

AFDIA - Chapter Three - Text and Discussion

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2019 at 6:49 PM

CHAPTER III.

The steeds of the sun had not mounted the horizon when Theon took the road to the gardens. He found the gate open. The path he entered on was broad and even, and shaded on either side by rows of cork, lime, oak, and other the finest trees of the forest: pursuing this for some way, he suddenly opened on a fair and varied lawn, through which the Illissus, now of the whitest silver in the pale twilight, stole with a gentle and noiseless course. Crossing the lawn, he struck into a close thicket: the orange, the laurel, and the myrtle, hung over his head, whose flowers, slowly opening to the breeze and light of morning, dropped dews and perfumes. A luxurious indolence crept over his soul; he breathed the airs, and felt the bliss of Elysium. With slow and measured steps he threaded the maze, till he entered suddenly on a small open plot of verdure, in face of a beautiful temple. The place was three parts encircled with a wood of flowering shrubs, the rest was girded by the winding Illissus, over which the eye wandered to glades and softly swelling hills, whose bosoms now glowed beneath the dyes of Aurora. The building was small and circular; Doric, and of the marble of Paros: an open portico, supported by twenty pillars, ran round the edifice: the roof rose in a dome. The roseate tints of the east fell on the polished columns, like the blush of love on the cheek of Diana, when, she stood before her Endymion.

Theon stopped: the scene was heavenly. Long had he gazed in silent and calm delight, when his eye was attracted by the waving of a garment on one side of the temple. He advanced, and beheld a figure leaning against one of the pillars. The sun at that moment shot his first beam above the hills: it fell full upon the face of the son of Neocles: it was raised, and the eyes were fixed as in deep meditation. The features reposed in the calm of wisdom: the arms were folded, and the drapery fell in masses to the feet. Theon flew towards him, then suddenly stopped, fearing to break upon his thoughts. At the sound, the sage turned his head — "Welcome, my son," he said, advancing to meet him, "welcome to the gardens of pleasure; may you find it the abode of peace, of wisdom, and of virtue."

Theon bowed his head upon the hand of the master. "Teach me, guide me, make me what you will — my soul is in your hand."

"It is yet tender, yet pure," said the Gargettian; "years shall strengthen it. Oh! let them not sully it! See to that luminary! lovely and glorious in the dawn, he gathers strength and beauty to his meridian, and passes in peace and grandeur to his rest. So do thou, my son. Open your ears and your eyes; know, and choose what is good; enter the path of virtue, and thou shalt follow it, for you shall find it sweet. Thorns are not in it, nor is it difficult or steep: like the garden you have now entered, all there is pleasure and repose."

"Ah!" cried Theon, "how different is virtue in your mouth and in Zeno's."

"The doctrine of Zeno," replied the sage, "is sublime: many great men shall come from his school; an amiable world, from mine. Zeno has his eye on man — I, mine on men: none but philosophers can be stoics; Epicureans all may be."

"But," asked Theon, "is there more than one virtue?"

"No, but men clothe her differently; some in clouds and thunders; some in smiles and pleasures. Doctors, my son, quarrel more about words than things, and more about the means than the end. In the Portico, in the Lyceum, in the Academy, in the school of Pythagoras, in the Tub of Diogenes, the teacher points you to virtue; in the garden he points you to happiness. Now open your eyes, my son, and examine the two Deities. Say, are they not the same? virtue is it not happiness? and is not happiness, virtue?"

"Is this, then, the secret of your doctrine?"

"No other."

"But — but — where then is the dispute? Truly, as you have said, in words, not things."

"Yes, in a great measure, yet not all together: we are all the wooers of virtue, but we are wooers of a different character."

"And may she not then favor one more than another?"

"That is a question," replied the Gargettian, playfully, "that each will answer in his own favor. If you ask me, he continued, — with one of his sweetest tones and smiles, "I shall say, that I feel myself virtuous, because my soul is at rest."

"If this be your criterion, you should with the stoics deny that pain is an evil."

"By no means: so much the contrary, I hold it the greatest of all evils, and the whole aim of my life, and of my philosophy, is to escape from it. To deny that pain is an evil is such another quibble as the Elean's denial of motion: that must exist to man which exists to his senses; and as to existence or non existence abstracted from them, though it may afford an idle argument for an idle hour, it can never enter as a truth, from which to draw conclusions, in the practical lessons of a master. To deny that pain is an evil seems more absurd than to deny its existence, which has also been done, for its existence is only apparent from its effect upon our senses; how then shall we admit the existence, and deny the effect, which alone forces that admittance? But we will leave these matters to the dialecticians of the Portico.{12} I feel myself virtuous because my soul is at rest. With evil passions I should be disturbed and uneasy; with uncontrolled appetites I should be disordered in body as well as mind — for this reason, and for this reason only, I avoid both."

"Only!"

"Only: virtue is pleasure; were it not so, I should not follow it."

Theon was about to break forth in indignant astonishment: the sage softly laid a hand upon his arm, and, with a smile and bend of the head demanding attention, proceeded; "The masters who would have us to follow virtue for her own sake, independent of any pleasure or advantage that we may find in the pursuit, are sublime visionaries, who build a theory without examining the ground on which they build it, who advance doctrines without examining principles. Why do I gaze on the Cupid of Praxiteles? because it is beautiful; because it gives me pleasurable sensations. If it gave me no pleasurable sensations, should I find it beautiful? should I gaze upon it? or would you call me wise if then I gave a drachma for its possession? What other means have we of judging of things than by the effect they produce upon our senses? Our senses then being the judges of all things, the aim of all men is to gratify their senses; in other words, their aim is pleasure or happiness: and if virtue were not found to conduce to this, men would do well to shun her, as they now do well to shun vice."

"You own then no pleasure but virtue, and no misery but vice?"

"Not at all: I think virtue only the highest pleasure, and vice, or ungoverned passions and appetites, the worst misery. Other pleasures are requisite to form a state of perfect ease, which is happiness; and other miseries are capable of troubling, perhaps destroying, the peace of the most virtuous and the wisest man."

"I begin to see more reason in your doctrine," said the youth, looking up with a timid blush in the face of the philosopher.

"And less monstrous depravity," replied the Gargettian, laughing, "My young friend," he continued, more seriously, "learn henceforth to form your judgments upon knowledge, not report. Credulity is always a ridiculous, often a dangerous failing: it has made of many a clever man, a fool; and of many a good man, a knave. But have you nothing to urge against me? You say you see more reason in my doctrine, which implies, that you think me less wrong, but not right."

"I am a young disputant," answered Theon, "and very unfit to engage with such a master."

"That does not follow; a bad logician may have a good understanding; and a young mind may be an acute one. If my argument have truth in it, less than a philosopher will see it; and if it have not, less than a logician may refute it."

"I think I could urge some objections," replied Theon; "but they are so confused and indistinct, I almost fear to bring them forth."

"I dare say I could forestall the most of them," said the master. "But I had rather leave your mind to its own exercise. Think over the matter at leisure, and you shall start your questions some evening or morning among my scholars. Knowledge is better imparted in a dialogue than a lecture; and a dialogue is not the worse for having more than two interlocutors. So! our walk has well ended with our subject. Let us see what friends are here. There are surely voices."

Their route had been circular, and had brought them again in front of the temple. "This is a favorite lodgment of mine," said the sage, ascending the noble flight of steps and entering the open door. The apartment, spacious, vaulted, and circular, occupied the whole of the building. The walls were adorned with fine copies of the best pieces of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, and some beautiful originals of Apelles. A statue, the only one in the apartment, was raised on a pedestal in the centre. It was a Venus Urania, by the hand of Lysippus, well chosen as the presiding deity in the gardens of virtuous pleasure. The ceiling, rising into a noble dome, represented the heavens — a ground of deep blue; the stars, sun, and planets, in raised gold. But two living figures soon fixed the attention of Theon. In one he recognized Metrodorus, though he had not the evening before much observed his countenance. He stood at a painter's easel. His figure was more graceful than dignified, his face more expressive than handsome. The eyes, dark, piercing, and brilliant, were bent in a painter's earnest gaze on his living study. The forehead was short, raised much at the temples, and singularly over the brows. The hair of a dark glossy brown, short and curled. The cheeks at the moment deeply flushed with the eagerness, and, perhaps, the impatience of an artist. The mouth curled voluptuously, yet not without a mixture of satire; the chin curved upwards, slightly Grecian, assisted this expression. His study was Leontium. She stood, rather than leaned, against a pilaster of the wall; one arm supported on a slab of marble, an unrolled book half lying on the same, and half in her opened hand. The other arm, partly hid in the drapery, dropped loosely by her side. Her fine face turned a little over the left shoulder, to meet the eye of the painter. Not a muscle played; the lips seemed not to breathe: so calm, so pale, so motionless — she looked a statue; so noble, so severely beautiful — she looked the Minerva of Phidias.

"I cannot do it!" cried Metrodorus, flinging down his pencil. "I had need be Apelles, to take that face." He pushed back his easel in disgust.

"What!" said Leontium, her fine features relaxing into a heavenly smile, "and is all my patience to go for nothing?"

"I am a blundering, blind Boeotian! a savage Spartan!" continued the disappointed artist. "There!" and seizing a brush, was about to demolish his work.

"For your life!" cried Leontium; and starting forward, pulled aside his hand. "Oh, the mad ill-temper of a genius! Why, friend, if my face were half so fine as that, Juno would be jealous of it."

"And who knows that she is not? A daub! a vile daub!" still muttered the impatient scholar, yet his face gradually relaxing its anger, as in spite of itself, till it turned to meet Leontium's with a smile.

"And there stand the master and the young Corinthian laughing at you," said Leontium.

They approached. "Are you a judge?" asked Metrodorus of Theon.

"I am afraid not, though the confession will mar my compliments."

"But I am," said the Gargettian, humorously: "and though I have all the inclination in the world, yet I cannot quarrel with the performance. Well outlined and finely coloured. The attitude and air hit exactly. The features too. Perhaps — the only possible perhaps my ill-nature can stumble on — perhaps the expression is too blooming, and less mental than that of the original."

"Why there — there it is!" cried the scholar, his face resuming all its vexation. "The look of an idiot instead of a genius."

"Not quite that either: only of a Hebe instead of a Juno. More like our Hedeia."

"Like a monster!" muttered the angry artist.

"Oh Hercules, oh Hercules!" cried the sage. "What it is to rub a sore place! Better break a man's leg than blow a feather on his razed shin. Had I (turning to Theon) told him he had drawn a hump-backed Thersites he would have blessed me, rather than for this pretty compliment of a blooming-faced Hebe."

"I might as well have done one as the other; they were equally like the original."

"I must bow to that compliment," said Leontium, laying her hand on her breast, and inclining with affected gravity to the painter.

He tried in vain to resist the laugh: then looking to the master — "What would you have me turn it to?"

"As you object to a Hebe, to a philosopher by all means. Silver the head a little, it may be an admirable Epicurus."

"Nay! don't make the madman furious," said Leontium, placing her hand on Metrodorus's shoulder; then addressing Theon, "Pray, young man, if you want to be a philosopher, never find an eye for painting, a finger for music, or a brain for poetry. Any one of these will keep a man from wisdom."

"But not a woman, I suppose," retorted Metrodorus, "as you have all three."

"Ready at compliments this morning: but if you wanted a bow for this, you should have given it with a more gracious face. But come, my poor friend; we will try and put you in good humor — nothing like a little flattery for this. Here, my young Corinthian! (walking to the other side of the room to a newly finished picture that stood against the wall, and beckoning Theon towards her,) you may without skill perceive the beauty of this work, and the excellence of the likeness."

It was indeed striking. "Admirable!" cried Theon, after a long gaze of admiration, and then turning to compare it with the original.

"A little flattered, and more than a little, I fear," said Epicurus with a smile, as he moved towards them.

"Flattered!" exclaimed Metrodorus; a Parrhasius could not flatter such an original."

"You see how my scholars spoil me," said the Gargettian to Theon.

"But you think," continued Metrodorus, " that I have done it common justice."

"Much more than common: — It is your Master's self. The dignity of his figure, the grace of his attitude, the nobility of his features, the divine benignity of his expression. Had we not the original to worship, we might worship your copy."

They were interrupted by the entrance of a crowd of disciples, in the midst of whose salutations young Sofron rushed in, breathless with running and convulsed with laughter.