

AFDIA - Chapter Eight - Text and Discussion

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CHAPTER VIII.

The sun was in its fervor, when Theon issued from one of the public baths. He was not disposed for rest, yet the heat of the streets was insufferable. "I will seek the gardens," he thought, "and loiter in their cool shades until the master join me." Reaching the house of the Gargettian, and the entrance to the gardens being shorter through it than by the public gate, he entered, and sought the passage he had before traversed. He however took a wrong one, and after wandering for some time, opened a door, and found himself in a library. Epicurus was sitting in deep study, with his tablets before him; his pen in one hand, his forehead supported on the other. Metrodorus, on the opposite side of the room was engaged in transcribing.

Theon stopped, and, making a short apology, hastily retired. "Stay!" cried the master. Theon again entered, but did not advance much within the threshold.

"When I bade you stay, I did not mean to fix you as doorkeeper. Come in, and shut the door behind you." Theon joyfully obeyed, and hurried to seize the extended hand of the sage." Since you have intruded on the sanctuary, I shall not drive you out." He motioned the youth to a place on his couch. "And now, what pretty things am I to say to you for your yesterday's defense of the wicked Gargettian? You should have come home with me last night, when we were both hot from the combat, and then I could have made you an eloquent compliment in full assembly at the Symposium, and you would as eloquently have disclaimed it with one of your modest blushes."

"Then, truly, if the master had such an intention, I am very glad I did not follow him. But I passed the evening at my own lodgings, with my friend Cleanthes."

"Trying to talk him into good humor and charity, was it?"

"Something so."

"And you succeeded?"

"Verily, I don't know; he did not leave me in worse humor than he came."

"Nay, then it must have been in better. Explanation always approaches or widens the differences between friends."

"Yes, but we also entered into argument."

"Dangerous ground that, to be sure. And your fight, of course, ended in a drawn battle."

"You pay me more than a merited compliment, in concluding that to be a thing of course."

"Nay, your pardon! I pay you any thing but a compliment. It is not that I conclude your rhetoric and your logic equal, but your obstinacy and your vanity."

"Do you know, I don't think myself either obstinate or vain," said Theon, smiling.

"Had I supposed you did, I might not have seen occasion to give you the information."

"But on what grounds do you think me obstinate and vain?"

"Your years; your years. And do you think there is a man under twenty that is not both?"

"Why, I should think an old man, at least, more obstinate than a young one."

"I grant you, when he is obstinate, which is pretty often, but not quite always; and when he is vain, the same. But whilst many old men have vanity and obstinacy in the superlative degree, all young men have those qualities in the positive. I believe your share to be tolerably moderate, but do not suppose that you have no share at all. Well, and now tell me, was it not a drawn battle?"

"I confess it was. At least, we neither of us convinced the other."

"My son, it would have added one more to the seven wonders if you had. I incline to doubt, if two men, in the course of an olympiad, enter on an argument from the honest and single desire of coming at the truth, or if, in the course of a century, one man comes from an argument convinced by his opponent."

"Well, then, if you will allow me no credit for not being convinced, you may at least for my not being silenced, I, so young an arguer, and Cleanthes so practiced a one!"

"You broke the ice beforehand yesterday in the portico," said the philosopher, tapping his shoulder. "After that generous instance of confidence, I shall not marvel if you now find a tongue upon all proper occasions. And trust me, the breaking of the ice is a very important matter. Many an orator has made but one spring to the land, and his legs, after he had taken courage to make the first stroke. Cleanthes himself found this. You know his history? He first appeared in Athens as a wrestler, a stranger to philosophy and learning of all kinds. In our streets, however, the buzz of it could not fail to reach him. He ran full speed into the school of Crates. His curiosity, joined to his complete ignorance, gave him so singular an appearance, and produced from him so many simple questions, and blundering replies, that he received from his fellow disciples the nickname of the Ass. But the ass persevered, and soon after entering the portico, he applied with such intense diligence to the unraveling the mysteries of Zeno's philosophy, that he speedily secured the esteem of his master, and the respect of his companions. But his timidity was for some time extreme, and probably nothing but a sudden excitement could have enabled him to break through it. This, however, accidentally occurred, and he is now the ready and powerful orator that you know him."

"I have often heard," said Theon, "and really not without some skepticism, the change that a few years have wrought in Cleanthes; — a brawny wrestler! who could believe it: and a dull, ignorant Barbarian!"

"The world always adds marvel to the marvelous. A brawny wrestler he never was, though certainly something stouter and squarer in person than he is now; and though ignorant, he was not dull. Intense application, and, some say, the fasting of poverty, as well as temperance, rapidly reduced his body, and spiritualized his mind."

"The fasting of poverty," cried Theon, "do you believe this?"

"I fear it is possible," returned the master. "At least it is asserted, that he possessed but four drachmas when he left the school of wrestling for that of philosophy; and it does not well appear that he now follows any other trade than that of a scholar; one which certainly brings very little nourishment to the body, whatever it may do to the mind."

"But his master; do you think Zeno would suffer him to want the necessaries of life?"

"The actual necessaries, somehow or other, he certainly has; but I can believe he will make very few serve, and procure those few with some difficulty, rather than be indebted even to his master."

"Or his friend," said Theon.

"Nay, remember, you are not a friend of very long standing, and something his junior in years."

"But should that prevent him from giving me his confidence on such an occasion?"

"Perhaps not, but allow something to the stoic pride."

"I can allow nothing to it here."

"No, because it touches your own. Thus do I tread on the pride of Plato," said Diogenes, setting his foot on the robe of the academic. 'Yes, with the greater pride of Diogenes,' returned Plato. But I have made you grave, which was not my intention. Metrodorus, how go you on?"

"Writing the last word, — There! — And now, rising and advancing towards Theon, "let me embrace the youth who so nobly took up the vindication of my insulted master. Perhaps you 'may not know how peculiarly I am indebted to you. Timocrates is the brother of Metrodorus."

"How?"

" I blush to own it."

"You need not blush, my loved son, you have done more than a brother's duty towards him, and more than a disciple's duty towards me. I suppose," turning to Theon, "as you are a stoic, you have not read the able treatises of Metrodorus in support of my doctrines, and defense of my character. In the last, indeed, he has done more than I wished."

"I own I have not, but I will read them."

"What! in the face of Zeno?"

"Aye, and of the whole portico."

"We need not doubt the young Corinthian's courage," said Metrodorus, "after his noble confidence yesterday."

"I see the master has not been silent," returned Theon, "and that he has given me more praise than is my due."

"Metrodorus can tell you that is not my custom," said the Gargettian. "By Pollux! if you continue your visits to the garden, you must look to be handled very roughly. I aim the blow at every fault I see; and I have a very acute pair of eyes. I find out the most secret sins — turn the souls of my scholars inside out; so be warned in time!"

"I do not fear you," returned the Corinthian.

"Not fear me, you rogue?"

"No, I love you too well; but," continued Theon, "let me now make my acknowledgments to the master for his coming forward so seasonably yesterday, and giving me the victory. How you astonished me! I almost took you a second time for a divinity."

"I will tell you how it happened," returned Epicurus: "Chancing to be called into the street yesterday, just after you left the house, I saw your meeting with Cleanthes; and guessing from his first address, that you would have to stand a siege, I followed you to the portico, and took my place, unnoticed, among the crowd, ready, if occasion should require, to offer my succor."

"And you heard then all that passed?"

"I did."

"I beg your pardon for the digression," said Theon: "but I think you have more forbearance and more candor than any man I ever heard of."

"If it be so, these useful qualities have not been attained without much study and discipline; for Zeno is mistaken in thinking all my virtues the children of temperament. I very early perceived candor to be the quality the most indispensable in the composition of a philosopher, and therefore very early set my whole efforts to the attaining of it. And when once I fairly engaged in the work, I did not find it either long or difficult. I had naturally a mild temper, and a sensitive heart, and these gifts were here of inconceivable use to me. Feeling kindly towards my fellow creatures, I could the easier learn to pity rather than hate their faults; to smile, rather than frown at their follies. This was a great step gained, but the next was more difficult — to be slow in pronouncing what is a fault, and what is a folly. Our superstition would haunt with the furies the man who should take his sister to wife, while the customs of Egypt would commend them.

How has the astronomer been laughed at, who made the earth revolve round the stationary sun; and yet who can say but the age may come, when this shall be established as a truth? Prejudices, when once seen as prejudices, are easily yielded. The difficulty is to come at the knowledge of them. A thousand lectures had I read to myself, ere I could calmly say, upon all occasions, it does not follow that the thing is, because I think it is; and till I could say this, I never presumed to call myself a philosopher. When I had schooled myself into candor, I found I was possessed of forbearance; for, indeed, it is hardly possible to possess the one without the other."

"I cannot understand," said Theon, "how with your mildness, your candor, and your good humor, you have so many enemies."

"Am I not the founder of a new sect?"

"Yes, but so have been many others."

"And you think I have more enemies than any? If it be so, perhaps in those peaceable qualities you have enumerated, you may seek the cause. Remember the cynics and stoics, (and I believe most of my enemies are either among them, or of their making,) do you think any of those three unassuming virtues would secure their approbation? They do not love to see a man take the place of a philosopher, without the airs of one, and, as you may perceive, I want these most entirely. Then you must remember also my popularity; for of course my mildness, candor, and good humor, along with other agreeable virtues which shall be nameless, help to secure me a thousand friends; and he who has many friends, must have many enemies, for you know he must be the mark of envy, jealousy, and spleen."

"I cannot endure to think that it should be so," said Theon. "Much less can I," said Metrodorus.

"My sons, never pity the man who can count more than a friend for every enemy, and I do believe that I can do this. Yes, my young stoic, Zeno may have fewer enemies, and as many disciples, but I doubt if he have so many devoted children as Epicurus."

"I know he has not," cried Metrodorus, curling his lip in proud scorn.

"You need not look so fierce upon your knowledge," said the master smiling.

"You are too mild, too candid," returned the scholar, "and that is your only fault."

"Then I am a most faultless person, and I only wish I could return the compliment to Metrodorus, but his lip curls too much, and his cheeks are too apt to kindle."

"I know it, I know it," said the scholar. "Then why not mend it?"

"Because I am not at all sure, but that it is better un-mended. If you would but turn more fiercely upon your enemies, or let me do so for you, they would respect you more, for they would fear you more."

"But as I am not a god, nor a king, nor a soldier, I have no claim to fear; and as I am a philosopher, I have no wish for it. Then, as to respect, do you really think yourself more worthy of it than your master."

"Nay," said Metrodorus, blushing, "that is too severe a rub."

"Grant that it was merited. No, no, my son, we will convince all we can, we will silence as few as possible, and we will terrify none."

"Remember the exit of Timocrates," said Theon, "was not that made in terror?"

"Yes: but it was the work of his conscience, not of my eyes; if the first had been silent, I imagine he would have stood the last very well."

"Do not name the wretch," cried Metrodorus, indignantly. "Oh, my young Corinthian, did you know all the patience and forbearance that his master had shown towards him, all the pains he took with him, the gentleness with which he admonished him, the seriousness with which he warned him, the thousand times that he forgave him; and then, at last, when he dared to insult his master's adopted child, the lovely Hedeia, and the indignant disciples thrust him from the gardens, he goes to our enemies, the enemies of his master, and feeds their malice with infernal lies. Curses of the furies on the wretch!"

"Fie! how darest thou?" said Epicurus, thrusting his scholar indignantly from him. "Thy anger is unworthy of a man, how much then of a brother? Go, and recollect thyself, my son!" softening his voice, as he saw a tear in Metrodorus's eye. "The Corinthian will accompany you to the gardens; I will join you when I have concluded this treatise."

Metrodorus took the arm of Theon, and they left the apartment.