

# AFDIA - Chapter Nine - Text and Discussion

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CHAPTER IX.

"Do not!" said Metrodorus to Theon, "take me as the best sample of the pupils of Epicurus. We are not all so hot-brained and hot-tongued."

"Nay!" returned his companion, "I am too young in philosophy to blame your warmth. In your place, I should have been as hot myself."

"I am glad to hear it. I like you the better for the sentiment. But the sun scorches dreadfully, let us seek shelter."

They turned into a thicket, and proceeding some way, caught on the still air the notes of a flute. They advanced, and came to a beautiful bank of verdure, bordered by the river, and shadowed by a group of thick and wide-spreading oaks. "It is Leontium," said Metrodorus. "No other in Attica, can breathe the flute so sweetly." They turned one of the trunks, and found her lying on the turf; her shoulder leaning against a tree, and her figure raised on one elbow. Beside her was seated the black-eyed girl whom Theon had before seen; her taper fingers twining into a wreath the scented flowers, which were lightly thrown into her lap by the gay Sofron, who stood at some distance among the shrubs.

"Enough! Enough!" said the gentle voice of the girl, as the youth shook down in showers the leaves and nectareous odors of the over-ripe blossoms. "Enough! enough! stay thy hand, thou heedless ravager!"

"Thank thee for thy words, although they chide me," said the boy, letting go the bough which he had just seized, with a bound, light as that of the shrub when it sprung upward from his hand. "Thou hast but one feeling in thy soul, Boidion; and thy nature belies the sunny clime which saw its birth. Friendship is all to thee, and that friendship is but for one."

"In truth, thou repayest his cares but coldly," said Leontium, taking the pipe from her mouth, and smiling on the dark-haired maiden.

"But I repay not thine coldly," said Boidion, kissing the hand of her friend.

"I am well punished for the neglect of my morning's lecture," said Sofron, impatiently, as he snatched his book from the ground, and turned away.

"Part not in anger, brother!" exclaimed Boidion. But the youth had vanished, and in his place Metrodorus and Theon stood before her.

The startled girl was about to rise, when Leontium, laying her hand on her arm, "Rest thee, thou timid fawn," and the maiden resumed her seat.

"I rejoice," said Theon, as he placed himself with Metrodorus by the side of Leontium, and took up the pipe which had fallen from her hand; "I rejoice to find this little instrument restored to Athens."

"Say not restored to Athens," returned Leontium, "only admitted into the garden. I doubt our vain youth still remember the curse of Alcibiades, and looking in their mirror, vow that none but fools would play on it."

"This recalls to me," said Theon, "that I have heard among the various reports concerning the gardens current in the mouths of the Athenians, very contradictory ones as to the place allowed in it to the sciences and liberal arts, and to music in particular."

"I suppose," said Metrodorus, " that you heard our whole employment was eating, drinking, and rioting in all licentiousness. "

"True, I did hear so; and I fear I must confess, half believed it. But I also heard your licentiousness described in various ways: sometimes as grossly sensual, enlivened by no elegances of art; veiled, adorned, if I may use the expression, by no refinement. In short, that Epicurus laughed as well at the fine arts as the grave sciences. From others, again, I learnt that music, dancing, poetry, and painting, were pressed into the service of his philosophy; that Leontium strung the lyre, Metrodorus the harp, Hedeia moved in the dance, Boidion raised the song to Venus; that his halls were covered with voluptuous pictures, the walks of his garden lined with indecent statues."

"And you may now perceive the truth," replied Metrodorus, "with your own eyes and ears."

"But," said Leontium, "the young Corinthian may be curious to know the sentiments of our master, and his advice regarding the pursuit of the sciences and the liberal arts. I can readily perceive," addressing herself to Theon, "the origin of the two contradictory reports you have just mentioned. The first you would hear from the followers of Aristippus, who, though not acknowledging the name, follow the tenets of his philosophy, and have long been very numerous in our degenerate city. These, because Epicurus recommends but a moderate culture of those arts, which by them are too often made the elegant incentives to licentious pleasure, accuse him of neglecting them altogether. The cynics, and other austere sects, who condemn all that ministers to the luxury, ease, or recreation of man, exaggerate his moderate use of these arts into a vicious encouragement of voluptuousness and effeminacy. You will perceive, therefore, that between the two reports lies the truth. Every innocent recreation is permitted in the garden. It is not poetry, but licentious poetry, that Epicurus condemns; not music, but voluptuous music; not painting, but licentious pictures; not dancing, but loose gestures. Yet thus he displeases alike the profligate and the austere; for these he is too moderate, and for those too severe. "With regard to the sciences, if it be said, that they are neglected among us, I do not say that our master, though himself versed in them, as in all other branches of

knowledge, greatly recommends them to our study but that they are not unknown, let Polyoenus be evidence.

"He, one of the most amiable men of our school, and one most highly favored by our master, you must have heard mentioned throughout Greece as a profound geometrician."

"Yes," replied Theon, "but I have also heard, that since entering the garden, he has ceased to respect his science."

"I am not aware of that," said Leontium, "though I believe he no longer devotes to it all his time, and all his faculties. Epicurus called him from his diagrams, to open to him the secrets of physics, and the beauties of ethics; to show him the springs of human action, and lead him to the study of the human mind. He taught him, that any single study, however useful and noble in itself, was yet unworthy the entire employ of a curious and powerful intellect; that the man who pursued one line of knowledge, to the exclusion of others, though he should follow it up to its very head, would never be either learned or wise; that he who pursues knowledge, should think no branch of it unworthy attention; least of all, should he confine it to those which are unconnected with the business, and add nothing to the pleasures of life; that further not our acquaintance with ourselves, nor our fellows; that tend not to enlarge the sphere of our affections, to multiply our ideas and sensations, nor extend the scope of our inquiries. On this ground, he blamed the devotion of Polyoenus to a science that leads to other truths than those of virtue, to other study than that of man."

"I am obliged to you for the explanation," said Theon; "not because I could any longer have given credit to the absurd reports of your master's enemies; but because, whatever opens to me the character and opinions of such a man, interests and improves me."

"You will find this," said Metrodorus, "the more you consider them. The life of Epicurus is a lesson of wisdom. It is by example, even more than precept, that he guides his disciples. Without issuing commands, he rules despotically. His wishes are divined, and obeyed as laws; his opinions are repeated as oracles; his doctrines adopted as demonstrated truths. All is unanimity in the garden. We are a family of brothers, of which Epicurus is the father. And I say not this in praise of the scholars, but the master. Many of us have had bad habits, many of us evil propensities, many of us violent passions. That our habits are corrected, our propensities changed, our passions restrained, lies all with Epicurus. What I myself owe him, none but myself know. The giddy follower of licentious pleasure, the headstrong victim of my passions, he has made me taste of the sweets of innocence, and brought me into the calm of philosophy. It is thus — thus, by rendering us happy, that he lays us at his feet — thus that he gains, and holds the empire of our minds — thus that by proving himself our friend, he secures our respect, our submission, and our love. He cannot but know his power, yet he exerts it in no other way, than to mend our lives, or to keep them innocent. In argument, as you may have observed, he always seeks to convince rather than sway. He is as free from arrogance as from duplicity; he would neither force an opinion on the mind, nor conceal from it a truth. Ask his advice, and it is ever ready — his opinion, and he gives it clearly. Free from prejudice himself,

he is tender to that of others; yet no fear of censure, or desire of popularity, ever leads him to humor it, either in his lessons or his writings. Candor, as you have already remarked, is the prominent feature of his mind; it is the crown of his perfect character. I say this, my young Corinthian, who know him. His soul, indeed, is open to all; but I have approached very near it, and considered its innermost recesses. Yes, I am proud to say it — I am one of those he has drawn most closely into his intimacy. With all my imperfections and errors, he has adopted me as a son; and, inferior as I am in years, wisdom and virtue, he deigns to call me his friend."

Tears here filled the eyes of the scholar; he seemed about to resume, when a slight sound made the party turn their heads, and they saw the master at their side. "Do not rise, my children, I will seat myself among you." Theon perceived he had heard the closing sentence of Metrodorus, for the water glistened in his eyes as he fixed them tenderly upon him. "Thanks, my son, for this tribute of thy gratitude; I have heard thy eulogy, and I accept it joyfully. Let all men," and he turned his eye upon Theon, "be above flattery; but let not a sage be above praise. He that is so is either arrogant or insincere. For myself, I own that the commendations of my friends fills me with triumph, as the assurance of their affection does with satisfaction. The approbation of our familiars, who are with us in our secret hours, hear our private converse, know the habits of our lives, and the bent of our dispositions, is, or should be to us, far more pleasing and triumphant than the shouts of a multitude, or the worship of the world."

There was a pause of some minutes, when Leontium took up the word. "I have been explaining, though very shortly and imperfectly, your views concerning the studies most proper to be pursued by men. I believe the Corinthian has some curiosity on this point."

Theon assented. "Knowledge," said the master, "is the best riches that man can possess. Without it, he is a brute, with it, he is a god. But like happiness, he often pursues it without finding it; or, at best, obtains of it but an imperfect glimpse. It is not that the road to it is either dark or difficult, but that he takes a wrong one; or if he enters on the right, he does so unprepared for the journey. Now he thinks knowledge one with erudition, and shutting himself up in his closet, he cons all the lore of antiquity; he fathoms the sciences, heaps up in his memory all the sayings of the dead, and reckoning the value of his acquisitions by the measure of the time and labor he hath expended on them, he is satisfied he hath reached his end, and from his retirement, looking down upon his more ignorant, because less learned, brethren, he calls them children and barbarians. But alas! Learning is not wisdom, nor will books give understanding. Again, he takes a more inviting road: he rushes into the crowd; he rolls down the stream of pleasure; he courts the breath of popularity: he unravels or weaves the riddles of intrigue ; he humors the passions of his fellows, and rises upon them to name and power. Then, laughing at the credulity, ignorance, and vice, he hath set his throne upon, he says, that to know the world is the only knowledge, and to see to dupe it, is to be wise. Yet knowledge of the world is not knowledge of man, nor to triumph in the passions of others, is not to triumph over our own. No, my sons, that only is real, is sterling knowledge, which goes to make us better and happier men, and which fits us to assist the virtue and happiness of others. All learning is useful, all the sciences are curious, all the arts are beautiful; but more useful, more curious, and more beautiful, is the perfect knowledge and perfect government of ourselves. Though a man

should read the heavens, unravel their laws and their revolutions; though he should dive into the mysteries of matter, and expound the phenomena of earth and air; though he should be conversant with all the writings, and the sayings, and the actions of the dead; though he should hold the pencil of Parrhasius, the chisel of Polycletes, or the lyre of Pindar; though he should do one or all of these things, yet know not the secret springs of his own mind, the foundation of his opinions, the motives of his actions; if he hold not the rein over his passions; if he have not cleared the mist of all prejudices from his understanding; if he have not rubbed off all intolerance from his judgments; if he know not to weigh his own actions, and the actions of others, in the balance of justice — that man hath not knowledge; nor, though he be a man of science, a man of learning, or an artist, he is not a sage. He must yet sit down, patient, at the feet of philosophy. With all his learning, he hath yet to learn, and, perhaps, a harder task, he hath to unlearn."

The master here paused, but the ears of Theon still hung upon his lips. "Do not cease," he exclaimed; "I could listen to you through eternity."

"I cannot promise to declaim quite so long," returned the sage, smiling. "But if you wish it, we will follow out the topic when we have joined our other friends."

They rose, and bent their steps to the public walk.