AFDIA - Chapter Two - Text and Discussion

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The astonished, the affrighted Theon, started from the arm of the sage, and, staggering backwards, was saved, probably from falling, by a statue that stood against the wall on one side of the door; he leaned against it, pale and almost fainting. He knew not what to do, scarcely what to feel, and was totally blind to all the objects around him. His conductor, who had possibly expected his confusion, did not turn to observe it, but advanced in such a manner as to cover him from the view of the company, and, still to give time for recollection, stood receiving and returning salutations.

“Well met, my sons! and I suppose you say well met, also. Are you starving, or am I to be starved? Have you eat up the supper, or only sat longing for it, cursing my delay?”

“The latter, only the latter,” cried a lively youth, hurrying to meet his master. Another and another advanced, and in a moment he was locked in a close circle.

“Mercy! mercy!” cried the philosopher, “drive me a step further, and you will overturn a couple of statues.” Then, looking over his shoulder, I have brought you, if he has not run away, a very pleasant young Corinthian, for whom, until he gain his own tongue, I shall demand reception.” He held out his hand with a look of bewitching encouragement, and the yet faltering Theon advanced. The mist had now passed from his eyes, and the singing from his ears, and both room and company stood revealed before him. Perhaps, had it not been for this motion, and still more this look of the sage, he had just now made a retreat instead of an advance.” In the hall of Epicurus — in that hall where Timocrates had beheld” oh, horrid imagination! “And he a disciple of Zeno, the friend of Cleanthes — the son of a follower of Plato — had he crossed the threshold of vice, the threshold of the impious Gargettian;” Yes; he had certainly fled, but for that extended hand, and that bewitching smile. These however conquered. He advanced, and, with an effort at composure, met the offered hand. The circle made way, and Epicurus presented ‘a friend.’ “His name you must learn from himself, I am only acquainted with his heart, and that on a knowledge of two hours, I pronounce myself in love with.”

“Then he shall be my brother,” cried the lively youth who had before spoken, and he ran to the embrace of Theon.

“When shall we use our own eyes, ears, and understandings” said the sage, gently stroking his scholar’s head. ” See our new friend knows not how to meet your premature affection.”

“He waits,” returned the youth archly, “to receive the same commendation of me that I have of him. Let the master say he is in love with my heart, and he too will open his arms to a brother.”

“I hope he is not such a fool,” gaily replied the sage. Then, with an accent more serious, but still sweeter, ” I hope he will judge all things, and all people, with his own understanding, and not with that of Epicurus, or yet of a wiser man. “When may I hope this of Sofron?” smiling and shaking his head; “can Sofron tell me?”

“No, indeed he cannot,” rejoined the scholar, smiling and shaking his head also, as in mimicry of his master.

“Go, go, you rogue! and show us to our supper: I more than half suspect you have devoured it.” He turned, and’ familiarly taking Theon by the shoulder, walked up the room, or rather gallery, and entered a spacious rotunda.

A lamp, suspended from the centre of the ceiling, lighted a table spread beneath it, with, a simple but elegant repast. Round the walls, in niches at equal distances, stood twelve statues, the work of the best masters; on either hand of these burnt a lamp on a small tripod. Beside one of the lamps, a female figure was reclining on a couch, reading with earnest study from a book that lay upon her knee. Her head was so much bowed forward as to conceal her face, besides that it was shadowed by her hand, which, the elbow supported on an arm of the couch, was spread above her brows as a relief from the glare of the light. At her feet was seated a young girl by whose side lay a small cithara, silent and forgotten by its mistress. Crete might have lent those eyes their sparkling jet, but all the soul of tenderness that breathed from them was pure Ionian. The full and ruddy lips, half parted, showed two rows of pearls, which Thetis might have envied. Still a vulgar eye would not have rested on the countenance: the features wanted the Doric harmony, and the complexion was tinged as by an Afric sun. Theon, however, saw not this, as his eyes fell on those of the girl, uplifted to the countenance of her studious companion. Never was a book read more earnestly than was that face by the fond and gentle eyes which seemed to worship as they gazed. The sound of approaching feet caught the ear of the maiden. She rose, blushed, half returned the salute of the master, and timidly drew back some paces. The student was still intent upon the scroll over which she hung, when the sage advanced towards her and laying a finger on her shoulder, “What read you my daughter?”

She dropt her hand, and looked up in his face. What a countenance was then revealed! It was not the beauty of blooming, blushing youth, courting love and desire. It was the self-possessed dignity of ripened womanhood, and the noble majesty of mind, that asked respect and promised delight and instruction. The features were not those of Venus, but Minerva. The eyes looked deep and steady from beneath two even brows, that sense, not years, had slightly knit in centre of the forehead, which else was uniformly smooth, and polished as marble. The nose was rather Roman than Grecian, yet perfectly regular, and, though not masculine, would have been severe in expression, but for a mouth where all that was lovely and graceful habited. The chin was elegantly rounded, and turned in the Greek manner. The colour of the cheeks was of the softest and palest rose, so pale, indeed, as scarcely to be discernible until deepened by emotion. It was so at this moment: startled by the address of the sage, a bright flush passed over her face. She rolled up the book, dropped it on the couch, and rose. Her stature was much above the female standard, but every limb and every motion was symmetry and harmony.

“A treatise of Theophrastus; — eloquent, ingenious, and chimerical. I have a fancy to answer it.” Her voice was lull and deep, like the tones of a harp, when its chords are struck by the hands of a master.

“No one could do it better,” replied the sage. But I should have guessed the aged Peripatetic already silenced by the most acute, elegant, and subtle pen of Athens.” She bowed to the compliment.

“Is that then the famous Leontium?” muttered Theon. “Timocrates must be a liar.”

“I know not,” resumed Leontium, “that I should this evening have so frequently thought Theophrastus wrong, if he had not made me so continually feel that he thought himself right. Must I seek the cause of this in the writer’s or the reader’s vanity?”

“Perhaps,” said the master, smiling, ” you will find that it lies in both.”

“I believe you have it,” returned Leontium. “Theophrastus, in betraying his self-love, hurt mine. He who is about to prove that his own way of thinking is right, must bear in mind, that he is about also to prove that all other ways of thinking are wrong. And if this should make him slow to enter on the undertaking, it should make him yet more careful, when he does enter on it, to do it with becoming modesty. We are surely imperiously called upon to make a sacrifice of our own vanity, before we call upon others to make a sacrifice of theirs. But I would not particularize Theophrastus for sometimes forgetting this, as I have never known but one who always remembers it. Gentleness and modesty are qualities at once the most indispensable to a teacher, and the most rarely possessed by him. It was these that won the ears of the Athenian youth to Socrates, and it is these,” inclining to the master, “that will secure them to Epicurus.”

“Could I accept your praise, my daughter, I should have no doubt of the truth of your prophecy. For, indeed, the mode of delivering a truth makes, for the most part, as much impression on the mind of the listener, as the truth itself. It is as hard to receive the words of wisdom from the ungentle, as it is to love, or even to recognize virtue in the austere.” He drew near the table as he spoke. Often during supper were the eyes of Theon riveted on the face of this female disciple. Such grace! such majesty! More than all such intellect! And this — this was the Leontium Timocrates had called a prostitute without shame or measure! And this was the Epicurus he had blasted with names too vile and horrible to repeat even in thought! And these — continuing his inward soliloquy as he looked round the board — these were the devoted victims of the vice of an impious master.

“You arrived most seasonably this evening,” cried Sofron, addressing the philosopher; “most seasonably for the lungs of two of your scholars.”

“And for the ears of a third,” interrupted Leontium. “I was fairly driven into exile.”

“What was the subject?” asked Epicurus.

“Whether the vicious were more justly objects of indignation or of contempt: Metrodorus argued for the first, and I for the latter. Let the master decide.”

“He will give his opinion certainly; but that is not decision.”

“Well: and your opinion is that of ––––.”

“Neither.”

“Neither! I had no idea the question had more than two sides.”

“It has yet a third; and I hardly ever heard a question that had not. Had I regarded the vicious with indignation, I had never gained one to virtue. Had I viewed them with contempt, I had never sought to gain one.”

“How is it,” said Leontium, “that the scholars are so little familiar with the temper of their master? When did Epicurus look on the vicious with other than compassion?”

“True,” said Metrodorus. “I know not how I forgot this, when perhaps it is the only point which I have, more than once, presumed to argue with him; and upon which I have persisted in retaining a different opinion.”

“Talk not of presumption, my son. Who has not a right to think for himself? Or, who is he whose voice is infallible, and worthy to silence those of his fellow men? And remember, that your remaining unconvinced by my argument on one occasion, can only tend to make your conviction more flattering to me upon others. Yet, on the point in question, were I anxious to bring you over to my opinion I know one, whose argument, better and more forcible than mine, will ere long most effectually do so.”

“Who mean you ?”

“No other than old hoary Time,” said the master, “who, as he leads us gently onwards in the path of life, demonstrates to us many truths that we never heard in the schools, and some that, hearing there, we found hard to receive. Our knowledge of human life must be acquired by our passage through it; the lessons of the sage are not sufficient to impart it. Our knowledge of men must be acquired by our own study of them; the report of others will never convince us. When you, my son, have seen more of life, and studied more men, you will find, or, at least, I *think* you will find, that the judgment is not false which makes us lenient to the failings — yea! even to the crimes of our fellows. In youth, we act on the impulse of feeling, and we feel without pausing to judge. An action, vicious in itself, or that is so merely in our estimation, fills us with horror, and we turn from its agent without waiting to listen to the plea which his ignorance could make to our mercy. In our ripened years, supposing our judgment to have ripened also, when all the insidious temptations that misguided him, and all the disadvantages that he has labored under, perhaps-from his birth, are apparent to us — it is then, and not till then, that our indignation at the crime is lost in our pity of the man.”

“I am the last,” said Metrodorus, a crimson blush spreading over his face, “who should object to my master his clemency towards the offending. But there are vices, different from those he saved me from, which, if not more unworthy, are perhaps more unpardonable, because committed with less temptation; and more revolting, as springing less from thoughtless ignorance than calculating depravity.”

“Are we not prone,” said the sage, “to extenuate our foibles, even while condemning them? And does it not flatter our self-love, to weigh our own vices against those of more erring neighbors?”

The scholar leaned forwards, and stooping his face towards the hand of his master, where it rested on the table, laid the deepening crimsons of his cheek upon it. “I mean not to exculpate the early vices of Metrodorus. I love to consider them in all their enormity; for the more heinous the vices of his youth, the greater is the debt of gratitude his manhood has to repay to thee. But tell me,” he added, and lifted his eyes to the benignant face of the sage, “tell me, oh, my friend and guide! was the soul of Metrodorus found base or deceitful; or has his heart proved false to gratitude and affection?”

“No, my son, no,” said Epicurus, his face beaming with goodness, and a tear glistening in his eye. “No! Vice never choked the warm feelings of thy heart, nor clouded the fair ingenuousness of thy soul. But, my son, a few years later — a few years later, and who shall say what *might* have been! Trust me, none can drink of the cup of vice with impunity.” But you will say, that there are qualities of so mean or so horrible a nature, as to place the man that is governed by them out of the pale of communion with the virtuous. Malice, cruelty, deceit, ingratitude — crimes such as these, should, you think, draw down upon those convicted of them, no feelings more mild than abhorrence, execration, and scorn. And yet, perhaps, these were not always natural to the heart they now sway. Fatal impressions, vicious example, operating on the plastic frame of childhood, may have perverted all the fair gifts of nature, may have distorted the tender plant from the seedling, and crushed all the blossoms of virtue in the germ. Say, shall we not compassionate the moral disease of our brother, and try our skill to restore him to health? But is the evil beyond cure? Is the mind strained into changeless deformity, and the heart corrupted in the core? Greater, then, much greater will be our compassion. For is not his wretchedness complete, when his errors are without hope of correction? Oh, my sons! the wicked may work mischief to others, but they never can inflict a pang such as they endure themselves. I am satisfied, that of all the miseries that tear the heart of man, none may compare with those it feels beneath the sway of baleful passions.”

“Oh,” cried Theon, turning with a timid blush towards Epicurus, “I have long owned the power of virtue, but surely till this night I never felt its persuasion.”

“I see you were not born for a stoic,” said the master, smiling, “Why, my son, what made you fall in love with Zeno?”

“His virtues,” said the youth, proudly.

“His fine face and fine talking,” returned the philosopher, with a tone of playful irony. “Nay! don’t be offended;” and he stretched his hand to Theon’s shoulder, who reclined on the sofa next him. “I admire your master very much, and go to hear him very often.”

“Indeed!”

“Indeed? Yes, indeed. Is it so wonderful?”

“You were not there.” — Theon stopped and looked down in confusion.

“To-day, you mean? Yes, I was; and heard a description of myself that might match in pleasantry with that in ‘*The Clouds’* of old Socrates.

Pray don’t you find it very like?” He leaned over the side of the couch, and looked in Theon’s face.

“I — I” — The youth stammered and looked down. “Think it is,” said the sage, as if concluding the sentence for him.

“No, think it is not; swear it is not,” burst forth the eager youth, and looked as he would have thrown himself at the philosopher’s feet. “Oh! why did you not stand forth and silence the liar?”

“Truly, my son, the liar was too pleasant to be angry with, and too absurd to be answered.”

“And yet he was believed?”

“Of course.”

“But why then not answer him?”

“And so I do. I answer him in my life. The only way in which a philosopher should ever answer a fool, or, as in this case, a knave.”

“I am really bewildered,” cried Theon, gazing in the philosopher’s and then in Leontium’s countenance, and then throwing a glance round the circle. “I am really bewildered with astonishment and shame,” he continued, casting down his eyes, “that I should have listened to that liar Timocrates! What a fool you must think me!”

“No more of a fool than Zeno,” said the sage, laughing, “What a philosopher listened to, I cannot much blame a scholar for believing.”

“Oh, that Zeno knew you!”

“And then he would certainly hate me.”

“You joke.”

“Quite serious. Don’t you know that who quarrels with your doctrine, must always quarrel with your practice? Nothing is so provoking as that a man should preach viciously and act

virtuously.”

“But you do not preach viciously.”

“I hope not. But those will call it so, aye! and in honest heart think it so, who preach a different, it need not be a *better*, doctrine.”

“But Zeno mistakes your doctrine.”

“I have no doubt he expounds it wrong.”

“He mistakes it altogether. He believes that you own no other law — no other principle of action — than pleasure.”

“He believes right.”

“Right? Impossible! That you teach men to laugh at virtue, and to riot in luxury and vice.”

“There he believes wrong.”

Theon looked as he felt, curious and uncertain. He gazed first on the philosopher, and, when he did not proceed, timidly round the circle.

Every face had a smile on it.

“The orgies are concluded,” said Epicurus, rising, and turning with affected gravity to the young Corinthian. “You have seen the horrors of the night; if they have left any curiosity for the mysteries of the day, seek our garden to-morrow at sun-rise, and you shall be initiated.”