

AFDIA - Chapter Six - Text and Discussion

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CHAPTER VI.

Theon rushed forward: he knelt; he raised the head of his friend: breathless, agitated, terrified, he called his name with the piercing cry of agony and despair. All was commotion and confusion. The scholar's pressed forward tumultuously; but Zeno, raising his arm, and looking steadily round, cried "Silence!" The crowd fell back, and the stillness of night succeeded. Then motioning the circle towards the street, to give way and admit the air, he stooped and assisted Theon to support his reviving pupil. Cleanthes raised his head, turned his eyes wildly around, and then fixed them on his master.

"Gently," said Zeno, as the youth struggled in their arms for recollection, "gently, my son." But he made the effort: he gained his feet, and throwing out his arm to a pillar neat him, turned his head aside, and for some moments combated with his weakness in silence. His limbs still trembled, and his face had yet the hues of death, when, pressing his hand with convulsive strength against the pillar, he proudly drew up his form, turned his eyes again upon his master, and mustering his broken respiration—"Blame me, but do not despise me."

"I shall do neither, my son: the weakness was in the body, not the mind."

"There has been want of command in both. I ask not to be excused." Then turning round to his companions, "I may be a warning, if not an example. The Spartans expose the drunkenness of their Helots to confirm their youth in sobriety: let the weakness of Cleanthes teach the sons of Zeno equanimity; and let them say, — if in the portico weakness be found, what shall it be in the gardens? But," he continued, addressing his master, "will Zeno pardon the scholar, who, while enforcing his nervous doctrines on others, has swerved from them himself?"

"Thou judgest thy fault as thou shouldst judge it," returned Zeno; "but comfort, my son! He who knows, and knowing can acknowledge his deficiency, though his foot be not on the summit, yet hath he his eye there. But say the cause, and surely it must be a great one, that could disturb the self-possession of my disciple."

"The cause was indeed a great one; no less than the apostacy of a scholar from Zeno to Epicurus."

Zeno turned his eyes round the circle: there was no additional severity in them, and no change in his manner, or in his deep sonorous voice, when, addressing them, he said, "If one, or more, or all of my disciples, be wearied of virtue, let them depart. Let them not fear upbraidings or exhortations; the one were useless to you, the other unworthy of me. He who sighs for pleasure, the voice of wisdom can never reach, nor the power of virtue touch. In this portico

truth will never be softened to win a sickly ear; nor the severity of virtue, will it ever be veiled to win a feeble heart. He who obeys in act and not in thought; he who disciplines his body and not his mind; he who hath his foot in the portico, and his heart in the gardens; he hath no more to do with Zeno, than a wretch sunk in all the effeminacy of a Median, or the gross debauchery of a Scythian. There is no mid-way in virtue; no halting place for the soul but perfection. You must be all, or you may be nothing. You must determine to proceed to the utmost, or I encourage ye not to begin. I say to ye, one and all, give me your ears, your understandings, your souls, and your energies, or depart!" Again he looked round upon his scholars. A long and deep silence succeeded: when young Theon, breaking through his awe and his timidity, advanced into the centre, and craving sufferance with his hand, addressed the assembly.

"Though I should forfeit the esteem of Zeno and the love of his disciples, I have no choice but to speak. Honor and justice demand this of me: first to remove suspicion from this assembly; next, to vindicate the character of a sage, whom the tongue of a liar hath traduced; and, lastly, to conciliate my own esteem, which I value beyond even the esteem of the venerated Zeno, and of my beloved Cleanthes." He paused, and turning to Zeno — "With permission of the master, I would speak."

"Speak, my son: we attend." Zeno retreated among his disciples; and Cleanthes, anxious and agitated for his friend, placed himself behind the screen of a pillar. With a varying cheek and tremulous voice, the youth began:

"In addressing an assembly accustomed to the manly elocution of a Zeno, and the glowing eloquence of a Cleanthes, I know I shall be forgiven by my companions, and I hope even by my severe master, the blushes and hesitations of timidity and inexperience. I open my mouth for the first time in public; and in what a public is it? Let not, therefore, my confusion be thought the confusion of guilt; but, as it truly is, of bashful inexperience. First, to remove suspicion from this assembly: —let not the scholars look with doubt on each other; let not the master look with doubt on his scholars. I am he who have communed with the son of Neocles; I am he who have entered the gardens of pleasure; I am he whom Cleanthes hath pointed at as the apostate from Zeno to Epicurus." A tumult arose among the scholars. Surprise, indignation, and scorn, variously looked from their faces, and murmured from their tongues.

"Silence!" cried Zeno, casting his severe glance round the circle. "Young man, proceed."

This burst of his audience rather invigorated than dashed the youth. He freely threw forth his arm; his eyes lighted with fire, and the ready words flowed from his lips. "I merit not the hiss of scorn, nor the burst of indignation. Desist, my brothers, till my artless tale be told; till you have heard, not my apology, but my justification. Yesterday, at this hour, I left the portico, heated to fury by the philippic of Timocrates against Epicurus and his disciples; indignant at the city that did not drive such a teacher from its walls; against the gods, who did not strike him with their thunders. Thus venting my feelings in soliloquy, after a long ramble I seated myself on the banks of Cephisus, and was awakened from a reverie by the approach of a stranger: his aspect had the wisdom of a sage, and the benignity of a divinity. I yielded him the homage of youthful

respect and admiration: he condescended to address me. He gave me the precepts of virtue with the gentle and honied tongue of kindness and persuasion. I listened, I admired, and I loved. We did not conclude our walk until sunset: he bade me to his supper. I entered his house, and he told me I beheld Epicurus. Could I have drawn back? Should I have drawn back? No: my heart answers, no. Your sufferance my friends! Do not interrupt me! Do not call me an apostate! In the presence of the gods; in the presence of my master, whom I fear as them; in the presence of my own conscience, which I fear more than both, I swear that I am not so! I mean not to explain or to justify the philosophy of Epicurus: I know but little of it. I only know — I only affirm, that his tongue has given new warmth to my love of virtue, and new vigor to my pursuit of it. I only affirm, that persuasion, simple, ungarnished persuasion, is on his lips; benevolence in his aspect; urbanity in his manners; generosity, truth, and candor, in his sentiments; I only affirm, that order, innocence, and content, are in his halls and his gardens; peace and brotherly love with his disciples; and that, in the midst of these, he is himself the philosopher, the parent, and the friend. I see the sneer of contempt upon your lips, my brothers; alas! even on the unperturbed countenance of my master I read displeasure."

"No, my son," said Zeno, "thou dost not. Continue thy artless tale. If there be error, it lies with the deceiver, not the deceived. And you, my sons and disciples, banish from your faces and your breasts every expression and every thought unworthy of your honest companion, and your upright sect. For remember, if to abhor falsehood and vice be noble, to distrust truth and innocence is mean. My son, proceed."

"Thanks for your noble confidence, my master: it makes me proud, for I deserve it. Yes! even should I, as I perceive you apprehend, be deceived, I feel that this open confession of my present perfect conviction is honorable both to myself and to Zeno. It proves that in his school I have learnt candor, though I have yet to learn discernment. And yet, methinks, however imperfect my youthful discernment, it is not now in error. If ever I saw simple, unadorned goodness; if ever I heard simple, unadorned truth, it is in, it is from Epicurus. Again your sufferance, my friends! Again your sufferance, my master! I am not — I wish not to be, a disciple of the gardens: virtue may be in them — excuse me, virtue is in them; but there is a virtue in the portico which I shall worship to my latest hour. Here, here I first learned — here I first saw to what a glorious height of greatness a mortal might ascend — how independent he might be of fortune; how triumphant over fate! Young, innocent, and inexperienced, I came to Athens in search of wisdom and virtue. 'Attend all the schools, and fix with that which shall give you the noblest aims,' said my father, when he gave me his parting blessing. He being an academician, I had, of course, somewhat imbibed the principles of Plato, and conceived a love for his school. On first hearing Crates, therefore, I thought myself satisfied. Accident made me acquainted with a young Pythagorean: I listened to his simple precepts; I loved his virtues, and almost fell into his superstitions. From these Theophrastes awakened me; and I was nearly fixed as a Peripatetic, when I met the eloquent, enthusiastic Cleanthes. He brought me to the portico, where I found all the virtues of all the schools united, and crowned with perfection. But when I preferred Zeno, I did not despise my former masters. I still sometimes visit the Lyceum and the academy, and still the young Pythagoraen is my friend. A pure mind should, I think,

respect virtue wherever it be found: and if then in the lyceum and the academy, why not in the gardens? Zeno, in teaching austerity, does not teach intolerance; much less, I am sure, does he teach ingratitude: and if I did not feel for the sage of Gargettium both respect and love, I were the most ungrateful soul in Athens; and if, feeling both, I feared to acknowledge both, I were the meanest. And now, my brothers, ask yourselves what would be your indignation at the youth, who for his vices being driven from this portico, should run to the lyceum, and accuse, to the sons of Aristotle, our great Zeno of that sensuality and wickedness which had here wrought his own disgrace, and his own banishment? Would ye not hate such a wretch? Would ye not loathe him? Would ye not curse him? My brothers! this day have I learned such a wretch to be Timocrates. Is he here? I hope he is. I hope he hears me denounce him for a defamer and an ingrate."

"'Tis false!" cried Timocrates, bursting in fury from the crowd. "'Tis false! I swear" —

"Beware of perjury!" said a clear, silver voice, from without the circle." Give way, Athenians! 'Tis for me to take up this quarrel."

The crowd divided. Every eye turned towards the opening. Theon shouted with triumph; Timocrates stood blank with dismay — for they recognized the voice and the form of the son of Neocles.