AFDIA -Chapter Fourteen - Text and Discussion

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CHAPTER XIV.

Uneasy thoughts bred unquiet slumbers; and Theon rose from a restless couch, before the first blush of Aurora tinged the forehead of the sky. He trod the paths of the garden, and waited with impatience, for the first time not unmixed with apprehension, the appearance of the Master. The assertions of Cleanthes were corroborated by the testimony of the public; but that testimony he had learned to despise. They were made after perusal of Epicurus' writings; with these writings he was still unacquainted. Had they been misinterpreted? Cleanthes was no Timocrates. If prejudiced, he was incapable of wilful misrepresentation; and he was too familiar with the science of philosophy, so grossly to misunderstand a reasoner, as lucid as appeared to be Epicurus. These musings were soon interrupted. The morning star still glowed in the kindling east, when he heard approaching footsteps, and turning from the shades upon a small open lawn where a crystal fountain flowed from the inverted urn of a recumbent naiad, he was greeted by the Sage.

"Oh no," exclaimed Theon half audibly, as he gazed on the serene countenance before him, "this man is not an Atheist."

"What thoughts are with you, my Son, this morning?" said the philosopher, with kind solicitude. "I doubt your plunge in Ilyssus disturbed your dreams. Did the image of a fair nymph, or of a river God flit round your couch, and drive sleep from your eyelids?"

"I was in some danger from the first," said the youth, half smiling, half blushing, "until a visitant of a different character, and one, I imagine, more wont to soothe than to disturb the mind, brought to my imagination a host of doubts and fears, which your presence alone has dispelled."

"And who played the part of your Incubus?" demanded the Sage.

"Even yourself, most benign and indulgent of men."

"Truly, I grieve to have acted so ill by thee, my Son. It shall be well, however, if having inflicted the disease, I may be its physician."

"On leaving you, last night," said Theon, "I encountered Cleanthes. He came from the perusal of your writings, and brought charges against them which I was unprepared to answer."

"Let us hear them, my Son; perhaps, until you shall have perused them yourself, we may assist your difficulty."

"First, that they deny the existence of the gods."

"I see but one other assertion that could equal that in folly," said Epicurus.

"I knew it," exclaimed Theon, triumphantly; "I knew it was impossible. But where will not prejudice lead men, when even the upright Cleanthes is capable of slander!"

"He is utterly incapable of it," said the Master ; "and the inaccuracy, in this case, I rather suspect to rest with you than with him. To deny the existence of the gods would indeed be presumption in a philosopher; a presumption equaled only by that of him who should assert their existence."

"How!" exclaimed the youth, with a countenance in which astonishment seemed to suspend every other expression.

"As I never saw the gods, my son," calmly continued the Sage, "I cannot assert their existence; and, that I never saw them, is no reason for my denying it."

"But do we believe nothing except that of which we have ocular demonstration?"

"Nothing, at least, for which we have not the evidence of one or more of our senses; that is, when we believe on just grounds, which, I grant, taking men collectively, is very seldom."{14}

"But where would this spirit lead us? To impiety! — to Atheism! — to all, against which I felt confidence in defending the character and philosophy of Epicurus!"

"We will examine presently, my Son, into the meaning of the terms you have employed. But as respects your defense of my philosophy, I am sorry that you presumed so much, where you knew so little. Let this serve for another caution against pronouncing before you examine, and asserting before you inquire. It is my usual custom," continued the Master, "with the youth who frequent my school, to defer the discussion of all important questions until they are naturally, in the course of events, suggested to their own minds. Their curiosity once excited, it is my endeavor, so far as in me lies, to satisfy it. When you first entered the garden your mind was unfit for the examination of the subject you have now started: it is no longer so; and we will therefore enter upon the inquiry, and pursue it in order."

"Forgive me if I express — if I acknowledge," said the youth, slightly recoiling from his instructor, "some reluctance to enter on the discussion of truths, whose very discussion would seem to argue a doubt, — and – "

"And what then?"

"That very doubt were a crime."

"It is there that I wished to lead you; and with the examination of this point we shall rest, until time and circumstances lead you to push the investigation farther. I have in me little of the spirit of proselytism. A mere abstract opinion, supposing it not to affect the conduct or

disposition of him who holds it, would be in my eyes of very minor importance. And it is only in so far as I believe that all our opinions, however apparently removed from any practical consequences, do always more or less affect one or the other — our conduct or our dispositions — that I am at the pains to correct in my scholars, those which appear to me erroneous. I understand you to say, that to enter upon the discussion of certain opinions, which you consider as sacred truths, would appear to argue a doubt of those truths, and that a doubt would here constitute a crime. Now as I think such a belief inconsistent with candor and charity — two feelings, indispensable both for the enjoyment of happiness ourselves, and for its distribution to others, I shall challenge its investigation. If the doubt of any truth shall constitute a crime, then the belief of the same truth should constitute a virtue."

"Perhaps a duty would rather express it."

"When you charge the neglect of any duty as a crime, or account its fulfillment a virtue, you suppose the existence of a power to neglect or fulfill; and it is the exercise of this power, in the one way or the other, which constitutes the merit or demerit. Is it not so?"

"Certainly."

"Does the human mind possess the power to believe or disbelieve, at pleasure, any truths whatsoever?"

"I am not prepared to answer: but I think it does, since it possesses always the power of investigation."

"But, possibly, not the will to exercise the power. Take care lest I beat you with your own weapons. I thought this very investigation appeared to you a crime."

"Your logic is too subtle," said the youth, "for my inexperience."

"Say rather, my reasoning too close. Did I bear you down with sounding words and weighty authorities, and confound your understanding with hair-drawn distinctions, you would be right to retreat from the battery."

"I have nothing to object to the fairness of your deductions," said Theon, "But would not the doctrine be dangerous that should establish our inability to help our belief; and might we not stretch the principle, until we asserted our inability to help our actions?"

"We might, and with reason. But we will not now traverse the ethical pons asinorum of necessity — the most simple and evident of moral truths, and the most darkened, tortured, and belabored by moral teachers. You inquire if the doctrine we have essayed to establish, be not dangerous. I reply — not, if it be true. Nothing is so dangerous as error, — nothing so safe as truth. A dangerous truth would be a contradiction in terms, and an anomaly in things."

"But what is a truth?" said Theon.

"It is pertinently asked. A truth I consider to be an ascertained fact; which truth would be changed into an error, the moment the fact, on which it rested, was disproved."

"I see, then, no fixed basis for truth."

"It surely has the most fixed of all — the nature of things. And it is only an imperfect insight into that nature, which occasions all our erroneous conclusions, whether in physics or morals."

"But where, if we discard the gods, and their will, as engraven on our hearts, are our guides in the search after truth ?"

"Our senses and our faculties as developed in and by the exercise of our senses, are the only guides with which I am acquainted. And I do not see why, even admitting a belief in the gods, and in a superintending providence, the senses should not be viewed as the guides, provided by them, for our direction and instruction. But here is the evil attendant on an ungrounded belief, whatever be its nature. The moment we take one thing for granted, we take other things for granted: we are started in a wrong road, and it is seldom that we can gain the right one, until we have trodden back our steps to the starting place. I know but of one thing that a philosopher should take for granted; and that only because he is forced to it by an irresistible impulse of his nature; and because, without doing so, neither truth nor falsehood could exist for him. He must take for granted the evidence of his senses; in other words, he must believe in the existence of things, as they exist to his senses. I know of no other existence, and can therefore believe in no other: although, reasoning from analogy, I may imagine other existences to be. This, for in stance, I do as respects the gods. I see around me, in the world I inhabit, an infinite variety in the arrangement of matter; — a multitude of sentient beings, possessing different kinds, and varying grades of power and intelligence, — from the worm that crawls in the dust, to the eagle that soars to the sun, and man who marks to the sun its course. It is possible, it is moreover probable, that, in the worlds which I see not, — in the boundless infinitude and eternal duration of matter, beings may exist, of every countless variety, and varying grades of intelligence inferior and superior to our own, until we descend to a minimum, and rise to a maximum, to which the range of our observation affords no parallel, and of which our senses are inadequate to the conception. Thus far, my young friend, I believe in the gods, or in what you will of existences removed from the sphere of my knowledge. That you should believe, with positiveness, in one unseen existence or another, appears to me no crime, although it may appear to me unreasonable: and so, my doubt of the same should appear to you no moral offense, although you might account it erroneous. I fear to fatigue your attention, and will, therefore, dismiss, for the present, these abstruse subjects."

But we shall both be amply repaid for their discussion, if this truth remain with you — that an opinion, right or wrong, can never constitute a moral offense, nor be in itself a moral obligation. It may be mistaken; it may involve an absurdity, or a contradiction. It is a truth; or it is an error: it can never be a crime or a virtue.”