

The relevance of Xenophon's *Anabasis* and Plato's *Meno* to nursing

Running head: Xenophon's *Anabasis* and Plato's *Meno*

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Abstract

The current situation in which the humanities are disparaged affects all university disciplines, including nursing, in whose historical evolution the humanities have always been present in one form or another. Looking beyond this disrepute, this study proposes that nursing renew its attention to classical philosophy. Specifically, it invites a close reading of Xenophon's *Anabasis* and Plato's *Meno*, showing how both texts are very valuable tools for the philosophical initiation of nursing students. *Anabasis* allows the examination of the choice of a practical way of life and the unavoidable conflict with social life – *Meno* provides future nurses with the possibility of dialogue about virtue. Both readings strengthen the intellectual relationship between philosophy and nursing, enabling the latter to delve deeper into the key questions of its own thought as a discipline.

Key words

Nursing philosophy, Plato, Xenophon, *Anabasis*, *Meno*, Education-programme.

Introduction

Among the scientific publications about the relationship between philosophy and nursing there are few that concern the contributions of classical philosophy. And among the texts that do deal with the classics, attention is focused on some writers more than others, with Aristotle standing out against Plato and Xenophon, to mention only the Greeks. By way of example, in the twenty years of *Nursing Philosophy* (one of the magazines most clearly specialized in this material), only two texts have been published whose titles mention Plato (Zucker & Borg, 2005; O'Byrne & Holmes, 2007), which is striking when compared to the eight articles that include Aristotle in their title (Whelton, 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2017; Scott, 2006; Elstad & Torjuul, 2009; Allmark, 2017, 2019) and there is not a single one dedicated to Xenophon (who does not even get a mention in the magazine's content). This study seeks to continue the efforts of the previous quoted and other writers involved in keeping alive the transmission of the classical tradition. Its original contribution is to propose reading Xenophon's *Anabasis*, for the first time, and Plato's *Meno* as a pedagogic resource within the framework of the university teaching of nursing.

The great conversation

In the general university context, there is currently a widespread disparaging of the humanities (Nussbaum, 2016). For this reason, the introduction of philosophy in university nursing teaching faces certain initial difficulties, such as the limited humanistic formation of the students. However, it is possible to propose a successful approach to philosophy if it is done from the perspective of a "great conversation" between authors of all times and places, in which nurses can participate to reconsider nursing from the profession's own intellectual foundations (LeVasseur, 1998; Arnone & Fitzsimons, 2015). In this way, returning the gaze towards classical authors and their works implies reclaiming the importance of history (Klein, 1973). This does not mean only the detailed knowledge of a more or less expansive series of historical facts but also accepting the possibility of understanding those who spoke previously about the questions that concern us today.

Leo Strauss, one of the historians of philosophy who has best reclaimed the need for a "return to the classics", indicates history's value to philosophy:

"History, i.e., concern with the thought of the past as thought to the past, takes on philosophic significance if there are good reasons for believing that we can learn something

of utmost importance from the thought of the past which we cannot learn from our contemporaries. History takes on philosophic significance for men living in an age of intellectual decline. Studying the thinkers of the past becomes essential for men living in an age of intellectual decline because it is the only practicable way in which they can recover a proper understanding of the fundamental problems". (Strauss, 1951).

If this is so, the conversation with the great minds of all periods reveals itself to us as the best possible education. And it has been seen in this way by the university for centuries. But this conversation can be performed only through dialogue with the great books. There are thus two questions to consider: which are those great books that can educate new nurses and to what point can they gather the wisdom of the masters? In terms of the first question, we would have to consider as great books not only those of Aristotle but also those of Xenophon and Plato, among many others. In terms of the second question, the key is in knowing whether, in the passage from orality to writing, it is possible to preserve the essence of a teaching (Flaming, 2003). In our case, it is about whether as readers we can trust that the essence of the teaching of Socrates, who left nothing in writing, has been collected and preserved in the works of his disciples Xenophon and Plato. To be worthy of this trust – which in each case the most demanding hermeneutics will try to question – is precisely what allows a text to form part of this great conversation.

But there is something to warn our students about before sending them to the great books. This is the fact that, within the cultural framework of antiquity (and even the Middle Ages), the reading of a text was, almost always, an act of a community meeting based around the content of the text and typically the occasion for establishing a process of teaching and learning. In the words of Roger French, "ultimately the purpose [of the Oxford Arts Course] was to enable the student to understand directly the books of the ancients" (French, 2000). This premise, which conveys certain connotations that are almost completely lost to us today, should be present when reading a classical text. We children of Modernity are irremediably marked by two important events in this respect: the invention of the printing press and the Protestant Reformation.

These two historical events, which combined with a clear synergy in the Europe of the 16th Century, mark an inflection point in terms of reading and writing. From this point, the pedagogic and communitarian character of reading aloud some of the few available volumes of any relevant work lost its importance. The paradigmatic case here is that of the translation, dissemination, and reading of the Bible, whose free interpretation by Protestant Christians made Europe, soon to be followed by North America, a world of readers. It is difficult to think of a mental and social change of greater repercussion regarding the dynamic established for the communication of knowledge. The theological framework established by the Reformation – and spread by the forced emigration of the wars of

religion – brought with it a new model of learning that was more solitary, based on the individual and direct reading of the authoritative sources.

These factors nurtured and were joined by the expansion of modern science. Its consolidation brought with it the weakening of the classical idea that to achieve understanding it was necessary to follow a process of learning with a master. The experimental character of the new natural science allowed any able individual, including those working on their own, to test for themselves the compliance of the laws of physics. From permanent dialogue between master and disciples – aimed not only at the acquisition by the latter of a series of technical and theoretical knowledge but also towards their personal development – we move to a different learning framework, in which the interpersonal relationship loses relevance. In this new era, which soon became the instruction of the masses, the written text won the game against the living voice of the master.

Taking all the above into consideration, I will now propose the inclusion in the reading list for nursing students of two classic texts – Xenophon’s *Anabasis* and Plato’s *Meno* – whose main features I will present below.

1. Xenophon’s *Anabasis*

The key feature of Xenophon of Athens (c. 430–c. 354 BCE) is that he was one of the disciples of Socrates. It is from this fact that one should approach his texts in general, because the influence of Socrates is the cornerstone of the interpretation of the texts of his followers. To understand how this influence occurs, it is important to recall that, according to Leo Strauss, “Socrates engaged in his most important work, the awakening of his fellow men and the attempting to guide them toward the good life which he himself was living” (Strauss & Cropsey, 1987).

The way of life

The most famous of Socrates’ disciplines, Plato, chose to follow the same way of life as his master. A way of life that has been given names such as “the theoretical life” or, more simply, “the philosophical way of life”. But Xenophon did not follow the example of his master to the letter and involved himself in what Socrates and his followers considered as politics.

“Xenophon was a man of action: he did the political things in the common sense of the term, whereas Socrates did not; but Socrates taught his companions the political things with the emphasis on strategy and tactics”, (Strauss, 1986).

Cristopher Bruell has expressed with the utmost clarity Xenophon's choice, indicating that "may have been one who pursued the Socratic question of the best way of life without ever coming to accept completely the Socratic answer that that way of life is the philosophic one" (Strauss & Cropsey, 1987).

Given this, the work of Xenophon takes on a new and growing interest for those who today opt for a practical life, in terms of how it can be a tool that leads readers to reflect on their own life choices from points of view different from those of the Platonists. To the extent that nursing does not focus primarily on understanding the world but on changing it (Birkelund, 2000), it is clear that opting for caring does not lead to a theoretical way of life, just as Xenophon's choice did not.

Starting to read Xenophon

Although Xenophon's writings do not reach the number, volume, or recognition of Plato, they have been much appreciated since ancient times. The catalogue of Xenophon's works represents a diverse offering for the reader. It includes works of a historical character such as *Cyropaetida*, *Hellenica*, and *Anabasis*; political works, such as *Hiero* and *Polity of the Lacedaemonians*; and other writings on varied practical matters, such as *Hipparchikos* and *Hunting with Dogs*.

With such a range of possibilities, it would not be strange for someone to ask about which work it would be best to start with when reading Xenophon. The first thing to do in response is to contemplate the work of Xenophon as a whole and, in doing this, one can consider that the writings may have not only an order of composition (chronological) but also an order of reading.

This particular question has driven important research on Plato's *Dialogues* that can offer crucial clues for our reading of Xenophon. Basically, it means taking into account at least two possibilities. The first is that the author sketched a general plan of his work before writing it and that, as a result, the chronological order of the composition of the texts is indicative of the way in which they should be read. The second possibility is that the author has gone about changing his own plan while writing his work, which would lead him to suggest to his readers – directly or indirectly – an order of reading that would not necessarily have to coincide with the order of composition and which would allow the reader to reach the true teaching that the author wanted to transmit when writing his texts. In relation to this last possibility, there are two main positions: one that advocates a dramatic argument to establish the order of reading (Zuckert, 2012), and another that calls for a pedagogic argument (Altmann, 2010).

As we look at Xenophon, it is necessary to point out that, unlike Plato, he was not a teacher who had his own school. And this may have been decisively important when he wanted and was able to reread his own work as he was writing it, thereby establishing an order of reading. Given this

nuance and the fact that I do not find among Xenophon scholars any discussion about the order of reading his works, I allow myself here, in terms of the arguments that I will present below, to choose *Anabasis* as the text with which to begin the reading of Xenophon's works. I believe that this is the correct choice for nurses. And not only for its aesthetic or literary character ("Xenophon's *Anabasis* seems today to be regarded universally as his most beautiful book.", Strauss, 1986) but also because it is the work in which the author shows with greater clarity his choice of political affairs, of a practical life.

A journey in conflict

Of all the various upheavals that led him to this political interest, the adventure that he narrates in *Anabasis* stands out: Xenophon's participation in the expedition of the Ten Thousand Greek hoplites (a kind of Greek soldiers) who accompanied Cyrus the Younger in his attempt to dethrone his brother, king Artaxerxes. The title of the work has a tremendously descriptive character, as it indicates the ascent (*anabasis*) of Cyrus's army from the coast of the Anatolian peninsula towards the interior seeking to confront the king. But it also contains a subjective metaphor, as it may indicate the ascent of Cyrus (the work has also been known as *Cyroanabasis*) from being a pretender to the throne to attaining it.

It is crucial to emphasize that Xenophon's participation in this expedition started with an invitation, with a call from his friend Proxenus to join the army. Xenophon, educated by Socrates in the examination of his own life, contrasted his inclination to accept the invitation with the opinion of his teacher. The latter, without giving him direction one way or the other, suggested that he consult the Delphic oracle. Based on what he experienced at the oracle, Xenophon finally decided to enlist with the Ten Thousand.

The narrative reaches its first inflection point, of great importance, with the early death of Cyrus, an event that breaks the dramatic rhythm of the story and awakens in the reader the suspicion that, leaving behind the geographical description of the journey of the Ten Thousand, the work is really not so much about the ascent of Cyrus as about the ascent of Xenophon himself. In the new circumstances, the Athenian finds the opportunity to lead the Greek army, trapped and stripped of most of its generals, who had been murdered by Artaxerxes.

From this point, *Anabasis* now unfolds no longer only as the tale of Cyrus's ambitious venture but also as that of the adventure of Xenophon and his comrades-in-arms, who are obliged to flee the king's army to be able to return to their native land, crossing a vast and hostile territory, confronting the elements and the peoples that inhabit them. The metaphor already implicit in the title is beautiful. Someone who, starting from a given point, sets out on his way with an objective in mind, finds himself

unexpectedly in the midst of a host of adverse circumstances that prevent him not only from achieving his objective but also from returning to his starting point. At the risk of taking the suspense out of the reading, I will advance that, in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, the circle is closed and the traveller returns home – although neither unharmed nor identical to the one who left.

The image is very similar to any person's life journey. And it is especially valid for those who opt for the practical or political life, because this journey is not given in the framework of a life of study in which contemplation has priority over action, but in the context of the thousand tribulations to which the path subjects the traveller. Nurses – who have decided to live a political life, who have decided to do something practical that changes the world (Whelton, 2002b) – can find in Xenophon's text a teaching that is more valuable than a thousand facts. By reflecting on their own journey, each nurse will be able to ask themselves if they are taking the right decisions – those that will lead towards an ascent – or whether, on the contrary, they are making mistakes that will leave them defenceless in the face of adversity.

Read in this way, *Anabasis* raises the question of whether caring can make us better. And this is not a merely rhetorical question. It is not easy to argue that caring is something necessarily good, or to show the possible undesirable consequences of such altruistic behaviour. But it should be remembered that, in the field of the practical life, circumstances play a determining role, which means that the question should not be put forward in a generic or abstract way. Each question will not take on its true dimension if it is not faced by this or that specific student, by this or that nurse who has a forename and a surname. Only thus can someone evaluate if the time they are dedicating to caring – whether a few months or many years – is leading them to be the best version of themselves.

Although it is not easy to answer, the urgency of confronting this question jumps into the sight of anyone who moves in a healthcare environment. One does not need very much experience to see that many of those who start out on a career of caring full of energy and enthusiasm have fallen by the wayside with the passage of time. Although they have not died physically, there have been changes in their interior that have killed them, so to speak, spiritually. And this is evident when one sees these professionals perform actions that are incompatible with even the least demanding meanings of the word "care". By now, they are people who are no longer caring but merely completing a series of tasks. Nurses who started their work making caring the centre of their lives become people with the mentality of a mercenary, selling themselves to the highest bidder (e.g. the debate after Francis Report: Rolfe, 2014; Paley, 2014; Allmark, 2019).

It is common to treat this topic from the psychological point of view, including it in the study of burn-out syndrome. This approach focuses on the internal and external conditioning factors on the worker that influence the appearance of the syndrome, but it tends to avoid, among the internal conditioning factors, the question of the choice of a specific way of life and the relevance of education

in an individual's awareness of the breadth of this choice. In this respect, I believe that a philosophical focus (e.g. Roberts & Ion, 2014) can complement the psychological through, on the one hand, the power of reading – giving value to the dialogue that each person can carry out on their own with the great books – and, on the other hand, the power of conversation, giving value to the dialogue with teachers in nursing, as well as with other trainees (Flaming, 2003). These two ways – reading and dialogue – will allow nursing students, who have already taken the decision to enter the way of caring, to examine themselves. First, to see if they have taken the right decision. Second, to see what each of them must do to avoid ruining themselves on the way, to reach a good port in their adventure. One should not forget the many occasions on which Xenophon shows how he and the Ten Thousand are at the point of dying at the hands of the enemies. In the metaphorical sense of dying spiritually, it is something which will happen to future nurses in each of the conflicts that, in all certainty, they will experience during the course of their careers. Thus, any teaching of nursing that does not start from the assumption of the polemological (conflictive) character of human life will only be robbing its students of the possibility of preparing themselves to face an inevitable reality.

Preparing oneself for conflict

In this way, asking ourselves the question of whether care can make us better is presented as a basic intellectual obligation of any nursing school, at the heart of whose constitution is the training – in all significant senses – of people who have decided to put caring at the centre of their lives. And this is because the profession of nursing, like other healthcare professions, is not easy to study out of simple curiosity or with a view to achieving other positions or goals. The task of nursing does not consist mainly of resolving technical problems or of unravelling the mechanisms through which nature is governed, but of putting into practice the choice of caring for each and every person. Whoever studies nursing should know from the very start – if they do not already know when they make their choice – that this decision will condition their life very deeply, that it will affect everything, including their sleep rhythms and their social life.

While there are young people who take the decision to become nurses, it is the responsibility of older people to help them examine whether they are making the right choice. Carrying out this examination will develop a true university activity. It thus appears as a *sine que non* that at least some teachers – placing themselves in the position of Socrates in having abandoned the direct exercise of care – enter into a dialogue with all these new Xenophons so that they can examine themselves together through conversation (e.g. Dinkins & Cangelosi, 2019). Given that the meeting spaces have already been created – the faculties of nursing – what matters is that there are teachers able to refocus the content that is taught in them and the way that it is taught so that a true dialogue between

philosophy and nursing can be established in their classes (Lambert, 1993; Zucker & Borg, 2005)). Although it may seem difficult, Xenophon's invitation is clear: "Let us not, in the name of the gods, wait for others to come to us and summon us to the noblest deeds, but let us take the lead ourselves and arouse the rest to valour" (Xenophon, 2001).

2. Plato's *Meno*: knowledge and virtue

We have seen that the reading of *Anabasis* can provide its readers with the clear awareness that the choice of the practical life must also be examined, that it can open their eyes to the conflictive reality of the political life, and that it can warn them of the need to prepare themselves to survive in conflicts with others. We will now see what Plato's *Meno* can bring to this philosophical initiation.

The order of reading the Dialogues

Throughout history, several dialogues have been considered suitable to begin reading Plato. Although today there is a range of opinion on the matter, there is a certain consensus that "the order in which we read the dialogues affects the way we understand them, both singly and in relation to one another" (Zuckert, 2012).

In this respect, it is important to first approach the *Dialogues* as a whole and then determine which is their order. Authors such as Catherine Zuckert incline towards seeking the order of composition (and this according to the dramatic character of the dialogues) while others, such as William H. Altmann, ask themselves directly about the order of reading most in line with the intention of the author. In fact, Altmann, proposes an order of reading based on the premise that Plato's main intention in writing the *Dialogues* is of a pedagogic character (the explicative capacity of this hypothesis on Plato's pedagogic intention is huge, because it helps overcome even first-order interpretative difficulties such as the apparent contradictions between the different dialogues). The fundamental difference between these two authors is, in my opinion, about whether they accept that Plato had his own teaching that differed, to a greater or lesser degree, from Socratic teaching. Zuckert, as a good disciple of Leo Strauss, rejects that possibility. Altmann, however, considers Plato to be a master in his own right.

"Plato is understood here at first and foremost a teacher, a teacher with a school — the Academy — as well as a teaching. [...] He is in any case a philosopher, an idealist, and a

teacher: a teacher who, while alive, taught others to philosophize and who [...] continues to do just that through his writings”, (Altmann, 2010).

In relation to this question, I take Altmann’s position on the primacy of pedagogy when discussing the Platonic corpus. However, I propose here that the convenience of choosing *Meno* (rather than Altmann’s choice of *Protagoras*) as the initial dialogue in Platonic reading for neophyte nurses. And I do this because of the text’s relationship that with Xenophon’s *Anabasis*: “Will anyone deny that Plato’s masterful *Meno* becomes a far greater dialogue for one who has read the description of *Meno* (An. 2.6.21-8) in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*?(Altmann, 2010).

Meno, like many other of the *Dialogues*, is a brief text, in which four characters appear: Socrates, Meno (who would later be one of the generals in Cyrus’s army of the Ten Thousand Greeks), Anytus (who would be, alongside Meletus, one of Socrates’ accusers in the trial that cost him his life), and Meno’s young slave. The subtitle that has historically been given to the work is *Meno, or On Virtue*. This is because Meno’s first question, directed to Socrates, is precisely the question of whether virtue can be taught.

“MEN. Can you tell me, Socrates, wheter virtue can be taught, or is adquired by practice, not teaching? Or if neither by practice nor by learning, whether it comes to mankind by nature or in some other way?”, (Plato, 1990).

It is the centrality of virtue to the dialogue that makes it interesting today, above all when one considers the question about virtue together with the connection with *Anabasis* caused by the presence of Meno. It is no accident that it is precisely Meno who interrogates Socrates about virtue. Plato had *Anabasis* in front of him when he wrote this dialogue and recalls Xenophon’s harsh words when he refers to Meno.

“Menon the Thessalian was manifestly eager for enormous wealth—eager for command in order to get more wealth and eager for honour in order to increase his gains; and he desired to be a friend to the men who possessed greatest power in order that he might commit unjust deeds without suffering the penalty. [...] Now when his fellow generals were put to death for joining Cyrus in his expedition against the King, he, who had done the same thing, was not so treated, but it was after the execution of the others that the King visited the punishment of death upon him; and he was not, like Clearchus and the rest of the generals, beheaded—a manner of death which is counted speediest—but, report says, was tortured alive for a year and so met the death of a scoundrel.” (Xenophon, 2001).

Plato's proleptic intention

In the face of these words of Xenophon about Meno, we can only think that Plato consciously chose this character to be the protagonist of his dialogue about virtue. But with what motive? If William Altmann is correct about the proleptic character of some of the Platonic texts, it was for the purpose of confusing us.

“Plato’s employs «proleptic» composition: he begins by confusing the student in an ultimately salutary manner, i.e., about things that is pedagogically useful for the student to be confused about”, (Altmann, 2010).

This prolepsis (that have been dealt with in detail by Kahn, 1988) is fundamental when it comes to the student’s realization that he does not know what he thinks he knows. The whole of *Meno* is a magnificent example of proleptic writing about what virtue is. In putting together the terms Meno and virtue, Plato forces a surprise on anyone who has read *Anabasis* because, as Altmann points out:

“In any context, ancient or modern, denying the most important of all ethical truths — i.e., that altruism is good and selfishness bad— forces students to discover it for themselves” (Altmann, 2010).

Plato’s proleptic intention is strengthened in the case of nurses who read *Meno* today, because they have been prepared to assume as a central idea that science is the only way to access knowledge about the most important things. Since Max Weber, anyone who opts to dedicate themselves to science (it should not be forgotten that nursing is not included among the humanities but among the health sciences) confronts the claim that science must be free of values. In this way, it is difficult for a scientist who wants to be consistent in mediating to use terms such as “worse” or “better” – terms that are omnipresent in the Socratic language and which have a close relationship with the theme of virtue. Thus, a sincere reading of *Meno* will have to end in questioning the basic premise of modern thinking: science’s self-sufficiency.

“Perhaps the idea of science is altogether the most powerful idea in modern life. Surely nothing can stop the victorious course of science which in its ideal completion is Reason itself that cannot tolerate any authority at its side or above it.”, (Strauss, 1986).

Our time has been so immersed in this idea that, especially in the university context, there is something heretical in attempting to recover that which today is known by the vaporous title of “humanities” not only as an erudite adornment but as a valid source of knowledge. Yuval N. Harari puts it very bluntly: “the dominant modern research method takes for granted the insufficiency of old knowledge” (Harari, 2015). The subalternity of nursing education (and of other healthcare professions) to the scientific premise is the touchstone that prevents most of its students from asking themselves about virtue: because to ask this question is to place oneself outside of the scientific framework. While the scientific focus can provide answers to many important questions, it is totally inadequate for confronting certain aspects of life – such as, for example, anything to do with knowing whether this or that action can be considered just or unjust (Whelton, 2002a). Thus, a philosophical learning will not in any way diminish the value of science but will, rather, accept that there are other areas of reality (and this includes the life of each individual) about which it does not have the last word.

The Socratic method

Therefore, since it is a question of seeking a more appropriate way to tackle certain questions, it is essential to recover a language that is up to this task. I say recover, because in putting science aside as a totalitarian worldview one quickly arrives at the great conversation, this universe of texts that has been addressing essential problems since ancient times.

One of the characteristics present in many of these texts is the use of common language to treat any subject, however difficult it might seem. The complexity of a problem requires complexity in its treatment, but this complexity does not have to reside in the use of arcane language – difficult to understand, accessible only to the initiated – but rather, for example, in the way in which the argument is composed. The paradigmatic case which illustrates this claim is the *Dialogues*. In these, Socrates always expresses himself using the words that his questioners speak every day. In the words of T. Pangle, “the Socratic «method» thus begins from what is perfectly commonsensical, if not banal”, (Pangle, 1986). Along the same lines, Leo Strauss insists when referring to the work of Edmund Husserl that “all philosophical understanding must start from our common understanding of the world, from our understanding of the world as sensibly perceived prior to all theorizing”, (Strauss, 1986). It is important to consider that this form of thinking, in common with and based on terms that can be understood by anyone, allows every person to undertake the path of apprenticeship in seeking the truth. No one is excluded on principle, but it will be the capacities and efforts of each individual that will mark the level of knowledge that will be reached through dialogue.

“Philosophy is an activity undertaken by a variety of different embodied human beings, coming from different cities and schools, having different views and concerns, talking in different ways to nonphilosophers”, (Zuckert, 2012).

For nurses in particular, this way of proceeding opens the door to reflection on their most important problems, avoiding that they fall into the temptation of camouflaging themselves behind terminological screens that are empty of meaning. In this way, if we are debating the question of whether caring makes us better or not, we must be able to do so starting from what caring means for each of us in pre-scientific terms. It is not appropriate to start the discussion from the theories about care of Dorothea Orem, Hildegard Peplau, and Virginia Henderson, to name only a few leading authors. This has to come later. It is not useless, but it is important as a first step to speak of care as we experience it, from our common understanding of the world.

For this task, to recover the language that allows having this kind of conversation, it is essential to find the interlocutors that can show us. Thus, the quality of the interlocutor, of the teacher, is of great relevance to the student’s progress. Especially, in terms of his art of prolepsis. It is necessary to be aware of one’s own ignorance to be able to advance, to be open to the possibility that what has been considered as knowledge until now is no more than a crude opinion, a mere appearance of knowledge. This humility, which is etched in the attitude that Socrates maintains in *Meno*, makes us sensitive to the greatness of those who have gone furthest.

“We cannot be philosophers, but we can love philosophy; we can try to philosophize. This philosophizing consists at any rate primarily and in a way chiefly in listening to the conversation between the great philosophers or, more generally and more cautiously, between the greatest minds, and therefore in studying the great books.”, (Strauss, 1995).

But it is fundamental, for the art of prolepsis to bear fruit, that the master encourages the disciple not to allow himself to be defeated by aporia (Brann, 2004), as this pedagogic style of Socrates – a problematic and problematizing conversationalist – is not always easy to overcome.

“MEN. Socrates, I used to be told, before I began to meet you, that yours was just a case of being in doubt yourself and making others doubt also; and so now I find you are merely bewitching me with your spells and incantations, which have reduced me to utter perplexity”, (Plato, 1990).

This problematizing in which Socrates places Meno shows, in total clarity, the appearance of prior knowledge about virtue and the need to seek good teachers. But Socrates does not exclude either of the two things, neither that of the appearance of knowledge nor the need to look for a good teacher.

“SOC. I fear, Meno, you and I are but poor creatures, and Gorgias has been as faulty and educator of you as Prodicus of me. So our first duty is to look to ourselves, and try to find somebody who will have some means or other of making us better.”, (Plato, 1990).

Nonetheless, and even though the good intentions of both Xenophon in *Anabasis* and Socrates in *Meno* are evident, in both cases the weakness of the position of the protagonists for achieving their objectives is clear. There are very few real possibilities for Xenophon to bring the Greek army home and although he triumphs in the end, failure was very close on many occasions. Socrates' possibilities of improving his questioners are limited and do not always, throughout the *Dialogues*, result in perfecting them.

Neither teacher can replace the student's own desire to be the best. Only the hunger that each one feels to advance in their own education can lead to a real apprenticeship. The lack of a will to perfect oneself makes it almost impossible to achieve this goal. *Meno* is a magnificent example of this, being one of the Platonic dialogues that most clearly shows the weakness of the Socratic method of teaching. As Zukert says: “in the *Meno* Plato thus reminds his readers of the limits of Socrates' ability to benefit those with whom he conversed”, (Zuckert, 2012). However interesting the pedagogic offer of the history of philosophy in the university teaching of nursing, everything depends on each student's willingness to learn.

3. Conclusion

People who choose to dedicate themselves to nursing make a choice to live putting the care of others at the centre of their time, their activity, and their concerns. It could be said that they choose a practical life. And at our point in history, this implies completing an educational process that leads to obtaining a title.

From a philosophical point of view, like that from which Socrates seeks to identify the most important things and the most important of all things, this opting for caring as a way of life has to be examined and questioned to be able to give an account of itself before all the other existing possibilities of the good life. And because living this life is precisely a process of teaching and learning, both teachers and their pedagogic methods must be examined, as is shown in *Meno*.

Reading *Anabasis* and *Meno*, two texts of great relevance to the history of philosophy, can be an important help in carrying out this examination. Not only because of their specific content, but also because reviving Xenophon and Plato complements the traditional centrality of the philosophical teaching of Aristotle (and of Christian humanism based on St Thomas Aquinas) in Western university education. These two disciples and masters have much to say about how each one of us can question what we think we know, subjecting not only their theories about the world but also their own decisions to the Socratic examination. That this examination has to be quick, easy, or comfortable is something that nobody has promised. But it is possible that, as in Xenophon's *Anabasis*, this enterprise becomes an ascent.

Thus, to the question of whether reading the classical authors, and Plato and Xenophon specifically, can help nursing as a discipline to deepen the study of the foundations of its own thinking, the answer must clearly be in the affirmative.

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