

AFDIA - Chapter Ten - Text and Discussion

Post by "Cassius" of February 15, 2019 at 6:56 PM

CHAPTER X.

Epicurus stood in the midst of the expectant scholars. "My sons," he said, "why do you enter the gardens? Is it to seek happiness, or to seek virtue and knowledge? Attend, and I will show you that in finding one, you shall find the three. To be happy, we must be virtuous; and when we are virtuous, we are wise. Let us then begin: and first, let us for a while hush our passions into slumber, forget our prejudices, and cast away our vanity and our pride. Thus patient and modest, let us come to the feet of philosophy; let us say to her, 'Behold us scholars and children, gifted by nature with faculties, affections, and passions. Teach us their use and their guidance. Show us how to turn them to account — how best to make them conduce to our ease, and minister to our enjoyment.'

"Sons of earth," says the Deity, "you have spoken wisely; you feel that you are gifted by nature with faculties, affections, and passions; and you perceive that on the right exertion and direction of these depends your well-being. It does so. Your affections both of soul and body may be shortly reduced to two, pleasure and pain; the one troublesome, and the other agreeable. It is natural and befitting, therefore, that you shun pain, and desire and follow after pleasure. Set forth then on the pursuit; but ere you start, be sure that it is in the right road, and that you have your eye on the true object. Perfect pleasure, which is happiness, you will have attained when you have brought your bodies and souls into a state of satisfied tranquillity. To arrive at this, much previous exertion is requisite; yet exertion, not violent, only constant and even. And first, the body, with, its passions and appetites, demands gratification and indulgence. But beware! for here are the hidden rocks which may shipwreck your bark on its passage, and shut you out for ever from the haven of repose. Provide yourselves then with a skilled pilot, who may steer you through the Scylla and Charybdis of your carnal affections, and point the steady helm through the deep waters of your passions. Behold her! it is Prudence, the mother of the virtues, and the handmaid of wisdom. Ask, and she will tell you, that gratification will give new edge to the hunger of your appetites, and that the storm of the passions shall kindle with indulgence. Ask, and she will tell you, that sensual pleasure is pain covered with the mask of happiness. Behold she strips it from her face, and reveals the features of disease, disquietude, and remorse. Ask, and she will tell you, that happiness is not found in tumult, but tranquillity; and that, not the tranquillity of indolence and inaction, but of a healthy contentment of soul and body. Ask, and she will tell you, that a happy life is like neither to a roaring torrent, nor a stagnant pool, but to a placid and crystal stream, that flows gently and silently along. And now Prudence shall bring to you the lovely train of the virtues. Temperance, throwing a bridle on your desires, shall gradually subdue and annihilate those whose present indulgence would only bring future evil; and others more necessary and more innocent, she

shall yet bring down to such becoming moderation, as shall prevent all disquiet to the soul and injury to the body. Fortitude shall strengthen you to bear those diseases which even temperance may not be efficient to prevent; those afflictions which fate may level at you; those persecutions which the folly or malice of man may invent. It shall fit you to bear all things, to conquer fear, and to meet death. Justice shall give you security among your fellows, and satisfaction in your own breasts. Generosity shall endear you to others, and sweeten your own nature to yourselves. Gentleness shall take the sting from the malice of your enemies, and make you extract double sweet from the kindness of friends. Gratitude shall lighten the burden of obligation, or render it even pleasant to bear. Friendship shall put the crown on your security and your joy. With these, and yet more virtues, shall prudence surround you. And, thus attended, hold on your course in confidence, and moor your barks in the haven of repose."

"Thus says Philosophy, my sons, and says she not wisely? Tell us, ye who have tried the slippery paths of licentiousness, who have given the rein to your passions, and sought pleasure in the lap of voluptuousness; tell us, did ye find her there? No, ye did not, or ye would not now inquire of her from Epicurus. Come, then, Philosophy hath shown ye the way. Throw off your old habits, wash impurity from your hearts; take up the bridle of your passions; govern your minds, and be happy. And ye, my sons, to whom all things are yet new; whose passions yet in the bud, have never led you to pain and regret; ye who have yet to begin your career, come ye also! Philosophy hath shown ye the way. Keep your hearts innocent, hold the bridle of your passions, govern your minds, and be happy. But, my sons, methinks I hear you say, 'You have shown us the virtues rather as modifiers and correctors of evil, than as the givers of actual and perfect good. Happiness, you tell us, consists in ease of body and mind; yet temperance cannot secure the former from disease, nor can all the virtues united ward affliction from the latter.' True, my children, Philosophy cannot change the laws of nature; but she may teach us to accommodate ourselves to them. She cannot annul pain; but she can arm us to bear it. And though the evils of fate be many, are not the evils of man's coining more! Nature afflicts us with disease; but for once that it is the infliction of nature, ninety-nine times it is the consequence of our own folly. Nature levels us with death; but how mild is the death of nature, with Philosophy to spread the pillow, and friendship to take the last sigh, to the protracted agonies of debauchery, subduing the body by inches, while Philosophy is not there to give strength, nor friendship consolation, but while the flames of fever are heated by impatience, and the stings of pain envenomed by remorse! And tell me, my sons, when the body of the sage is stretched on the couch of pain, hath he not his mind to minister delight to him? Hath he not conscience whispering that his present evil is not chargeable to his own past folly, but to the laws of nature, which no effort or foresight of his could have prevented? Hath he not memory to bring to him past pleasures, the pleasures of a well-spent life, on which he may feed even while pain racks his members, and fever consumes his vitals? Or, what if agony overpower his frame, and cripple his faculties, is there not death at hand to reach him deliverance? Here, then is death, that giant of terror, acting as a friend. But does he interrupt our enjoyments as well as our sufferings? And is it for this we fear him? Ought we not rather to rejoice, seeing that the day of life has its bright and its clouded hours, that we are laid to sleep while the sun of joy yet shines, before the storm of fate has broken our tranquillity or the evening of age bedimmed our prospect? Death, then, is never

our foe. When not a friend, he cannot be worse than indifferent. For while we are, death is not; and when death is, we are not. To be wise, then, death is nothing. Examine the ills of life; are they not of our own creation, or take they not their darkest hues from our passions or our ignorance? What is poverty, if "we have temperance, and can be satisfied with a crust, and a draught from the spring? — if we have modesty, and can wear a woolen garment as gladly as a tyrian robe? What is slander, if we have no vanity that it can wound, and no anger that it can kindle? What is neglect, if we have no ambition that it can disappoint, and no pride that it can mortify? What is persecution, if we have our own bosoms in which to retire, and a spot of earth to sit down and rest upon? What is death, when without superstition to clothe him with terrors, we can cover our heads, and go to sleep in his arms? What a list of human calamities are here expunged — poverty, slander, neglect, disappointment, persecution, death. What yet remains? Disease? That, too, we have shown temperance can often shun, and Philosophy can always alleviate. But there is yet a pain, which the wisest and the best of men cannot escape; that all of us, my sons, have felt, or have to feel. Do not your hearts whisper it? Do you not tell me, that in death there is yet a sting? That ere he aim at us, he may level the beloved of our soul? The father, whose tender care hath reared our infant minds — the brother, whom the same breast hath nourished, and the same roof sheltered, with whom, side by side, we have grown like two plants by a river, sucking life from the same fountain and strength from the same sun — the child whose gay prattle delights our ears, or whose opening understanding fixes our hopes — the friend of our choice, with whom we have exchanged hearts, and shared all our pains and pleasures, whose eye hath reflected the tear of sympathy, whose hand hath smoothed the couch of sickness. Ah! my sons, here indeed is a pain — a pain that cuts into the soul. There are masters that will tell you otherwise; who will tell you that it is unworthy of a man to mourn even here. But such, my sons, speak not the truth of experience or philosophy, but the subtleties of sophistry and pride. He who feels not the loss, hath never felt the possession. He who knows not the grief, hath never known the joy. See the price of a friend in the duties we render him, and the sacrifices we make to him, and which, in making, we count not sacrifices, but pleasures. We sorrow for his sorrow; we supply his wants, or, if we cannot, we share them. We follow him to exile. We close ourselves in his prison; we soothe him in sickness; we strengthen him in death: nay, if it be possible, we throw down our life for his. Oh! What a treasure is that for which we do so much! And is it forbidden to us to mourn its loss? If it be, the power is not with us to obey. Should we, then, to avoid the evil, forego the good? Shall we shut love from our hearts, that we may not feel the pain of his departure? No; happiness forbids it. Experience forbids it. Let him who hath laid on the pyre the dearest of his soul, who hath washed the urn with the bitterest tears of grief — let him say if his heart hath ever formed the wish that it had never shrined within it him whom he now deplores. Let him say if the pleasures of the sweet communion of his former days doth not still live in his remembrance. If he love not to recall the image of the departed, the tones of his voice, the words of his discourse, the deeds of his kindness, the amiable virtues of his life. If, while he weeps the loss of his friend, he smiles not to think that he once possessed him. He who knows not friendship, knows not the purest pleasure of earth. Yet if fate deprive us of it, though we grieve, we do not sink; Philosophy is still at hand, and she upholds us with fortitude. And think, my sons, perhaps in the very evil we dread, there is a good; perhaps the very uncertainty of the tenure gives it value in our eyes;

perhaps all our pleasures take their zest from the known possibility of their interruption. What were the glories of the sun, if we knew not the gloom of darkness? What the refreshing breezes of morning and evening, if we felt not the fervors of noon? Should we value the lovely-flower, if it bloomed eternally; or the luscious fruit, if it hung always on the bough? Are not the smiles of the heavens more beautiful in contrast with their frowns, and the delights of the seasons more grateful from their vicissitudes? Let us then be slow to blame nature, for perhaps in her apparent errors there is hidden a wisdom. Let us not quarrel with fate, for perhaps in our evils lie the seeds of our good. Were our body never subject to sickness, we might be insensible to the joy of health. Were our life eternal, our tranquillity might sink into inaction. Were our friendship not threatened with interruption, it might want much of its tenderness. This, then, my sons, is our duty, for this is our interest and our happiness; to seek our pleasures from the hands of the virtues, and for the pain which may befall us, to submit to it with patience, or bear up against it with fortitude. To walk, in short, through life innocently and tranquilly; and to look on death as its gentle termination, which it becomes us to meet with ready minds, neither regretting the past, nor anxious for the future."

The sage had scarcely ceased, when a scholar advanced from the crowd, and bowing his head with reverence, stooped and touched the knees of his master. "Refuse not my homage," he said, "nor call the expression of it presumptuous." Epicurus raised him in his arms. "Colotes, I am more proud of the homage of thy young mind, than I should be of that of the assembled crowds of Olympia. May thy master, my son, never lose his power over it, as I feel that he will never abuse it."