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*We Assume Too Often That a Man Wise in One Field
Is Competent in All—Even in Education.*

ASK THE MEN WHO KNOW

By CAMPBELL BONNER

MUCH that is happening about us today and every day brings to mind the worth of a simple maxim that is neither novel nor inspiring at first hearing: Ask the men who know—seek knowledge where true knowledge is

to be found. It applies in countless ways to our daily actions and attitudes of mind. In order that it may not be dismissed as a mere truism, let us consider, before applying it to modern life, some pertinent experiences of a great ancient seeker after wisdom, Socrates of Athens.

Just retired as Professor of Greek and, until recently, Chairman of the Department of Greek, CAMPBELL BONNER delivered the Commencement address to the class which was graduated in February. This article is, in great part, his address to the seniors. Professor Bonner was born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1876, and after his graduation from Vanderbilt University in 1896, he received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1900. He became a member of the University's Greek Department in 1907. A fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, corresponding fellow of the British Academy, and a member of the American Philosophical Society, he is a well-known author on Greek language and culture. In 1927-28, he was professor in the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. He has written a number of books based on the University's collection of papyrus—*A Papyrus Codex of the Shepherd of Hermas* (1933), *The Last Chapters of Enoch in Greek* (1937), and *The Homily on the Passion by Melito, Bishop of Sardis* (1940)—and has contributed to classical journals, as well as articles published from time to time in the QUARTERLY REVIEW, including "Thoughts About Old Books" in the Winter Number.

Socrates' greatest bugbears were loose thinking and loose talking. All round him every day he heard people talking about right and wrong, justice and injustice, good and bad, about courage, temperance, and other high ideas; and his keen mind did not fail to observe that in nine cases out of ten the people who tossed those words about so lightly had only the haziest notion of what the ideas behind the words really meant. A lesser man, or a less cautious one, might have thrown himself at once into the work of correcting such sloppy thinking by positive instruction. But he disclaimed the ability to teach. It is true that an enthusiastic friend of his considered Socrates the wisest of men, and got from the Delphic oracle a probably ironical

confirmation of his opinion, in the form of a declaration that no man was wiser than Socrates. But Socrates himself, in what seems to have been a genuine humility of mind, was sure that he had no true wisdom and said so. However, he turned again with still greater zest to his favorite employment of cross-questioning other people, in the hope of finding somewhere a man who could be called truly wise. Certain incidents of that long search are worth remembering.

First of all he went to the statesmen, with particularly unhappy results. In their own estimation those gentlemen were full of knowledge about all sorts of very important subjects, and they had no deeply rooted objection to sharing their wisdom with all inquirers. But Socrates was strangely unimpressed by this flow of political wisdom, and when he tried by his usual method of questioning to show the politicians that they did not know what they were talking about, he only succeeded in making himself thoroughly detested. Probably half of them called him a wild radical, and the other half were sure that he was a hide-bound conservative; but with one accord they all heaved a sigh of relief when they had shaken him off and seen his bald head and stocky figure vanish round a corner.

He next tried the poets, and with them his experience was somewhat different. They had indeed, he says, composed beautiful works; but Socrates was much taken aback to find that when he asked the meaning of a passage in a poem or a drama, the poet made a very poor hand of explaining it. This seems to be the first recorded instance of a happening that has occurred again and again down to our own time. Many an earnest but incautious inquirer has received from a poet a haughty intimation that words speak for themselves to him who has the wit to understand them; and curiously enough, there are poetic passages from which their authors, when they condescend to do it, develop a meaning that no other human being, whatever his

talents as an interpreter, could possibly elicit from the poet's language. But this divorce of the creative and the critical faculties shocked Socrates much less than another weakness of the poets. He found that on the strength of their poetical accomplishments, they thought themselves endowed with wisdom in other subjects than poetry, which was far from true.

This same fault appeared again and dashed Socrates' hopes in the last stage of his search, when he went to talk to the craftsmen. At that time Athens was a city of many small but thriving industries, and Socrates, like other healthy-minded men, took great pleasure in seeing a good artisan do a good job with his hands. We can picture him looking on with keen interest at a statuary casting the figure of a god or a hero in bronze, at a potter shaping a vessel on his wheel, even at a shoemaker putting the last touches on a pair of hunting-boots for a young sportsman, or on a pair of dainty slippers for a lady's feet. But when the craftsman paused, wiped his hands, and sat down to talk, it was the same story again. Mastery of his craft gave the artisan a confidence in himself which was beautiful when it confined itself to his own work, but which unfortunately extended itself to subjects outside his own province of knowledge. Just as it had happened with the poets, Socrates says that the able craftsmen, on the strength of their specialized skill, were ready to give their opinions about other matters, in which he found, and showed them, that they were mere childish bunglers.

THIS is a true story, but we may treat it as a fable that applies in a striking way to some phases of contemporary life. It needs to be slightly adapted, it is true. Ours is a civilization no longer based upon small handicrafts, but largely upon mass manufacture. Corresponding to the smiths, weavers, potters, and carpenters whom Socrates interviewed, we have steel manufacturers,

makers of cars by the thousand and million, industrial scientists, inventors of new processes in metallurgy and chemical technology, packers of processed foods, and many other captains of industry. Now it would be very unfair to intimate that such men are always so puffed up with their success that they are ready to lay down the law on any and every subject, for many of these prodigies of technical accomplishment are very modest men, well aware that their competency has narrow limits. Unfortunately, the American public does all it can to destroy that modesty, and it is aided and abetted by the press, which in this matter, at least, acts as its bad angel.

We so admire success that we assume that a man who has made a great thing of his business or his job is worth listening to, no matter what he talks about—politics, religion, gardening, the bringing up of children. Anything that a multimillionaire financial wizard says is news. A generation ago in the last war a great manufacturer's views on how to stop the war and bring the boys home were front-page news; not because he had a special fund of information about the European nations and the causes—economic, psychological, social, political—that had set them at each other's throats, but simply because his name was known from Maine to California as the maker of a cheap and popular car. Admiration for a daring airman, a charming actress, a star athlete, leads curious people to ask such men and women questions about everything from philosophy to cooking, and they need a good deal of resolution to steer clear of flattering invitations to make fools of themselves.

Not long ago a talented young musician came to Ann Arbor and was interviewed by a representative of the *Michigan Daily*. One might have expected the interviewer to ask about the training which the young artist had gone through to play her instrument so well, or what she thought about the newer trends in music. But the reporter

seems to have been chiefly interested in learning the musician's opinions about the negro question in the United States. Which leads me to say that it is precisely such difficult, perplexing problems as that, social questions of infinite complexity, that the unqualified are most ready to deal with.

A few weeks ago I happened to overhear a fragment of conversation in our faculty club. A professor and four instructors were discussing ways to civilize the South. They evidently thought it would be a hard job, but at least one of them seemed to have views on the subject and to be willing to impart them. I did not linger to be enlightened. Now like every other part of this country, the South has some grave social and political sins to answer for. Yet despite its sins the South is the home of a civilization which has a certain wisdom in the art of living, and certain amenities of daily intercourse, that might be studied with profit in other parts of our country. Whether that group of five civilizers would be at home in such a civilization is another question. But the point is, that like Socrates' craftsmen, they were men trained for one job and venturing to talk about a very different subject.

Surprisingly enough, men of scientific training, who in our system might correspond to the highest group of Socrates' artisans, are not exempt from the fault that offended the great Athenian. Some years ago a surgeon whose skill was so remarkable that he became known throughout Europe and America, wrote a book called *Man, the Unknown*, which went into more than fifty editions. It probably had a certain interest for anybody who happened to want to know just how this particular doctor's mind worked, but it would not help much to solve the mystery of the nature and destiny of man's soul. Another scientist, the winner of a Nobel prize for research in physics, wrote books on *Science and Life* and *Evolution in Science and Religion*. They have not seriously hurt his

How is it in matters of educational policy and university government—shall we find that in these important subjects the voices that are listened to, and the advice that is taken, come from men who know, or from men who darken counsel by words without knowledge? The phenomenal growth of American universities, and particularly the state universities, has brought with it a great need for workers in matters that have nothing to do directly with instruction. There is need for supervision of the finances of the institution, for care of its buildings and movable properties, for proper keeping of its records, for study of its relations with the public and of ways to serve it. Consequently, there has been a great influx into the university personnel of people who are in a large sense business men, in that they work with money, material property, paper—and how much paper!—not with youthful minds.

This may be inevitable, and it is right just to the extent that such work as these officials do is actually needed, and with the all-important provision that they confine themselves to their proper tasks. But it sometimes happens that posts of the kind mentioned are occupied by men who have made a beginning of teaching and been diverted into business or administrative positions by the lure of promotions and financial rewards that they might not be able to win in a purely academic career. Yet they sometimes carry into their work as directors, secretaries, or heads of bureaus the idea that they too are educators and entitled to speak as such. The nature of their work brings them into frequent contact with the highest officers of administration and with the governing boards. When they choose to raise their voices in educational questions—and they are not always silent—their influence is often exerted to make the university safe for mediocrity; and circumstances may bring it about that they are heard oftener, and more attentively, than the men who are doing the

fundamental work of a university, namely teaching and trying to extend the bounds of knowledge.

With his strong conviction that both speech and action should be based upon knowledge, what would Socrates have thought of that strange paradox of American education, namely, that almost every college and university, whether privately endowed or financed by a state, is governed in the last instance by men who need not be, and usually are not, educators at all? He would probably have been surprised, and would have asked many questions, not condemning hastily; and if we examine the history of our country, we should be equally tolerant.

There was a time when almost every question that concerned a college was decided by its faculty, in those days a group of perhaps a dozen, perhaps a few score, professors, headed by a president who acted as their chairman. They settled the standards of admission, planned the course of study, and laid down rules for the government of the student body. In one respect they rightly distrusted their own judgment, namely, in pecuniary matters. Therefore they gave over the management of the finances of their colleges to groups of men of proved integrity who were accustomed to dealing with money and investments. In this way there developed such boards as that known at Harvard as the Corporation, consisting of the President and Fellows, and those which at many other institutions are called trustees, and at several of the state universities are known as regents. The arrangement was a convenient one and in the main a good one. Its principal drawback was that when the functions of such boards were defined by charter, statute, or otherwise, these trustees were often given a rather vaguely defined right of general supervision over the affairs of the college or university concerned, which might be interpreted as the right to intervene in questions of educational method, policy, and

personnel. Exception can certainly be taken to such arrangements on theoretical grounds; but experience shows that faulty constitutions or organic laws need not cause serious harm if their provisions are wisely interpreted and tactfully applied. It is greatly to the honor of most of these governing boards that they confine their activity to the business affairs of their institutions, while in educational matters they expect to follow and give practical effect to the recommendations of the various faculties.

Nevertheless, a danger remains; how serious, can be judged by the recent unhappy experiences of certain universities in the less stable and less generally enlightened communities of our country, where, on the basis of scant and biased information, trustees have interfered with the choice, tenure, and promotion of professors and deans, and even with fundamental questions of educational policy. Imagine for a moment that the shoe was on the other foot. What sort of welcome would a professor get if he walked into the office of a trustee who happened to be a manufacturer and told him whom to make foreman of a plant, or if he told a medical trustee how to treat a complicated illness, or advised a lawyer on the conduct of his next case before the supreme court?

Fame and ever-growing prestige await those universities whose governing boards clearly recognize and faithfully observe that differentiation of functions which will allow every part of the organism to perform without hindrance the duty for which knowledge and experience fit it; and who see to it that nobody, from trustee to janitor, undertakes to deal with matters beyond his knowledge and competency. That is the only condition on which we can look for good teaching, happy and inspiring because it is both competent and untrammelled, and for further extension of knowledge by undisturbed research. It is also the only way to develop in those cranky as-

semblages, college faculties, a sense of their responsibility to the institution that gives them employment.

SUCH matters as these are not to be reserved for older minds to consider; they are equally relevant to the education of students in college. Every class that is graduated includes men and women who within a few years will be members of some college faculty, and others who after another ten or fifteen years may themselves be trustees of a college or university. In any American community careful thought about the problems of educational statesmanship, no less than political statesmanship, is a part of the duty that rests upon every conscientious citizen.

When one insists upon the need for knowledge as a guide to speech and action, and urges that knowledge should be sought from men who know, and authority given to those who know how to use it, a hearer may suspect a latent error greatly to be deprecated. The burden of these remarks is not to glorify the specialist. Even now we are in some danger of becoming expert-ridden. It will be a sad day indeed when any little tiff between husband and wife becomes a reason for consulting a psychoanalyst; it is an unlucky child whose every ache and pain bring him to the office of a medical allergist; and heaven forbid that every explosion of wilfulness or temper on a youngster's part should prompt his parents to summon an educational psychologist. Certainly there are countless little problems of life and conduct in which one can find more help in plain common sense than in profound learning and specialized skill.

On the other hand, we are living in a confused and complicated age, and if we wish to approach the truth of many a vexed problem we are likely to need a helping hand. At least we can be sure that it is better to learn our history from a historian than from a superficial, partisan journal;

better to form our opinions of foreign policy on the advice of men who know foreign peoples and have studied their ways for years, than let them be warped by the prejudices of public men who are so intensely American that they make a boast of never having left the boundaries of the United States. In brief, then, where special knowledge is necessary, let us try to find it at a pure source. In simple questions of expediency it is part of our education to rely upon ourselves. One who does not

know his own mind may find it worth while to sit down and try to get acquainted with it. The acquaintance might even be interesting and profitable. In matters of deepest import there is no help save conscience which we must take as the voice of God.

For the rest, there is another ancient maxim—"Let us hold fast ever to the upward way," words that were written some twenty-three hundred years ago by a pagan philosopher; but they might have been spoken by the Man of Nazareth in Galilee.

ANATOMY LECTURE

The man of science speaks; the world is dumb.
 We grasp each word to salvage wisdom's crumb.
 What secret has his scalpel blade laid bare?
 What depths are penetrated by his care
 And oil-immersion lens? How much is known?
 "Though intricate morphology is shown
 By our research, no question is resolved.
 The 'what' gives rise to 'how' and 'why' unsolved.
 A rhythm governs life, beyond dispute,
 We measure it, we trace it, we compute
 Its source; our work is long, success is small;
 Perhaps there is a God. That will be all."

Across the room you lift your smile to mine
 And we are wise. We know life is divine.

ELAINE BAUMANN