

KIRSTEN KALKMAN

TO LOVE OR TO BE LOVED?:
A PLATONIC EVALUATION OF ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT(S)

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1. Introduction

Of all the people stung by Socrates' critical questions, none was more dramatically affected than the handsome, intelligent youth Alcibiades. In the dialogues *Alcibiades I* and *Symposium*, Plato describes how Alcibiades' encounter with Socrates instigates a painfully critical reevaluation of the young man's ambitions and disposition. What values should he uphold? Which goals should he pursue? How should he live? Alcibiades is used to evaluate his behavior in terms of the appreciation he receives for his actions. Socrates, however, confronts him with a radically different option: the philosopher does what *he* considers to be desirable, regardless of the public opinion.

Whereas Alcibiades behaves like an *eromenôs* or 'beloved', Socrates is an *erastês* or 'lover'. In this essay, the contrast between these two characters will be used to reflect on the condition of Dutch universities and the protest of their students. The first paragraph opens with a description of the disproportionately high number of expectations students are faced with and goes on to outline two common reactions to these criteria: feverish ambition and detached indifference. Both the 'excellent' and the 'indifferent' student seem to take Alcibiades' *erômenos*-attitude which, I will argue, is

problematic. In the second paragraph, Socrates' disposition is presented as an alternative to Alcibiades' popularity-centered actions. His *erastês*-minded behavior is used to interpret the recent student protests. Finally, 'De *Bildung Academie*', a student initiative I am happy to be part of, is introduced as an example of what *erastês*-based education might look like.

Naturally, the interpretation presented here is only one of the many possible perspectives on the current developments in the academic community. But by connecting the contemporary university with the ancient struggle between Socrates and Alcibiades and with its possible future in *De Bildung Academie*, I hope to place the debate on academic cultivation in a perspective wider than the now evicted rooms of the Maagdenhuis.

2. Academic excellence and being beloved

Fortunately, one needs neither to enter into a monastery nor to be the son of a gentleman to gain academic knowledge in our present-day society. Some measure of intelligence, a great deal of perseverance, and the willingness to take out quite a high loan suffice to acquire an academic degree. Whether one's graduation is considered a *success*, however, is an entirely different matter. Judging from a number of fairly intimidating lists, the ruling principles of the market of success are many and diverse. An 'excellent' paper displays not only in-depth understanding of its topic: it presents an original approach, displays an exemplary execution, and gives evidence of initiative, personal responsibility and intellectual rigor too (University of Brighton 2008). An 'excellent' PhD candidate has much more to show than a relevant degree and a letter of recommendation: his portfolio includes certificates from a prestigious foreign institute and an honors program, several publications in top ranked journals, and a résumé mentioning volunteer work and experience as teacher and researcher (Espanta 2013). Meanwhile, students seeking to succeed outside the walls of the university face as much of a challenge as their academically-inclined peers. They are expected to not only acquire a degree, but to give evidence of leadership and innovative thinking as well – either by starting their own company, by being a professional athlete or by holding impres-

sive positions in student societies (Van der Klis 2014). On top of that, excellent students of all kinds must have both the social skills and the energy to build an extensive network, so as to maximise their high potential. These intelligent, inventive, experienced and strategic students bear the characteristics of the professors and CEOs of tomorrow. These are the high-quality products universities strive to manufacture (Kouwenberg & Dekkers 2013: 3-4).

Thus, the modern-day student is confronted with alarmingly high expectations, to which he can respond in several ways. Some of us do everything we can to live up to the criteria of excellence. The sad truth is that many of us fall short of the norms we attempt to uphold; they are simply too demanding to meet. The almost inevitable lack of success that results from the grand ambitions of the excellence-hungering students may explain the common occurrence of nervousness and burn-outs in young people (Lijst Calimero 2014). A completely different reaction to the intimidating excellence-criteria is to give up trying to be excellent, so as to avoid disappointment. The indifferent student lives from exam to exam to certificate without even trying for a grade higher than a pass, and without even thinking about a job more interesting than dishwashing (sorry to insult you, dishwashers!). The indifferent student does not think highly enough of himself to try for more. At the end of his uneventful academic career, he receives the piece of paper that's required to satisfy his parents and to get him a job and so he, too, sets out to live up to expectations others have of him – though in a much less risky way than the excellent student does.

To the extent in which they take the expectations of others as the ultimate norm for their own choices, both the excellent and the indifferent student ascribe mere instrumental value to their academic development. If it weren't for the certificate that awaits him when he has passed all his exams, the disinterested student would not bother to read his course literature. If he didn't care about the judgment of his potential employer, the excellent student might drop his course on applied statistical methods and quit his position in the Model United Nations altogether. The study-related decisions made by these self-conscious students are not motivated by their studies, but by the admiration, paychecks or status they hope to

receive as a consequence of their activities. They act out of a desire to become beloved by others, and thus take what Plato scholar Rudi te Velde calls an '*eromenôs*-attitude', an attitude incorporated by the character Alcibiades (Te Velde 2006: 40, 175).

For, as it turns out, the burdensome demand to excel that haunts contemporary students is about as old as philosophy itself. Like the excellent student, Alcibiades decides to take on the challenge of success: he ambitiously strives to attain fame and power not only in Athens, but in the whole of Greece – indeed, in the entire world (*Alcibiades I*, 105a-c). He wants others to acknowledge his great beauty and intelligence; his acts are motivated by a feverish desire to be loved. Thus, he does not bother to decide what *he* finds worthy of his attention – Alcibiades' main question is what *others* judge as valuable. He simply does whatever the majority of the people would admire him for; the value of his acts is assessed with regard to the popularity they buy him. Like the student motivated to complete a course for the sake of the ECTS credits he will obtain by doing so, Alcibiades acts admirably for the sake of the applause it will bring him (*Alcibiades I*, 104a-c; *Symposium*, 216b; Te Velde 2006: 79, 170). To the *eromenôs*, academic development is a means to an end set by popular or authoritative opinion.

The *eromenôs*-attitude is problematic for several reasons. For one thing, neither the excellent student nor the indifferent one gains much gratification from their academic efforts. In order to attain perfection in everything he does, the excellent student needs to work around the clock. He thus strains himself to the point of a mental breakdown, but still feels he does not accomplish enough. Meanwhile, the indifferent student dispassionately carries out his 'duties'; he writes papers and sits exams without feeling any enthusiasm for the education he receives. The excellent student is plagued by obsession, while his indifferent peer is haunted by boredom; both of them suffer from unhappiness. Feverish engagement with academic success causes an atmosphere of nervous fixation, whereas cold detachment from the university creates an unconcerned culture of mediocrity; neither attitude serves the academic community well.

Yet unhappiness isn't even the worst consequence of the *eromenôs*-disposition, as Socrates points out to Alcibiades. Since he founds his ac-

tions on criteria set by his audience, Alcibiades has effectually made himself a slave to Athens' crowds; he carries out whatever actions they will give him credit for. By delegating his decisions to others, he degrades himself; he surrenders his authority as if he were an object with no judgment of his own (*Alcibiades I*, 135c-d; Kal 1997/98). Similarly, the excelling or complying student answers to norms others set for him and is thus enslaved by his professors, parents, peers, employers or whoever else has expectations of him. He has become an object to himself, evaluating his own actions in terms of the eyes of his beholders. The beloved *eromenôs* is completely dependent on others to sustain his identity.

Ominously, Alcibiades' *eromenôs*-attitude not only harms his own subjectivity, but also endangers the *polis* in which he operates; he is completely corruptible. He is not concerned with what is right, but with what will be most appreciated by the crowds; he lacks a sustainable moral compass (*Alcibiades I*, 135c-d; Te Velde 2006: 170). Let us, for now, skip the confronting question about the status of the conscience of the *eromenôs*-centered student and close with the conclusion that academics motivated by a desire to become beloved are slaves to other people's judgments.

3. *De Bildung Academie* and love for knowledge

The barefooted philosopher Socrates does not come across as a very likeable person. Owing to his very annoying habit of asking stinging questions, he has been compared to unpalatable creatures such as gadflies and vipers (*Apologie I*, 30e; *Symposium*, 218a). Socrates cannot be called a beloved person. But he is, perhaps more than anyone else, an *erastês*; he is a lover of the absolute goodness, beauty and truth that have become known as 'platonic ideas' (Goldschmidt 1949: 2-4; Te Velde 2006: 40). These ideas can be understood as the intrinsically valuable idealities that constitute the ultimate ends of our desires. They represent absolute perfection and therefore transcend this ever imperfect world – and incite our desire at the same time (Goldschmidt 1949: 16, 21, 32-33; Wedgwood 2009). Absolutely perfect peace – more commonly known as world peace – is an example of an intrinsically valuable ideality that may serve as the ultimate end of the UN's

General Assembly, but is at the same time inherently unattainable; even in the unlikely event of the complete absence of war, the next door neighbors might still be quarreling about the hedgerow. Our efforts are motivated by our love for idealities we can never fully actualize, precisely because they constitute perfection (Kal 1997/98; Wedgwood 2009). Pure beauty is the end of the artist's efforts; absolute truth is the final aim of journalism; unconditional goodness is the goal of anyone seeking to act justly.

Socrates' actions, too, are motivated by his love for ideal possibilities. By ceaselessly asking exasperating questions, he seeks to advance the correspondence between the knowledge people actually hold and the pure truth he is in love with. By carefully assessing what constitutes a just act, he attempts to incorporate a fragment of absolute goodness into the actual world (Kal 1997/98). Socrates tries to turn reality into a mirror of the ideas he so dearly loves for their intrinsic value. Thus, his attitude radically differs from Alcibiades' disposition. Whereas Alcibiades passively awaits acclaim from others, Socrates actively pursues what he himself finds worthy of aspiration. While Alcibiades' actions merely serve as instruments to gain fame and power, Socrates is intrinsically motivated to act. The *erastês* is motivated by a genuine desire to do as he does, not by a desire to be admired for his actions (*Alcibiades I*, 133c-134d; *Symposium* 210e-212c; Te Velde 2006: 79, 83, 150).

Fortunately, a significant part of the academic community is similarly inspired by a love for what they do. There are people studying mathematics because they genuinely want to understand why there is an infinite amount of odd numbers. There are people studying Russian literature because they deem knowledge about Dostoyevski intrinsically valuable. These knowledge-lovers may be excellent students, but if they are, it is because they study around the clock out of a sincere interest in their courses – not out of an instrumentally-motivated desire to excel. They may also be students that only just manage to pass their exams – not because they cannot be bothered to study hard, but because their desire to learn motivates them to participate in courses they find intellectually challenging. If the *erastês* happens to participate in an honors program, he does so because he is interested in the program, not for the honor. He

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studies because he considers academic development *intrinsically valuable*. These knowledge-loving students respond to the excellence-mania with neither frantic ambition nor defeatist indifference; they simply do not define themselves by the love other persons have for them, but by the love they cherish for other things – such as their studies.

The students participating in or supporting the current protests – *not* a ‘small group’ – look at their university from an *erastês* perspective and conclude that ‘top down, efficiency-orientated management damages the very thing a university should revolve around: research and education’ (De Nieuwe Universiteit 2015). Despite the troublesome upshot of the *eromenôs* approach, the university seems to encourage students, teachers and study programs alike to become as ‘beloved’ as possible. Students are both supposed to excel and to finish within nominal time; teachers are asked to both organize attractive courses and to publish groundbreaking research results. Studies, too, are assessed with reference to their instrumental value: what financial profit do they bring? How many students do they attract? What jobs do they result in? The value of academic education is discussed in terms coined by business schemes, political parties, managers and taxpayers. The university strives to please her beholders and refers to instrumental utility to evaluate her purposes; she has become an *eromenôs*. Just as Socrates reprimands Alcibiades in an attempt to turn him into a lover of intrinsic values, so the protesting students are trying to reopen the existing academic reality for a reevaluation of its values. The protesting students emphasize the intrinsic value of academic development and scientific research; that is the benchmark according to which the university should fashion her policies. They try to reshape the *eromenôs*-minded academic reality by confronting it with the ideals the university ought to cherish and pursue, which are worthwhile ideals in their own right.

But no matter how noble their efforts, it may prove very hard to make the university change her attitude. The fact that answering to expectations from others has higher priority to the university than the advancement of academic development is not altogether the fault of its management. It so happens that the university cannot ignore criteria set by politicians or society, because it effectually depends on the money it is granted by these

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external parties. The university truly is, to some extent, enslaved by the judgment of others; the reality in which the protesters seek to incorporate their ideal university is dictated by the laws of the *eromenôs*.

Fortunately, however, there are other ways to actualize academic ideals. A group of devoted students and teachers is trying to *be* the change they want to see in the university. The initiators of ‘*De Bildung Academie*’ do not wait for managers to reevaluate the university’s aims, but are quite well on their way to effectuating an utterly new academic institute that seems to mirror the ideals that charm both Socrates and *erastês*-minded students. The development of *De Bildung Academie* was initiated by political science student Michiel Tolman and professor Eugène Sutorius last November and has greatly advanced since: the organization was joined by five teachers and 31 students, one of which is myself. Of course, *De Bildung Academie* still has a lot to prove; we have only just welcomed our first generation of students and although more than thirty of our teachers have agreed to give their *Bildung* lectures for free in the upcoming term, we will need to find funding if we want to continue and expand our mission. But however things may turn out, I believe the educational ideal of *De Bildung Academie* can play a stimulating and inspiring part in the debate on higher education. *De Bildung Academie* aims to offer her students the opportunity to develop themselves, both as academics and as persons, because such development is *intrinsically valuable* – a thought which is, in fact, framed in Dutch law: Article 1 of the Law on Higher Education states that ‘the university should pay conscious attention to the personal development of the student’ (Wet op Hoger Onderwijs, 1.3.5). Although the *Bildungsideal* our new educational platform relates to is from Humboldtian rather than Platonic descent – the academy’s interpretation of it would, I think, quite please Socrates.

The full time program we hope to offer each term focuses on four core competences. The first is the critical-analytic competence Socrates is so very enthused about. The ability to criticize and doubt what is usually taken for granted is essential to all those who share Socrates’ love for truth. Secondly, *De Bildung Academie* seeks to promote the moral competence of her students. Moral issues regarding our interaction with the people we meet and the planet we live on ask for careful reflection on

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what is right and how we should act. Thus, the student is presented with the opportunity to relate himself to the goodness pivotal to Platonic thought. The third competence we strive to advance in our students is their expressive proficiency. Our students are encouraged to interact with beauty, by implementing their findings in an appealing speech, work of art or project. Finally, *De Bildung Academie* aims to stimulate the development of the student's empathic competence, providing him with a chance to put himself in someone else's shoes so as to understand what motivates people that differ from him. For although individual development is taken as an intrinsic value, such formation is essentially linked to the social reality in which it takes place. According to Plato, too, it is the *polis* that benefits first and foremost from the individual's attempt to mirror the ideals (Graefe 1989: 14, 91; Kal 1997/98). The *erastès* who orientates himself on idealities acts as justly, truthfully and beautifully as he can and thus brings goodness, truth and beauty about in the world. The *Bildung* student can investigate and develop these competences in courses of which both the content and shape are designed by the students who have founded *De Bildung Academie* and which are to remain open for input by the students participating in them. Hence, these courses are centered around themes in which students take a direct interest – themes ranging from art and identity to money and digitalization (*De Bildung Academie* 2015).

So *De Bildung Academie* tries to be a platform that keeps in close touch with the wishes of her students and that founds her educational choices on their intrinsically valuable development. Here, the *erastès*-minded student may practice his love for knowledge and academic formation without being hindered by instrumental norms. Here, the excelling *eromenôs* may come to advance his career prospects and find that his love for knowledge is greater than his love to be loved for his knowledge. Here, too, the indifferent *eromenôs* may come to escape from the responsibilities others ascribe to him and discover he wants to be responsible for his own goals. Our new platform might not have set out to incorporate Platonic ideas, but if Socrates were on the lookout for an Agora in 21st-century Amsterdam, I think he would do well to drop by *De Bildung Academie*.

Let us hope that the established universities will allow themselves to be inspired by the intrinsic values their discontented students uphold. Let us

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hope that, this time, Alcibiades will pay heed to Socrates' plea for intrinsic motivation. Until then, *De Bildung Academie* may provide the idealistic room where students can come together to love knowledge.

Kirsten Kalkman (1990) studies Philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. She currently works on her master thesis, in which she uses Plato's *Symposium* to systematically investigate the relation between philosophy and religion. Besides studying, she is involved in the establishment of *De Bildung Academy*, a bottom-up initiative aiming to offer academic and personal formation to students.

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