

AFDIA - Chapter One - Text and Discussion

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDceb_E1-6U

"Oh monstrous," cried the young Theon, as he came from the portico of Zeno. "Ye Gods! and will ye suffer your names to be thus blasphemed? How do ye not strike with thunder the actor and teacher of such enormities? What! will ye suffer our youth, and the youth of after ages, to be seduced by this shameless Gargettian? Shall the Stoic portico be forsaken for the garden of Epicurus? Minerva, shield thy city! Shut the ears of thy sons against the voice of this deceiver!"

Thus did Theon give vent to the indignation which the words of Timocrates had worked up within him. Timocrates had been a disciple of the new school; but, quarreling with his master, had fled to the followers of Zeno; and to make the greater merit of his apostacy, and better to gain the hearts of his new friends, poured forth daily execrations on his former teacher, painting him and his disciples in the blackest colours of deformity; revealing, with a countenance distorted as with horror, and a voice hurried and suppressed as from the agonies of dreadful recollections, the secrets of those midnight orgies, where, in the midst of his pupils, the philosopher of Gargettium officiated as master of the cursed ceremonies of riot and impiety.

Full of these nocturnal horrors, the young Theon traversed with hasty steps the streets of Athens, and issuing from the city, without perceiving that he did so, took the road to the Piraeus. The noise of the harbor roused him to recollection, and, feeling it out of tune with his thoughts, he turned up the more peaceful banks of the Cephissus, and, seating himself on the stump of a withered olive, his feet almost washed by the water, he fell back again into his reverie. How long he had sat he knew not, when the sound of gently approaching footsteps once more recalled him. He turned his head, and, after a start and gaze of astonishment, bent with veneration to the figure before him. It was of the middle size, and robed in white, pure as the vestments of the Pythia. The shape, the attitude, the foldings of the garment, were such as the chisel of Phidias would have given to the God of Elocution. The head accorded with the rest of the figure; it sat upon the shoulders with a grace that a painter would have paused to contemplate — elevated, yet somewhat inclining forward, as if habituated gently to seek and benevolently to yield attention. The face a poet would have gazed upon, and thought he beheld in it one of the images of his fancy embodied. The features were not cast for the statuary; they were noble, but not regular. Wisdom beamed mildly from the eye, and candor was on the broad forehead, the mouth reposed in a soft, almost imperceptible smile, that did not curl the lips or disturb the cheeks, and was seen only in the serene and holy benignity that shone over the whole physiognomy: it was a gleam of sunshine sleeping on a lucid lake. The first lines of age were traced on the brow and round the chin, but so gently as to mellow rather than deepen

expression: the hair indeed seemed prematurely touched by time, for it was of a pure silver, thrown back from the forehead, and fringing the throat behind with short curls. He received benignly the salutation of the youth, and gently with his hand returning it — "Let me not break your meditations; I would rather share than disturb them." If the stranger's appearance had enchanted Theon, his voice did now more so; never had a sound so sweet, so musical, struck upon his ear.

"Surely I behold and hear a divinity," he cried, stepping backwards, and half-stooping his knee with veneration.

"From the groves of the Academy, I see," said the sage, advancing, and laying his hand on the youth's shoulder.

Theon looked up with a modest blush, and, encouraged by the sweet aspect of the sage, replied, "No; from the portico."

"Ah! I had not thought Zeno could send forth such a dreamer. You are in a good school," he continued, observing the youth confused by his remark, "a school of real virtue; and, if I read faces well, as I think I do, I see a pupil that will not disgrace its doctrines."

Theon's spirit returned; the stranger had that look, and voice, and manner, which instantly give security to the timid, and draw love from the feeling heart. "If you be man, you exert more than human influence over the souls of your fellows. I have seen you but one moment, and that moment has laid me at your feet."

"Not quite so low, I hope," returned the sage, with a smile; "I had always rather be the companion than the master."

"Either, both," said the eager youth, and, seizing the half-extended hand of the sage, pressed it respectfully to his lips.

"You are an enthusiast, I see. Beware, my young friend! Such as you must be the best or the worst of men."

"Then, had I you for a guide, I should be the best."

"What! do you, a stoic, ask a guide?"

"I, a stoic! Oh, would I were; I yet stand but on the threshold of the temple."

"But, standing there, you have at least looked within and seen the glories, and will not that encourage you to advance? Who that hath seen virtue doth not love her, and pant after her possession?"

"True, true; I have seen virtue in her noblest form—alas! so noble, that my eyes have been dazzled by the contemplation. I have looked upon Zeno with admiration and despair."

"Learn rather to look with love. He who but admires virtue, yields her but half her due. She asks to be approached, to be embraced — not with fear, but with confidence —not with awe, but with rapture."

"Yet who can gaze on Zeno, and ever hope to rival him?"

"You, my young friend: Why should you not? You have innocence; you have sensibility; you have enthusiasm; you have ambition. With what better promise could Zeno begin his career. Courage! courage! my son! stopping, for they had insensibly walked towards the city during the dialogue, and laying his hand on Theon's head, "we want but the will to be as great as Zeno."

Theon had drawn his breath for a sigh, but this action and the look that accompanied it, changed the sigh to a smile. "You would make me vain."

"No; but I would make you confident. Without confidence Homer had never written his Iliad. No, nor would Zeno now be worshiped in his portico."

"Do you then think confidence would make all men Homers and Zenos!"

"Not all; but a good many. I believe thousands to have the seeds of excellence in them, who never discover the possession. But we were not speaking of poetry and philosophy, only of virtue — all men certainly cannot be poets or philosophers, but all men may be virtuous."

"I believe," returned the youth with a modest blush, "if I might walk with you each day on the borders of Cephisus, I should sometimes play truant at the portico."

"Ye gods forbid," exclaimed the sage, playfully, "that I should steal a proselyte! From Zeno, too? It might cost me dear. — What are you thinking of?" he resumed, after a pause.

"I was thinking," replied Theon, "what a loss for man that you are not teacher in the gardens in place of the son of Neocles."

"Do you know the son of Neocles?" asked the sage.

"The gods forbid that I should know him more than by report! No, venerable stranger; wrong me not so much as to think I have entered the gardens of Epicurus. It is not long that I have been in Athens, but I hope, if I should henceforth live my life here, I shall never be seduced by the advocate of vice."

"From my soul I hope the same. But you say you have not long been in Athens. You are come here to study philosophy."

"Yes; my father was a scholar of Xenocrates; but when he sent me from Corinth, he bade me attend all the schools, and fix with that which should give me the highest views of virtue."

"And you have found it to be that of Zeno."

"I think I have: but I was one day nearly gained by a young Pythagorean, and have been often in danger of becoming one of the academy."

You need not say in danger: for, though I think you choose well in standing mainly by Zeno, I would have you attend all the schools, and that with a willing ear. There is some risk in following one particular sect, even the most perfect, lest the mind become warped and the heart contracted. Yes, young man! it is possible that this should happen even in the portico. No sect without its prejudices and its predilections."

"I believe you say true."

"I know I say true," returned the sage, in a tone of playfulness he had more than once used; I know I say true; and had I before needed evidence to confirm my opinion, this our present conversation would have afforded it."

"How so!"

"Nay, were I to explain, you would not now credit me; no man can see his own prejudices; no, though a philosopher should point at them. But patience, patience! Time and opportunity shall right all things. Why, you did not think," he resumed, after a short pause, "you did not really think you were without prejudices? Eighteen, not more, if I may judge by complexion, and without prejudices! Why, I should hardly dare to assert I was myself without them, and I believe I have fought harder and somewhat longer against them than you can have done."

"What would you have me do!" asked the youth timidly.

"Have you do? Why, I would have you do a very odd thing. No other than to take a turn or two in Epicurus' garden."

"Epicurus' garden! Oh, Jupiter!"

"Very true, by Juno."

"What! To hear the laws of virtue confounded and denied? To hear vice exculpated, advocated, panegyrised? Impiety and atheism professed and inculcated? To witness the nocturnal orgies of vice and debauchery? Ye gods, what horrors has Timocrates revealed!"

"Horrors, in truth, somewhat appalling, my young friend; but I should apprehend Timocrates to be a little mistaken. That the laws of virtue were ever confounded and denied, or vice advocated and panegyrised, by any professed teacher, I incline to doubt. And were I really to hear such things, I should simply conclude the speaker mad, or otherwise that he was amusing himself by shifting the meaning of words, and that by the term virtue, he understood vice, and so by the contrary. As to the inculcating of impiety and atheism, this may be exaggerated or misunderstood. Many are called impious not for having a worse, but a different religion from their neighbors ; and many atheistical, not for the denying of God, but for thinking somewhat peculiarly concerning him. Upon the nocturnal orgies of vice and debauchery I can say nothing; I am too profoundly ignorant of these matters either to exculpate or condemn them. Such

things may be, and I never hear of them. All things are possible. Yes," turning his benignant face full upon the youth, "even that Timocrates should lie."

"This possibility had indeed not occurred to me."

"No, my young friend; and shall I tell you why? Because he told you absurdities. Let an impostor keep to probability, and he will hardly impose. By dealing in the marvelous, he tickles the imagination, and carries away the judgment; and, judgment once gone, what shall save even a wise man from folly?"

"I should truly rejoice to find the Gargettian's doctrines less monstrous than I have hitherto thought them. I say less monstrous, for you would not wish me to think them good."

"I would wish you to think nothing good, or bad either, upon my decision. The first and the last thing I would say to man is, think for yourself. It is a bad sentence of the Pythagoreans, 'The master said so.' If the young disciple you mentioned should ever succeed in your conversion, believe in the metempsychosis for some other reason than that Pythagoras 'taught it.'"

"But if I may ask, do you think well of Epicurus?"

"I meant not to make an apology for Epicurus, only to give a caution against Timocrates — but see, we are in the city; and, fortunately so, for it is pretty nigh dark. I have a party of young friends awaiting me, and, but that you may be apprehensive of nocturnal orgies, I would ask you to join us."

"I shall not fear them where I have such a conductor," replied the youth, laughing.

"I do not think it quite so impossible, however, as you seem to do," said the sage, laughing, in his turn, with much humor, and entering a house as he spoke; then throwing open with one arm a door, and with the other gently drawing the youth along with him, "I am Epicurus."