantry, a book-man, a desk-man, a stunted and sallow lecturer. At best—or is this worse?—the academic philosopher translates the insights of his greatest predecessors into conceptually precise terms, rearranging the revised propositions into formal arguments, then analyzing the results as to validity and soundness. And perhaps for a soupçon of creativity he cogitates for himself an implication of, or a counter-example to, the argument, which then he publishes as his own little contribution to the field, or sub-field, as the case may be—but at this point what does it matter, really? The stakes are so very low. Oh,” he concluded with a flourish, “how our Plato must weep!”

We had come full circle around the lake, and as we turned onto the path that ran back through the meadow toward my friend’s favorite bench and my hotel beyond, I remarked that “I suppose old Plato must weep—if our situation really is so dire. And perhaps it is. But before I can agree in good conscience, I shall have to collect my thoughts.”

I admit I was relieved that we’d reached the natural terminus of our walk, for in the moment I had no coherent reply to his remarks. My head was swimming with ideas, but my thoughts were undeveloped, vague impressions, isolated words, and detached,

dangling clauses. Therefore I suggested that we continue our discussion the following morning. I needed time to think, I said, and, besides, it was time I return to my room to prepare for my appointment at the sanatorium.

My activities later at the spa were a refreshing change from my usual routine. The exercise did my body good—I hadn't stretched, strained, and leapt like that in years—and the healing waters of the hot-spring bath worked into my muscles and joints most soothingly indeed. The vegetarian meal was not at all to my taste, but later that evening I supplemented the nutritionist's roots and leaves with beef-stew, bread, and a large glass of red wine in a café not far from my hotel. Later, before turning in to sleep, I worked steadily for two full hours with no trace of pain; the ideas came easily and my writing flowed with clarity and precision. Immediately I lay down to bed, however, my thoughts ran back to the morning's conversation, and although I slept, some small angle of my mind remained awake throughout the night talking, talking, talking. The following morning I rolled out of bed tired, and although I managed to work for a long stretch, in the back of my thoughts the monologue continued ceaselessly. Eventually I set aside my books and papers to engage intentionally in dialogue with myself, hoping thus to clarify my position before speaking again with my challenging new friend.

I asked myself: What exactly had I been up to at my desk, surrounded by my books? Was I living as a philosopher or working as a professor? Or was I merely studying as a scholar? Such questions as these, and the further questions to which they in turn gave rise, formed the theme of my morning's ruminations.

A knock at the door distracted me from my thinking, and I opened to find the morning attendant bearing a note from my friend suggesting that, since a cold drizzle was falling outside, we meet for coffee and conversation at the neighboring café. I arrived on the spot not twenty minutes later, and as I removed my overcoat I was greeted with a cry of, "*Buongiorno, Charmides! Eccomi qua!*" and I saw my friend waving from a table beside a window in the back, the usual aura of mischief and solemnity dancing about his head.

After the waiter had taken our orders I recounted in brief my afternoon at the sanatorium. My friend put several questions to me regarding my experiences there, then eventually he asked whether I'd reflected on our conversation of the previous day. I had indeed, I said, both in the background of my dreams and after waking that morning. "Still," I added, "whether Plato weeps for me I cannot begin to imagine. But in any case I doubt that my boyish naiveté is relevant to the matter at hand. One fantasizes as a child, to be sure. One plays the berserking warrior, hacking through the enemy's ranks with a branch for a sword; one chases the neighbor's pets and collapses in the mock agony of one's death-throes. But these are but juvenile games. Summer larks. Eventually one grows up, one matures. Surely you don't recommend that I abandon my studies to run wild through town as if I were sacking Troy."

Of course I understood that he intended no such thing, but I was warming to my theme. Or perhaps I was only temporizing. In any case, eventually I carried on. “But as for my being a Homer or Plato,” I said, “which I take to be your actual point, what can I say? There’s no business in it. And I don’t mean merely that one can’t secure a salary—I mean to say that there’s no place in our world for this type of man. Ours is a prosaic age, an age of industry and commerce; and these days even the literary intellectual strives to secure his position among the bourgeoisie. Shall I revolt against this system? Shall I withdraw into the bohemian demimonde? What good would it do me? None, I should think. And I rather expect it would do me grave harm.

“Think of it this way,” I continued. “The academic life affords me the opportunity to pursue my passion for philosophy in a socially acceptable manner, I should say in even a respectable manner. It is, if you will, the responsible, adult expression of those youthful frivolities that were once, no doubt, entertaining, but which no serious man can sustain beyond his childhood. In short, then, I mean to say that the scholar’s life is admirable, decent, and sensible. We are after all no longer children.”

“Ah,” my friend interjected, an arch expression brightening his face, “but on that last point you must speak for yourself, I’m afraid. But I shall hymn the virtues of the child some other time. For now I should make it clear that I acknowledge the prudence of life as you describe it. All due respect to prudence, of course, and honor too. Nevertheless, I must at the same time insist on the viability—or, better, the superiority—of a life beyond this. Not a life of children’s games, playing the hoplite with imaginary heroes. Of course not that! But, more to the point, I wonder whether as an academic you really do pursue your passion for philosophy. I suspect that what you call the responsible expression of this pursuit is actually a transformation so complete, so radical, as to amount to the abandonment of your passion.

“Consider the difference,” he continued, “and the distance, between the philological study of a Platonic text and the rational analysis of Plato’s arguments. Moreover—and this is the crucial point—neither of these activities is the sum of a life lived philosophically. Philological study and rational analysis may be elements of the philosophical life—in fact I am sure they are. But taken as ends in themselves—and, as you know, the perverse domain of academic professionalism promotes these things as the highest ends—taken thus they divert one’s attention from philosophy to logic and scholarship. This is why the typical professor eventually abandons the love of wisdom for the calculus of practicality.

“In sum, then, I say that if your passion really is, or ever was, philosophy, it’s likely that you *have* abandoned it. The scholar, the academic, the professor of philosophy is not a sensible philosopher. He is no philosopher at all.”

“No philosopher?” I sighed, and this bare expression of surprise was the extent of my contribution.

“Yes, well, all right then,” my friend carried on. “Permit me to explain. Now the following thought may not apply to other disciplines—the natural sciences, for instance—but as for philosophy, the profession tends to destroy the vocation. The virtues conducive to flourishing in the vocation—unbounded intellectual independence, reckless exploration, visionary leaps tempered by a bold skepticism, creative conceptual and linguistic expression—in short, thinking without limits—these virtues are suppressed by the requirements and routines of the profession.

“Having said this, however, I should stress that I don’t mean to denigrate the value of scholarship altogether. Creativity devoid of expertise is vacuous—as expertise devoid of creativity is merely pedantic. Philosophy springs from the proper intermingling of artistry and knowledge. Substance and style. Matter and form. And above all, *life*, abundant and overflowing. Yes, as I have just suggested, the philosopher must be—or at least it’s best if he once has been—a scholar, but he must become much more than this. He must master the skills of scholarship without the discipline mastering him. But this is no easy undertaking. The effort requires so very much time and concentrated dedication that over the years, and by imperceptible degrees, the average young academic eventually adopts the scholar’s modes of evaluation, including of course the thought that the scholar’s life is in some decisive respect superior to the philosopher’s. Then, my friend—ah, well, then it’s all over with the love of wisdom, and no aspiration higher than the accumulation of knowledge remains.”

At this point he paused and looked at me closely, narrowing his eyes. Then, after a moment of tense silence, he relaxed and continued.

“Listen,” he said, “Plato’s Charmides suffered from his own peculiar problems, much different from yours, no doubt. Whether he sincerely aspired to philosophy and poetry or was only blustering to impress his fellows, I can’t say. But either way, in the end his lust for power and pleasure destroyed him. His headaches may well have been no more than the inevitable consequence of his debauchery. But his fundamental flaw was that he did not know himself, or rather that he didn’t even care to try.”

Here I nodded my agreement.

“And how about you, my friend?” he asked. “I have been thinking of you, daily pondering your condition, on the assumption that philosophy is more to you than a profession, that some part of you, deep down, desires to live philosophy rather than merely to study it. But am I right? Only you can make this determination—if, that is, you really know yourself. Head pains alone could have a purely physiological etiology, but together with bouts of melancholy I suspect a psychosomatic source. But, as I say, I must leave the final diagnosis up to you.”

I knew my friend was right, of course. Right not only about the possible diagnoses, but also in his specific analysis. My problem likely was psychosomatic, certainly at least for the most part. I hadn’t tended responsibly to my physical health over the years; and perhaps I’d been even more neglectful of my psychic well-being. Even so I was not

convinced that at the root of my malady was the fact that my scholarship suppressed my philosophical drive. Therefore as he finished speaking I was thinking less about his concluding remarks regarding my condition than his apparently blithe dismissal of “the accumulation of knowledge.” It was evident that he’d meant to distinguish knowledge from wisdom. But this made no sense to me, and I said so.

“Wait,” I said, “let’s go back a minute. If I heard you correctly, and I believe I did, you implied that wisdom and knowledge are somehow distinct. Was this really your intention? But this can’t be right, can it?”

He made no reply to my question, but only smiled his arch smile, and his eyes again gleamed mischievously.

“No,” I answered for him. “This cannot be right. For does not the way to wisdom run along the road of truth?”

His face now shone more brightly. He leaned forward.

“And does one not proceed along this road by accuracy of interpretation achieved through objective analysis, which is to say, in a word, by way of knowledge? Of course one does! One walks the road to wisdom by seeking and knowing truth. We have understood this since Parmenides, father of logic, master of knowledge!”

Now a look of delighted surprise passed over his face, prompted by my discernment or my folly I could not tell.

“In short, then,” I concluded, in a tone intended to communicate definitiveness, “wisdom is by definition the possession of certain knowledge of objective truth. Surely. I am only paraphrasing Aristotle here, from whose analysis I infer that the sage is preeminently a knower, the wise man one who knows the truth. Of this at least I have no doubt.”

My friend sat back in his chair, and I read from his expression that my appeal to certainty had not moved him. I suppose it didn’t help that as I spoke my head began to ache, and that my pain was apparent from my having to massage my forehead. For his part, my interlocutor was utterly relaxed, only the pulsing of his right temple hinted at the whirring of his mind. Slowly he leaned forward again, laid his palms on the table, and addressed me with his customary tone of genial seriousness.

“Well, friend Charmides,” he said, “that your mind is wholly untainted by doubt is clear from the zeal with which you express yourself. Very good. But whether your expression manifests a passion for philosophy is another question. But I see now that we shall have to pursue these matters at a deeper level, and I shall have to apply my charm to your overestimation of the value of truth.”

Then rising from his seat he smiled and said, “But let us put this off to another day. It will not be easy work; we shall have to prepare ourselves. Besides, since the clouds at last have exhausted their supply of rain, and the sun peeks through their dispersing ranks, we’d do well to give ourselves over to the uncommon joy of a quiet stroll around the lake.”

Anderson

Mark Anderson
Belmont University
Mark.anderson@belmont.edu