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Petrarch and the History of Philosophy

“I turned my inner eyes within, and from that moment there was no one who heard me speak until we arrived back at the foot of the mountain.” This is what Petrarch says he did when, in 1336 in the company of his brother Gherardo, he opened Augustine’s Confessions to a random passage and found this: “And they go to admire the summits of mountains and the vast billows of the sea and the broadest rivers and the expanses of the ocean and the revolutions of the stars and they overlook themselves.” (Fam. IV, 1) Happening upon this passage, Petrarch writes, induced him to feel angry with himself for admiring earthly things when he should have been attending to the state of his soul. Is Petrarch doing philosophy here?

When in the 1740s Johann Jakob Brucker wrote, at the outset of his Historia critica philosophiae, that, up until his day, people had been using the terms “philosophy” and “philosopher” quite broadly, to refer to literary thinkers, religious thinkers, and others, he was right. For Brucker, that broad use of the term “philosophy” was something that needed to be curtailed, to be stopped. “Philosophy,” henceforth, should refer only to the pure exercise of human reason, and become a critical tool. Brucker’s work, so admirably open in its premises, set the modern historiography on a path that wound up excluding large parts of the past from view: post-Plotinian later Platonism, for example and, especially, Italian humanist thought from Petrarch through Poliziano. So in writing and thinking about the history of philosophy the most pressing question is: do we want to write the history of philosophy from the perspective of the actors under study, or from a later perspective? I would argue it is more effective to take the actors’ categories seriously, which means that, to comprehend Petrarch’s place within and conception of the history of philosophy, we need to understand what he considered the

2 “Et eunt homines admirari alta montium et ingentes fluctus maris et latissimos lapsus fluminum et oceani ambitumet giros siderum, et relinquunt se ipsos.” For both text and translation, see ibid.
enterprise of philosophy to be: the love of and search for wisdom, an enterprise that could take different forms and be expressed in many genres.⁴

There are four interlinked ways of thinking about philosophy that are important when considering Petrarch: Philosophy as self-scrutiny; philosophy as creation of a persona; philosophy and exemplarity; and philosophy as dialogue. In what follows I would like to explore these tendencies in Petrarch’s work.

We can return to the Ascent of Mont Ventoux, cited above, a letter in origin. Petrarch was writing for other readers as well. He carefully collected his letters, preserving the things he wanted to preserve, so that he could leave behind the image of himself that he desired to foster. In this letter, what impressions would a reader receive? First, we see a Petrarch intensely concerned about the state of his own conscience and behavior, scrutinizing himself for lapses and shortfalls, and exhorting himself to improve. One also observes a Petrarch very interested in having others know that he feels this way, that the persona he is cultivating is something that, though seemingly solitary, actually needs to be shared to be actualized. I am borrowing this idea of the search for a persona from the work of Condren, Gaukroger, and Hunter’s The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: The Nature of a Contested Identity. In their introduction, they write that their approach attempts to shift the “focus from philosophical problems to the institutional contexts in which they are delimited, and from the subject of consciousness to the persona of the philosopher that is cultivated in such contexts.”⁵

Finally on this front, and perhaps most importantly, there is Petrarch the writer, as he makes a point of telling Dionigi – and us – how and where he decided to write down his experiences. Petrarch’s persona is that of a writer.

Part of cultivating a persona had to do with exemplarity. From this perspective, De viris illustribus comes to the fore. The key concern present in this work is Petrarch’s belief that the study of exemplary lives constituted one of history’s most important functions. Petrarch’s beloved Livy had himself said, in his own historical masterpiece, that “It is this especially in the study of history that is healthy and profitable: that you observe instances of every kind of conduct, a record clearly displayed from which you may select for yourself and your country what to imitate and from which you may avoid that which is shameful through and through” (Livy, Ab urbe condita, Praefatio 10).⁶ This view of Livy’s

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⁶ “Hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te exempli documenta in industri posita monumento intueri; inde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu foedum exitu quod vites.”
was one that Petrarch shared as well: history existed to teach virtue and avoid vice by example; history existed, for individuals at least, to help one craft a persona.

Elsewhere in the preface he says that he would have gladly written about contemporary great men, but could not, since contemporary princes “contribute material not for history but for satire.”

This “historical” sensibility pervaded much if not all of Petrarch’s work. Combined with his strong, proto-Romantic sense of personal identity, it served as a means for Petrarch to produce much interesting and – for its day – admired work. Yet there is one more element that needs to be brought into the picture to understand him the round, an element that, again, became part of the genetics of Italian Renaissance thought: a dialogical sensibility. This dialogical sensibility engendered many types of writing, from actual dialogues, to work written in an open-ended way, to treatises written as letters (after a face-to-face meeting and thus continuing the dialogue, as it were), to, finally, adversarial works. In Petrarch’s Latin prose works, many of these tendencies were on view.

As Ronald G. Witt, one of the leading modern scholars of the Renaissance, put it, Petrarch can be considered a third-generation humanist who took an already existing movement that privileged the study of the ancient world and the writing of classicizing Latin and re-oriented it toward religion. Indeed, if there was one factor that marked Petrarch’s work, it was this profound religious attitude, something that arose in a number of his other works.

One of these was On the Solitary Life. The addressee, Philippe de Cabassoles, was an important local cleric who would later rise to become a cardinal. Petrarch early on became a close friend, and cultivated the relationship throughout his life. Yet in contrast to his On Religious Leisure, with its stark, restricted message of avoiding temptation, On the Solitary Life emerges as a more public work, in which one sees Petrarch weighing the merits of a certain style of life: the solitary life. As far as philosophy and the dialogical sensibility goes, a particular passage comes to mind: “Though I have always diligently sought for the truth, yet I fear the recesses in which it is hidden, or my own preoccupations, or a certain dullness of mind may have sometimes stood in my way, so that often in my search for the thing I may have been bewildered by false lights. Therefore I have treated these matters not in the spirit of one who lays down the law but as a student

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and investigator.” 9 Again, we see a central element of this style of searching for wisdom, “philosophy” in its original meaning: not so much the pronouncement of truths already known but rather the stimulation of further conversation, questioning, and investigation.

When Petrarch offered criticisms of his fellow intellectuals, it was usually because they, in his view, seemed too smugly certain of their expertise. In fact, we possess a remarkable series of invectives that Petrarch penned, dating from the middle and end of his career, all written after he had gained a sizeable reputation. All of them share an underlying theme: the need to cultivate modesty in the face of how much there is to know in the world and the consequent obligation to resist the vanities and temptations to boast that come with professional titles. The message is forceful, and Petrarch uses all of the tricks of the rhetorical trade to get it across. Petrarch’s invectives can make for difficult reading today. One has the sense of an author who, despite his urging toward modesty, had a tremendous ego and was one of those men who always believed people were watching him, always on the lookout to be offended. But they represent an important showcase for Petrarch’s thought.

Take Petrarch’s Invectives against a Physician: The story behind the episode is indicative of the times in which Petrarch lived. He had visited Pope Clement VI, the fourth in the sequence of Popes at Avignon, to whom Petrarch appealed (unsuccessfully) to bring the papacy back to the city of Rome. Pope Clement was suffering from a fever and Petrarch offered him advice, indirectly, to avoid doctors. The Pope, having heard this advice, wanted Petrarch’s direct counsel, which Petrarch sent in the form of a short letter (Fam. V, 19). In the letter Petrarch invoked the ancient idea that doctors were little more than “mechanics,” meaning tradesmen, and that those doctors especially were to be avoided who discoursed at length: “[...] I shall stop now by saying that you ought to avoid the doctor who is powerful not in his advice but in his eloquence, just as you would avoid a personal attacker, a murderer, or a poisoner.” 10 As this letter become known and made the rounds, local doctors, who were just beginning to see themselves as

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a professional class, took offense, and one decided to take up the pen to defend himself and his profession. It is to this letter, by an author whose name has not been preserved, that Petrarch responds in his *Invective*.

Among other things, Petrarch suggests that one category of analysis be subject to re-examination: that of “philosophy” and, consequently, who counts as a “philosopher.” Petrarch quotes the doctor’s letter in his own invective: “Let us hear what you say, and how you present yourself: ‘I am a physician. [...] Consequently I am a philosopher’.”

We can infer that the doctor had claimed that his status as a physician meant that he was automatically a “philosopher.” For Petrarch here, as for many humanists after him, it was precisely the significance of this title that he wanted to call into question. Petrarch says: “Do you hear this, Pythagoras, who first invented this name?”

Petrarch alludes to a story that he would have known through writings of the ancient orator and politician Cicero, who related a tale about the invention of the word philosophy (one that went back to an ancient Greek source Cicero would have known, Heraclides of Pontus).

The story told that Pythagoras had been asked by a king what art Pythagoras thought to be his own, what, in other words, was his own special skill. Pythagoras replied that he had no art but that, instead, he considered himself a “philosopher.” The king, surprised by a word he had not heard before, asked Pythagoras what he meant. Pythagoras said that life was like a great concourse, where many people could be found. Some were athletes, who contended with each other, others came to buy and sell. But the most distinctive people were those who came simply to observe, who did not seek applause, or money, but who were present instead to look into the nature of things since they were “lovers of wisdom.” This story became proverbial in antiquity, late antiquity, and the Middle Ages. For Petrarch and later humanists, going back to the root meaning of the word “philosophy” had a powerful symbolic resonance and was always used in contexts like these, when a thinker, in this case Petrarch, wants to claim the mantle of the authentic pursuer of wisdom.

For Petrarch, in this case, the mistake that the doctor had made was confusing technical expertise for wisdom. This idea had, and still has, a deep background in the history of philosophy, and can be seen in Plato’s early “Socratic”

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12 Ibid.: “Audis ista, Pithagoras, qui nomen hoc primus omnium invenisti?”

dialogues, those works in which Socrates draws out of his interlocutors precisely this sort of admission: that their expertise, or technical proficiency, was that and only that, not real knowledge and certainly not wisdom. Petrarch’s point, pungently put as it is, is that the doctor in question is a mere mechanic and that his behavior – charging money for his expertise – vindicates this view: “Philosophers spurn money, in case you don’t know. You cannot put philosophy up for sale. Who can sell what he does not possess? Even if you did possess philosophy, you could not put it up for sale; rather, philosophy would prohibit you from selling yourself.”

So far so good: true philosophy cannot be bought and sold. But as Petrarch goes on, we see, yet again, the differences between his day and ours: “How can I believe you are a philosopher, when I know you are a mercenary mechanic? I gladly repeat this term, since I know that no other reproach stings you more. I often call you a mechanic, not by chance but by choice; and I call you a second-rate one, to cause you more pain.” Even in the most vehement modern academic disagreements, one does not observe this level of vitriol in published statements. One instance, then, of Petrarch’s resentments, can be found in his Invective against a Physician: in this category we can place all those times – and there were many – when he believed that someone diminished the sort of work he did, suggesting that it was not reflective of solid, authentic intellectual work. Needless to say, Petrarch did not use those terms (“solid”, “authentic”). But that is what is at stake.

Petrarch was willing, for his entire life, to accept the patronage of many different kinds of men in many different political situations – cardinals in the Church, tyrants in northern Italy, and even, for a while, leading citizens in the republic of Venice. Later in the history of Renaissance intellectual life there emerged more concrete political concerns, but Petrarch was, essentially, looking first and foremost to find resources to do what he thought most important: his work.

As to Venice, it was this environment out of which his last major invective grew. It has come down to us with the title On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others, and of his three invectives, it is the most thought provoking and the least sullied by ad hominem language. Moreover, with his attempts in the work to address the proper (as opposed to wrongheaded) shapes of knowledge, his


15 Ibid.: “quomodo ego te philosophum credam cum mercenarium mechanicum sciam? Repeto libenter hoc nomen, quia novi quod nullo magis ureris convitio; non casu, sed sciens sepe te mechanicum voco, et, quo gravius doleas, non primum.”
satire of scholastic learning, and his consequent charges of irreligion (against his detractors), Petrarch set a template that later Renaissance thinkers would follow.

Petrarch’s travels had taken him to Venice by 1362, where he received a rent-free accommodation from the city government, after promising his library to Venice – to the Church of Saint Mark, precisely – in the hopes of creating what he described in a letter to a friend as the beginnings of a *bibliotheca publica*, a “public library.” In his proposal to the city, Petrarch wrote that he hoped his gift would inspire the city to add to the collection of books from public funds from time to time and, what is more, that others would be inspired by his example to donate their own book collections “to the aforesaid Church; and thus it may develop into a great and famous library equaling those of antiquity.”\(^\text{16}\) The city government (which had control over the Church, as state property) wrote back and accepted the “offer made by Master Francesco Petrarca, whose fame today in the whole world is so great that, in the memory of man, there has never been in Christendom any moral philosopher or any poet who can be compared with him.”\(^\text{17}\) So you could say that Petrarch and Venice got off to a good start.

Petrarch enjoyed his life in Venice, living as he did in his rent-free house and earning income from yet another ecclesiastical benefice he had been awarded. As ever, he developed a circle of learned, wealthy friends. And for a time, their relationship was idyllic: they would meet and discuss intellectual matters large and small and share the usual mix of seriousness and laughter common among friends. But as time went by, the tenor of their discussions changed. They – there were four of them – favored university-based learning and the philosopher Aristotle especially, something that seems to have rankled Petrarch to such an extent that he began to speak out. Petrarch gives us the tenor of how the discussions unfolded. “These men burn and rage with blind ardor all the more fiercely because they themselves are all scholars and great burners of midnight oil.”\(^\text{18}\) Yet, “learning is an instrument of madness for many, and of pride for nearly everyone, unless, as rarely happens, it meets with a good and cultivated mind.”\(^\text{19}\) Petrarch then begins to give examples of useless facts that the learned know and, full of pride as they are, vaunt. “This fourth fellow knows about wild beasts, birds, and fish. He knows how many hairs a lion has in its mane, how many feathers a hawk has in its tail, and how many coils an octopus

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\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., p. 186.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., p. 239. Latin text, p. 1038: “Sunt enim literae multis instrumenta dementie, cuntis fere superbie, nisi, quod rarum, in aliquam bonam et bene institutam animam inciderint.”
wraps around a castaway.” Petrarch satirizes “natural philosophy” here, which is to say the brand of philosophy dedicated to studying nature in all its aspects.

Whether the facts cited are true or false (and Petrarch is working from known sources), “What use is it, I ask, to know the nature of beasts and birds and fish and snakes, and to ignore or neglect our human nature, the purpose of our birth, or whence we come whither we are bound?” In other words Petrarch is arguing that moral character matters firstly and most importantly and that knowledge of facts is secondary. At some point his friends’ constant citation of Aristotle seems to have got the better of him, and he spoke out:

Hec et talia huiusmodi adversus hos scribas, non mosaica utique nec cristiana, sed aristotelica, ut sibi videntur, in lege doctissimos, cum sepe liberius agerem quam soliti sint audire, idque fortassis incautius, ut qui inter amicos loquens nichil inde periculi proiderem, mirari illi primum, post irasci. Et quoniam contra suam heresim ac paternas leges dici ista sentirent, collegerunt et ipsi concilium, non ut me, quem profecto diligunt, sed ut famam meam, quam oderunt, ignorantie crimine condemnarent.

[I have often made these and similar objections to these scribes, who consider themselves most learned, not in the law of Moses or Christ, but in that of Aristotle. I spoke with greater freedom than they are accustomed to hear, and perhaps with less caution, since I foresaw no danger involved in speaking with friends. At first they were amazed, and then angered, for they felt that my words ran counter to their sect and its ancestral laws. So they formed a council, not to condemn me, whom they love, but to condemn my fame, which they hate, on a charge of ignorance.]22

Sect. This word – secta in Latin – carried with it an important resonance. The Latin word was a direct translation of the Greek ‘haeresis’ or ‘heresy,’ a word that derived from the verb haereo, which at its root signified cutting, or segmenting, and more generally meant choosing. A haeresis signified a ‘choice’ at its most basic level. In late antiquity, as early Christian leaders struggled to define the boundaries of the Christian religion, it also came to mean the ‘wrong choice,’ so that the meaning more familiar to us, heresy, emerged then. The word could also be used to describe a group of followers of a certain religious or philosophical emphasis. So when Petrarch uses the word here, coupling it with “ancestral laws,” he is very subtly including all those resonances, triggering in a reader’s

20 Ibid.: “Multa ille igitur de beluis deque avibus ac piscibus: quot leo pilos in vertice, quot plumas accipiter in cauda, quot polipus spiris naufragum liget.”
21 Ibid. Latin text, p. 1038–1040: “Nam quid, oro, naturas beluarum et volucrum et piscium et serpentum nosse profuerit, et naturam hominum, ad quid nati sumus, unde et quo pergimus, uel nescire uel spernere?”
mind the beginnings of the argument he will go on to develop in the treatise: these former friends of his were *uncritical* followers of Aristotle and (something he will later emphasize) possibly irreligious as well.

But what was it, exactly, that set Petrarch off? Why did he feel the need to write a treatise? He tells us early on. His friends, after saying that Petrarch was eloquent in speech and writing but devoid of knowledge, pronounced a verdict on him, to this effect: “I am a good man without learning.”23 The direction of the treatise changes immediately after this statement, and in its dramatic tension the transition can stand not only for Petrarch’s main thrust in the treatise but also for the way he re-oriented the humanist movement. Petrarch writes, in a passage that is worth quoting extensively:

O utinam veri nichil unquam preter hoc unum dixerint aut dicturi sint! Et, o alme salutiferque Iesu, vere literarum omnium et ingenii Deus ac largitor, vere rex glorie ac virtutum domine, te nunc flexis anime genibus supplex oro, ut si michi non amplius vis largiri, hec saltem portio mea sit, ut vir bonus sim; quod, nisi te valde amem pieque colam, esse non possum. Ad hoc enim, non ad literas natus sum; que si sole obvenerint inflant diruuntque, non edificant: fulgida uincula laboriosumque negotium ac sonorum pondus anime.

[Would that this were the only truth they have spoken or will ever speak! O gracious savior Jesus, true God who bestows all learning and intelligence, true King of glory and Lord of virtues, I pray to you as a suppliant on my soul’s bended knee. If You choose to grant me nothing else, let it at least be my portion to be a good man. This I cannot be unless I greatly love and devoutly worship You. I was born for this and not for learning. If learning alone is granted us, it puffs up and ruins, and does not edify. It becomes a gleaming shackle of the soul, a wearsome pursuit, and a noisy burden.]24

It is obvious that Petrarch is using rhetoric here, counter-posing Christianity to learning, in a time when what he wrote could not, effectively, be gainsaid. No one could disagree, in other words, that worshiping god and practicing Christianity should be a priority over against studying Aristotle. But Petrarch’s sentiment here represents far more than rhetoric. Instead, it signals a turn toward religion that he introduced into the humanist movement, in which Christianity, the advocacy of personal humility, and a focus on moral philosophy all came together. Bibliically oriented readers will have noticed Petrarch’s allusion to St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians 8:1: “Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.” The idea is to focus on personal conduct, stressing that knowledge of facts alone can make a person arrogant and vain.

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23 Ibid., p. 245 and 249. Latin text, p. 1044 and 1048.
24 Ibid., p. 245. Latin text, p. 1044.
Petrarch sinuously loops back on his own arguments in this treatise, as if repeating things in a slightly different key would reinforce his message. Petrarch tells how the discussions used to go, first recounting his own style in speaking to his friends: “when I speak to my friends, I use a rambling sort of speech”\(^{25}\) – in other words, I didn’t think I constantly had to be “on” when in the company of friends.

Here is what they would do: “they used to propose some Aristotelian problem or some question about animals for discussion.” Fair enough. “I would remain silent, or joke, or introduce some other topic. Sometimes I would smile and ask how Aristotle could have known things that obey no reason and cannot be tested experimentally.” Their reaction: “they would be amazed and silently angered, and would look at me as a blasphemer for requiring more than that man’s authority as proof of a fact.”\(^{26}\)

At this distance and given that we hear only Petrarch’s side of the conversation, who can say what the real tenor of the discussion was? Perhaps his friends were earnest young men, interested in discussing the most current scientific problems of the day ... and there sat Petrarch, ridiculing them, as if these issues could not possibly be important. Perhaps they were indeed arrogant, as Petrarch claimed, and believed that Aristotle was the only legitimate authority and that, to learn truly and to understand the works truly, one needed only to explicate Aristotle.

What we can know is this: it is precisely Aristotle’s status as an authority that Petrarch wants to bring into relief. Petrarch tells us so: “Now, I believe that Aristotle was a great man and a polymath. But he was still human and could therefore have been ignorant of some things, or even of many things.” This message represents one half – the positive half – of Petrarch’s approach in this treatise. The other half is not so positive. Petrarch goes on: “I shall go further, if I am allowed by these men who are greater friends of sects [sects, again] than of the truth.” Petrarch goes on: “by heaven, I believe without a doubt that he was ‘quite on the wrong road,’ as the phrase has it” –Petrarch alludes to a line from the ancient comic playwright Terence – “not only in minor questions, in which any error is minor and scarcely dangerous, but also in the major questions that concern our

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 263. Latin text, p. 1060: “Michi autem sermo vaus inter amicos inelaborateque sen- tentie.”

\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 265. Latin text, p. 1062: “Solebant illi vel aristotelicum problema vel de animalibus aliquid in medium iactare. Ego autem vel tacere vel iocari vel ordiri aliud, interdumque sub- ridens querere quonam modo id scire potuisset Aristotiles, cuius et ratio nulla esset et experi- mentum impossibile. Stupere illi, et taciti subirasci, et blasphemum velut aspicere, cui ad fidem rerum aliud quam viri autoritas quereretur [...].”
ultimate salvation.”

Again, we see this turning toward Christianity as part of a rhetorical strategy, a tendency that intensifies soon thereafter.

Petrarch widens his critique when he brings a specific work of Aristotle into play: the *Ethics*, or what we know as the *Nicomachean Ethics*, whose primary purpose was a discussion of “happiness” or “flourishing” (the Greek *eudaimonia* and the Latin *felicitas*). Aristotle’s questions had been: what constitutes human flourishing? How does one best pursue it? Aristotle’s brilliant, methodical approach to what he called the “philosophy of the human” assured him a continuous audience throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, from the time in the thirteenth century when his works were rediscovered and translated from Greek into Latin through to the Renaissance and beyond (*EN 1181b15*). By Petrarch’s day Aristotle’s works had become staples of university curricula.

Here, in this treatise, Petrarch sets the tone for much of the humanist world to come, when Aristotle is under discussion. It is not so much that Aristotle was wrong – it was after all Aristotle himself who had said that *Ethics* was not a subject we study to gain knowledge but rather to become better. Rather, Aristotle’s modern followers are the ones to be singled out. Adhering to institutional models, they have, in Petrarch’s view, lost the ability to practice philosophy broadly conceived, to practice, that is, that set of interlinked disciplines that fostered the love and pursuit of human wisdom. Petrarch’s *persona*, then, is of someone standing outside institutional life, who only from that outsider perspective can offer incisive critique.

At root, Petrarch’s method involved a tight linkage between reading and writing and, as importantly, an imagined (but no less powerful) link between reading and life. We can conclude with a passage from Petrarch’s *familiare colloquium*, the *Secret*, where Augustine advises Petrarch as follows:

> Comunis legentium mos est, ex quo monstrum illud execrabile, literatorum passim flagiti-osissimos errare greges et de arte vivendi, multa licet in scolis disputentur, in actum pauca converti. Tu vero, si suis locis notas certas impresseris, fructum ex lectione percipies.

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27 *Ibid.*: “Ego vero magnum quendam virum ac multisicium Aristotilem, sed fuisse hominem, et idcirco aliquia, imo et multa nescire potuisse arbitror; plus dicam, si per istos liceat non tam veri amicos quam sectarum: credo hercle, nec dubito, illum non in rebus tantum parvis, quorum parvus et minime periculosus est error, sed in maximis et spectantibus ad salutis summam ab-errasse tota, ut aiunt, via.”

[That’s what usually happens with readers, with the dire and damnable consequence that disgraceful groups of well-read people wander round incapable of translating the art of living into action, even if they are good at arguing about it in the schools.]

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