

AFDIA - Chapter Seven - Text and Discussion

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CHAPTER VII.

The sage advanced towards Theon: he laid a hand on either of his shoulders, and kissed his glowing forehead. "Thanks to my generous defender. Your artless tale, my son, if it have not gained the ear of Zeno, hath fixed the heart of Epicurus. Oh, ever keep this candor and this innocence!" He turned his benign face round the circle: "Athenians! I am Epicurus."

This name, so despised and execrated, did it not raise a tumult in the assembly? No; every tongue was chained, every breath suspended, every eye rivetted with wonder and admiration. Theon had said the truth: it was the aspect of a sage and a divinity. The face was a serene mirror of a serene mind: its expression spoke like music to the soul, Zeno's was not more calm and unruffled; but here was no severity, no authority, no reserve, no unapproachable majesty, no repelling superiority: all was benevolence, mildness, openness, and soothing encouragement. To see, was to love; and to hear, was to trust. Timocrates shrunk from the eye of his master: it fell upon him with a fixed and deep gaze, that struck more agony into his guilty soul, than had the flash of a Cleanthes, or the glance of a Zeno. The wretch sunk beneath it: he trembled; he crouched; he looked as if he would have supplicated mercy; but his tongue cleaved to his palate, and shame withheld him from quite dropping on his knees. "Go! I will spare thee. Give way Athenians!" The scholars opened a passage: again the sage waved his hand, and the criminal slunk away.

"Your pardon, Zeno," said the Gargettian; "I know the youth: he is not worthy to stand in the portico."

"I thank you," returned the master, "and my disciples thank you. The gods forbid that we should harbor vice, or distrust virtue. I see, and I recant my error: henceforth, if I cannot respect the teacher, I shall respect the man."

"I respect both," said Epicurus, reclining his head to the stoic. "I have long known and admired Zeno: I have often mixed with the crowd in his portico, and felt the might of his eloquence. I do not expect a similar return from him, nor do I wish to allure his scholars to my gardens. I know the severity of their master, and the austerity, may I say, the intolerance of his rules. But for one," and he laid his hand upon the head of Theon, "for this one, I would bespeak clemency. Let not that be imputed to him as a crime, which has been the work of accident and of Epicurus: and let me also say for him, as well as for myself — he has lost in the gardens no virtues, if a few prejudices."

"Son of Neocles," said Zeno, "I feared you yesterday, but I fear you doubly to-day. Your doctrines are in themselves enticing, but coming from such lips, I fear they are irresistible."

Methinks, I cast a prophet's eye on the map of futurity, and I see the sage of Gargettium standing on the pinnacle of fame, and a world at his feet. The world is prepared for this: the Macedonian, when he marched our legions to the conquest of Persia, struck the death-blow at Greece. Persian luxury and Persian effeminacy, which before crept, now come with strides upon us. Our youth, dandled on the lap of indulgence, shall turn with sickened ears from the severe moral of Zeno, and greedily suck in the honied philosophy of Epicurus. You will tell me that you too teach virtue. It may be so. I do not see it; but it may be so. I do not conceive how there can be two virtues, nor yet how two roads to the same. This, however, I shall not argue. I will grant that in your system, as elucidated by your practice, there may be something to admire, and much to love; but when your practice shall be dead, and your system alone shall survive, where then shall be the security of its innocence; where the antidote to its poison? Think not that men shall take the good and not the evil; soon they shall take the evil and leave the good. They shall do more; they shall pervert the very nature of the good, and make of the whole, evil unmixed. Soon, in the shelter of your bowers, all that is vicious shall find a refuge. Effeminacy shall steal in under the name of ease; sensuality and debauchery in the place of innocence and refinement; the pleasures of the body instead of those of the mind. Whatever may be your virtues, they are but the virtues of temperament, not of discipline; and such of your followers as shall be like you in temperament, may be like you in practice: but let them have boiling passions and urgent appetites, and your doctrines shall set no fence against the torrent; shall ring no alarm to the offender. Tell us not that that is right which admits of evil construction — that that is virtue which leaves an open gate to vice. I said, that with a prophet's eye I saw your future fame; but such fame as I foresee can but ill satisfy the ambition of a sage. Your gardens shall be crowded, but they shall be disgraced; your name shall be in every mouth, but every mouth shall be unworthy that speaks it; nations shall have you in honor, but ere it is so, they shall be in ruin: our degenerated country shall worship you, and expire at your feet. Zeno, meantime, may be neglected, but he shall never be slandered; the portico may be forsaken, but shall never be disgraced; its doctrines may be discarded, but shall never be misconstrued. I am not deceived by my present popularity. No school now in such repute as mine; but I know this will not last. The iron and the golden ages are run; youth and manhood are departed; and the weakness of old age steals upon the world. But, O son of Neocles! in this gloomy prospect, a proud comfort is mine: I have raised the last bulwark to the fainting virtue of man, and the departing glory of nations: — I have done more: When the virtue and glory of nations shall be dead, and when in their depraved generations some solitary souls, born for better things, shall see and mourn the vices around them, here, in the abandoned portico, shall they find a refuge; here, shutting their eyes upon the world, they shall learn to be a world to themselves; here, steeled in fortitude, shall they look down in high, unruffled majesty, on the slaves and the tyrants of the earth. Epicurus! when thou canst say this of the gardens, then, and not till then, call thyself a sage and a man of virtue." He ceased; but his full tones seemed yet to sound in the ears of his listening auditors. There was a long pause, when the Gargettian in notes like the breathing flutes of Arcadia, began his reply:

"Zeno, in his present speech, has rested much of the truth of his system on its expediency; I, therefore, shall do the same by mine. The door to my gardens is ever open, and my books are

in the hands of the public; to enter, therefore, here, into the detail or the expounding of the principles of my philosophy, were equally out of place and out of season. 'Tell us not that that is right which admits of evil construction; that that is virtue which leaves an open gate to vice.' This is the thrust which Zeno now makes at Epicurus; and did it hit, I grant it were a mortal one. From the flavour, we pronounce of the fruit; from the beauty and the fragrance, of the flower; and in a system of morals, or of philosophy, or of whatever else, what tends to produce good we pronounce to be good, what to produce evil, we pronounce to be evil. I might indeed support the argument, that our opinion with regard to the first principles of morals has nought to do with our practice; — that whether I stand my virtue upon prudence, or propriety, or justice, or benevolence, or self-love, that my virtue is still one and the same; that the dispute is not about the end, but the origin; that of all the thousands who have yielded homage to virtue, hardly one has thought of inspecting the pedestal she stands upon; that as the mariner is guided by the tides, though ignorant of their causes, so does a man obey the rules of virtue, though ignorant of the principles on which those rules are founded: and that the knowledge of those principles would affect the conduct of the man, no more than acquaintance with the causes of the tides would affect the conduct of the mariner. But this I shall not argue; in doing so I might seem but to fight you flying. I shall meet your objection in the face. And I say — that allowing the most powerful effects to spring from the first grounds of a moral system; — the worst or the best, — that mine, if the best, is to be so judged by the good it does and the evil it prevents, must be ranked among the best. If, as you say, and I partly believe, the iron and the golden ages are past, the youth and the manhood of the world, and that the weakness of old age is creeping on us — then, as you also say, our youth, dandled on the lap of indulgence, shall turn with sickened ears from the severe moral of Zeno; and then I say, that in the gardens, and in the gardens only, shall they find a food, innocent, yet adapted to their sickly palates; an armor, not of iron fortitude, but of silken persuasion, that shall resist the progress of their degeneracy, or throw a beauty even over their ruin. But, perhaps, though Zeno should allow this last effect of my philosophy to be probable, he will not approve it: his severe eye looks with scorn, not pity, on the follies and vices of the world. He would annihilate them, change them to their opposite virtues, or he would leave them to their full and natural sweep. 'Be perfect, or be as you are. I allow of no degrees of virtue, so care not for the degrees of vice. Your ruin, if it must be, let it be in all its horrors, in all its vileness; let it attract no pity, no sympathy; let it be seen in all its naked deformity, and excite the full measure of its merited abhorrence and disgust.' Thus says the sublime Zeno, who sees only man as he should be. Thus says the mild Epicurus, who sees man as he is: — With all his weakness, all his errors, all his sins, still owning fellowship with him, still rejoicing in his welfare, and sighing over his misfortunes; I call from my gardens to the thoughtless, the headstrong, and the idle — 'Where do ye wander, and what do ye seek? Is it pleasure? Behold it here. Is it ease? Enter and repose.' Thus do I court them from the table of drunkenness and the bed of licentiousness: I gently awaken their sleeping faculties, and draw the veil from their understandings: — 'My sons! do you seek pleasure? I seek her also. Let us make the search together. You have tried wine, you have tried love; you have sought amusement in reveling, and forgetfulness in indolence. You tell me you are disappointed: that your passions grew, even while you gratified them; your weariness increased even while you slept. Let us try again. Let us quiet our passions, not by gratifying, but subduing them; let us

conquer our weariness, not by rest, but by exertion.' Thus do I win their ears and their confidence. Step by step I lead them on. I lay open the mysteries of science; I expose the beauties of art; I call the graces and the muses to my aid; the song, the lyre, and the dance. Temperance presides at the repast; innocence at the festival; disgust is changed to satisfaction; listlessness to curiosity; brutality to elegance; lust gives place to love; Bacchanalian hilarity to friendship. Tell me not, Zeno, that the teacher is vicious who washes depravity from the youthful heart; who lays the storm of its passions, and turns all its sensibilities to good. I grant that I do not look to make men great, but to make men happy. To teach them, that in the discharge of their duties as sons, as husbands, as fathers, as citizens, lies their pleasure and their interest; — and when the sublime motives of Zeno shall cease to affect an enervated generation, the gentle persuasions of Epicurus shall still be heard and obeyed. But you warn me that I shall be slandered, my doctrines misinterpreted, and my school and my name disgraced. I doubt it not. What teacher is safe from malevolence, what system from misconstruction? And does Zeno really think himself and his doctrines secure? He knows not then man's ignorance and man's folly. Some few generations, when the amiable virtues of Epicurus, and the sublime excellence of Zeno, shall live no longer in remembrance or tradition, the fierce or ambitious bigots of some new sect may alike calumniate both; proclaim the one for a libertine, and the other for a hypocrite. But I will allow that I am more open to detraction than Zeno: that while your school shall be abandoned, mine shall more probably be disgraced. But it will be the same cause that produces the two effects. It will be equally the degeneracy of man that shall cause the discarding of your doctrines, and the perversion of mine. Why then should the prospect of the future disturb Epicurus more than Zeno? The fault will not lie with me any more than you: but with the vices of my followers, and the ignorance of my judges. I follow my course, guided by what I believe to be wisdom; with the good of man at my heart, adapting my advice to his situation, his disposition, and his capacities. My efforts may be unsuccessful, my intentions maybe calumniated; but as I know these to be benevolent, so I shall continue those, unterrified and unruffled by reproaches, unchilled by occasional ingratitude and frequent disappointment." He ceased, and again laying his hand on the shoulder of Theon, led him to his master. "I ask not Zeno to admire me as a teacher, but let him not blame this scholar for loving me as a man."

"I shall not blame him," said the stoic, "but I wish that I may not soon distrust him. I wish he may not soon forget Zeno, and forsake the portico."

The shades of evening now fell on the city, and the assembly divided.