

Sophrosune

Higher Power for Freethinkers



By John Lauritsen

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Pagan Press

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Pagan here denotes the outlook and culture of Classical
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HIGHER POWER FOR FREETHINKERS

Introducing *Sophrosune* [So-fro-SU-nay],* a goddess of Ancient Greece, who personifies virtues germane to us in recovery. She is the spirit of moderation, self-control, temperance, restraint, and discretion. Sophrosune was one of the good spirits who escaped when Pandora opened the box that contained all the evils of the world.

As long as I can remember I've been a Hellenist, a lover of Ancient Greece, and therefore familiar with *sophrosune* — especially from two great Plato dialogues, *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, where *sophrosune* represents the willing constraints of Love.

For humanists and freethinkers, Ancient Greece is our spiritual homeland. The philosophical, political, scientific, legal, and artistic foundations of Western Civilization were erected in Athens. We pay tribute to Greek ideals: respect for freedom, reason, and knowledge; the pursuit of physical and intellectual excellence.

Only recently did I consciously connect *sophrosune* with addiction recovery — as a result of an exchange in the AA Atheists and Agnostics

discussion group. The topic for the week was Humility. On 8 July 2014 Sean at Hay on Wye wrote:

Last night at my home group we discussed Step 7 - Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings. (We discuss a step every month)

Our secretary did it from the 12 and 12 (that is, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, for those not in the know). I hate that book ... it is total rubbish. You'd think Uriah Heep himself had written Step 7 there ... humility, humility, humility ... of that dreadful destructive "woe is me" variety. Well, "woe was me" prior to AA and i'm fkuced if I want to be like that in sobriety....

I share Sean's sentiments regarding the *12 & 12*, especially the first section, where Bill W. comments on his Steps. The Traditions are another matter, and I have great respect for them, excepting only the second one, which is marred by gratuitous religiosity. Unlike the Steps, the Traditions

developed from group experience and had no single author — but the Traditions are another topic.

“Humility” has various meanings. Sometimes it is taken as a synonym of “modesty”. “Modest” or “humble” people do not exaggerate their virtues or over-estimate their abilities. All good enough.

But humility also has other meanings, which are less appealing: low self-esteem, self-abasement. When used as a verb, “to humble” people means to lower them, to push them down. The root etymology of “humility” is the Latin *humus* (dirt): it follows that to humble others is to treat them like dirt.

I consider Bill W.'s chapter on “Step Seven” one of the most odious in the *12 & 12*. In the second paragraph he proclaims:

Indeed, the attainment of greater humility is the foundation principle of each of A.A.'s Twelve Steps. For without some degree of humility, no alcoholic can stay sober at all.

I strongly disagree: recovering alcoholics, humble or not, stay sober by avoiding the First Drink. Period. I have known newcomers who were sick and frail, broke, homeless, frightened, confused, filled with self-loathing. The last thing they needed was to be *humbled*. Instead, they needed hope and encouragement, kindness and understanding. I have seen many such newcomers develop into strong and self-confident people — with sobriety and the encouragement of the Fellowship.

For those who are followers of Nietzsche, and I am one, “humility” is one of the cardinal virtues of “slave-morality” — a morality which sanctifies weakness and sickness, which is based on resentment, which says *No* to life.

In his post, Sean mentioned Uriah Heep, a character created by Charles Dickens in his novel *David Copperfield*. The character is known for cloying humility and obsequiousness; he makes frequent references to his own humbleness:

“I am well aware that I am the umblest person going. My mother is likewise a very umble

person. We live in a numble abode.” (Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ch.16.)

At the same time, Heep is dishonest and treacherous. His humility is merely a mask for his evil machinations.

Henrietta Seiberling — the woman who started the Alcoholics squad within the Oxford Group in Akron, Ohio, and who, as much as anyone, should be considered a co-founder of A.A. — associated Bill W. with Uriah Heep:

According to her [Henrietta Seiberling's] later and highly unflattering recollections, Bill had shown up that day in uncouth clothing, and he had stood hunched over instead of fully erect. “He laughed too loudly,” she said, “and showed too many teeth even when talking. He had this mannerism of rubbing his hands together and a simpering smile — a regular Uriah Heep.” (Matthew J. Raphael, *Bill W. and Mr. Wilson*, p. 105)

Reading the 12 & 12 commentary on Step Seven, it becomes clear that Bill W. is not talking about modesty, but rather the humbling or abasing of his followers. He goes so far as to say that serious character flaws, with humility at the head of the list, “made problem drinkers of us in the first place” and that such flaws “must be dealt with to prevent a retreat into alcoholism once again.” This is the exact opposite of the “biogenic approach” of James Milam (*Under the Influence*), according to which alcoholism itself, an addiction to ethyl alcohol, is the primary problem, not merely a symptom of psychological (or moral) problems.

While preaching humility for others, Bill W. has no low opinion of himself. He alludes to “the full implication of Step Seven: ‘humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.’” as though these seven words — which he had written himself — were truly profound. I think not.

The pernicious bottom line of Step Seven is Bill W.'s declaration that we can only be sober through the intervention of a supernatural being:

As long as we placed self-reliance first, a genuine reliance upon a higher Power was out of the question. That basic ingredient of all humility, a desire to seek and do God's will, was missing.

Enough for humility. A better virtue for us in recovery is *sophrosune*, which has something in common with the better qualities of humility. Both humility and *sophrosune* are opposed to such things as arrogance or extreme egotism, but there are important differences. Within limits, *sophrosune* is entirely compatible with confidence and self-esteem, with success and victory.

The great classical scholar and populariser, Edith Hamilton, had this to say on *sophrosune*:

This conception [man's free choice] of what freedom means dawned upon the Greeks. The quality they valued most — the Greek word is *sophrosuné* — cannot be expressed by any single English word. It is oftenest translated by self-control, but it meant more than that. It was the spirit behind the two great Delphic sayings,

“Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess”.

Arrogance, insolent self-assertion, was of all qualities most detested by the Greeks. *Sophrosuné* was the exact opposite. It had its nature, as Aristotle would say, in the excellent and it meant accepting the bounds excellence laid down for human nature, restraining impulses to unrestricted freedom, shunning excess, obeying the inner laws of harmony and proportion. This was the virtue the Greeks esteemed beyond all others not because they were moderate lovers of the golden mean, but because their spontaneity and ever-changing variety and ardent energy of life had to have the strong control of a disciplined spirit or end in senseless violence.

That was the Greek ideal, and the result was their freedom. The idea that only the man who holds himself within self-chosen limits can be free is one of their great legacies to us. (Edith Hamilton, *The Echo of Greece*)

Sophrosune is consonant with self-mastery, self-knowledge, treating others fairly and appropriately,

realizing one's limits and boundaries, discretion, temperance, and clear-headedness; it means having a healthy mind in a healthy body (*mens sana in corpore sano*); it means *tolerance* (Live and Let Live).

One caveat: although *sophrosune* is about moderation, this does not apply to drinking. For us recovering alcoholics, our lives depend on total, life-long abstinence — staying away from the First Drink a day at a time.

Since Sophrosune is a goddess as well as a virtue, might she not be a candidate for Higher Power? And since *Sophrosune* is by nature a reasonable and tolerant goddess, I don't think she would mind being called *Sophie*, if this were done with affection and respect.

But before any of you decide to worship the goddess, let me explain how it's done. The Greek way of praying is very different from the Christian. When Christians pray, they do so on bended knees, with head bowed, hands folded, and eyes closed. The attitude is one of submission, as before an Oriental despot (which indeed Jehovah was).

In contrast, an Ancient Greek might pray with head upraised to the sky and arms uplifted. The attitude is one of pride, joy and alertness — at the same time with reverence to the deity. I imagine that one could pray to *Sophrosune* in a quiet place, sitting or standing comfortably, and making appeals in a simple and straightforward way.

If it seems that I, as a secular humanist, am going soft on religion, I stress that *sophrosune* is fundamentally an ideal and a virtue, and a lot better than that nasty old *humility*.

I look forward to the time, in a closed A.A. meeting, when someone will share: "... my Higher Power, whom I choose to call ... [dramatic pause] ... SOPHIE"

by John Lauritsen

[end]

* PRONUNCIATION of *sophrosune*: There is an Anglicised spelling and pronunciation, but we will go with the classical. My friend Beert, retired head of a Classics department, explained it to me.

[So-fro-SU-nay] Taking one syllable at a time, the first “o” transliterates the vowel *omega*, pronounced as the big or long “o” in “so” or the “aw” sound in “saw”; the second “o” transliterates the *omicron*, the little or short “o”, pronounced like the “o” in “not”; the accented “u” translates the *upsilon*, which is pronounced as the “u” in the French “tu”; and the final “e” transliterates *eta*, which is pronounced like the first syllable in Beethoven or the last syllable in Italian *cane* (dog) (it is not a diphthong).

Let's simplify. [So-fro-SU-nay] The first two vowels are pronounced pretty much like the first two vowels in “sophomore”; the third and accented vowel is pronounced like the French “tu” or “rue”; and the final vowel (not a diphthong) pronounced like the “e” in Italian *cane* or the second “e” in French *bébé* (baby).

This article was first published by AA Agnostica in 2014. <AAAgnostica.org>

MORE ON HELLENISM: "The Greek Spirit", service conducted by John Lauritsen, Unitarian Universalist Meeting House, Provincetown, 23 May 1999.

<http://paganpressbooks.com/jpl/GREEK.HTM>

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Note on the typeface

The typeface used for this book, Perpetua, was created in the 1920s by the English engraver Eric Gill under commission from typographic scholar, Stanley Morison. Morison's intention was to cut an original face for the book trade: "that should not be another old master such as Bembo, nor a redrawn classic such as Centaur — but a wholly new design corresponding with contemporary demands." (*A Tally of Types*, Cambridge 1973)

The first specimen was a 1928 private printing of Walter Shewring's translation of *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*. The Roman was named "Perpetua", and the italic cut later, "Felicity".

Morison was highly satisfied with Perpetua, which he considered particularly appropriate for "the semi-private printing with which Gill was for a long time intimately associated".

In line with Gill's sentiments ("The Procrustean Bed", *An Essay on Typography*, 1936) the right-hand margins are not justified.

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