AFDIA - Chapter Fifteen - Text and Discussion

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2019 at 7:00 PM

CHAPTER XV.

Theon remained transfixed to the same spot of earth on which the sage left him. A confused train of thoughts traveled through his brain, which his reason sought in vain to arrest, or to analyze. At one moment it seemed as if a ray of light had dawned upon his mind, opening to it a world of discovery as interesting as it was novel. Then suddenly he started as from the brink of a precipice, whose depths were concealed in darkness." "Cleanthes then had justly expounded the doctrines of the garden. — But did these doctrines involve the delinquency which he had hitherto supposed? Were they inconsistent with reason, and irreconcilable with virtue? If so, I shall be able to detect their fallacy," said the youth, pursuing his soliloquy aloud. "It were a poor compliment to the truths I have hitherto worshiped, did I shrink from their investigation. And yet, to question the power of the gods! To question their very existence! To refuse the knee of homage to that great first cause of all things, that speaks, and breathes, and shines resplendent throughout all animated nature! To dispute I know not what — of truths, as self-evident as they are sacred; which speak to our eyes and to our ears: to those very senses whose testimony alone is without appeal in the garden!"

"Do you object to the testimony, young Corinthian?" said a voice, which Theon recognized as that of Metrodorus.

"You arrive opportunely," said Theon, "that is, if you will listen to the questions of my doubting and embarrassed mind."

"Say rather, if I can answer them."

"I attribute to you the ability," said Theon, “since I have heard you quoted as an able expounder of the philosophy of the garden."

"In the absence of our Zeno," said the scholar with a smile, "I sometimes play the part of his Cleanthes. And though you may find me less eloquent than my brother of the porch, I will promise equal fidelity to the text of my original. But here is one, who can expound the doctrine in the letter and the spirit; and, with such an assistant, I should not fear to engage all the scholars and all the masters in Athens."

"Nay, boast rather of thy cause than of thy assistant," said Leontium, approaching, and playfully tapping the shoulder of Metrodorus: "nor yet belie thy own talents, my brother. The Corinthian will smile at thy false modesty, when he shall have studied thy writings, and listened to thy logical discourses. I imagine," she continued, turning her placid gaze on the youth, "that you have hitherto listened to more declamation than reasoning. I might also say, to more

sophistry, seeing that you have walked and talked in the Lyceum."

"Say rather, walked and listened."

"In truth and I believe it," she returned with a smile, "and would that your good sense in this, were more common; and that men would rest content with straining their ears, and forbear from submitting their understandings, or torturing those of their neighbors."

"It might seem strange," said Metrodorus, "that the pedantry of Aristotle should find so many imitators, and his dark sayings so many believers, in a city, too, now graced and enlightened by the simple language, and simple doctrines of an Epicurus. — But the language of truth is too simple for inexperienced ears. We start in search of knowledge, like the demigods of old in search of adventure, prepared to encounter giants, to scale mountains, to pierce into Tartarean gulfs, and to carry off our prize from the grip of some dark enchanter, invulnerable to all save to charmed weapons and deity-gifted assailants. To find none of all these things, but, in their stead, a smooth road through a pleasant country, with a familiar guide to direct our curiosity, and point out the beauties of the landscape, disappoints us of all exploit and all notoriety; and our vanity turns but too often from the fair and open champaigne, into error's dark labyrinths, where we mistake mystery for wisdom, pedantry for knowledge, and prejudice for virtue."

"I admit the truth of the metaphor," said Theon. "But may we not simplify too much as well as too little? May we not push investigation beyond the limits assigned to human reason, and, with a boldness approaching to profanity, tear, without removing, the veil which enwraps the mysteries of creation from our scrutiny?"

"Without challenging the meaning of the terms you have employed," said Metrodorus, "I would observe, that there is little danger of our pushing investigation too far. Unhappily the limits prescribed to us by our few and imperfect senses must ever cramp the sphere of our observation, as compared to the boundless range of things; and that even when we shall have strained and improved our senses to the uttermost. We trace an effect to a cause, and that cause to another cause, and so on, till we hold some few links of a chain, whose extent like the charmed circle, is without beginning as without end."

"I apprehend the difficulties," observed Leontium, "which embarrass the mind of our young friend. Like most aspirants after knowledge, he has a vague and incorrect idea of what he is pursuing, and still more, of what may be attained. In the schools you have hitherto frequented," she continued, addressing the youth, "certain images of virtue, vice, truth, knowledge, are presented to the imagination, and these abstract qualities, or we may call them, figurative beings, are made at once the objects of speculation and adoration. A law is laid down, and the feelings and opinions of men are predicated upon it; a theory is built, and all animate and inanimate nature is made to speak in its support; an hypothesis is advanced, and all the mysteries of nature are treated as explained. You have heard of, and studied various systems of philosophy; but real philosophy is opposed to all systems. Her whole business is observation; and the results of that observation constitute all her knowledge. She receives no truths, until she has tested them by experience; she advances no opinions, unsupported by the testimony

of facts; she acknowledges no virtue, but that involved in beneficial actions; no vice, but that involved in actions hurtful to ourselves or to others. Above all, she advances no dogmas, — is slow to assert what is, — and calls nothing impossible. The science of philosophy is simply a science of observation, both as regards the world without us, and the world within; and, to advance in it, are requisite only sound senses, well developed and exercised faculties, and a mind free of prejudice. The objects she has in view, as regards the external world, are, first, to see things as they are, and secondly, to examine their structure, to ascertain their properties, and to observe their relations one to the other. — As respects the world within, or the philosophy of mind, she has in view, first, to examine our sensations, or the impressions of external things on our senses; which operation involves, and is involved in, the examination of those external things themselves: secondly, to trace back to our sensations, the first development of all our faculties; and again, from these sensations, and the exercise of our different faculties as developed by them, to trace the gradual formation of our moral feelings, and of all our other emotions: thirdly, to analyze all these our sensations, thoughts, and emotions, — that is, to examine the qualities of our own internal, sentient matter, with the same, and yet more, closeness of scrutiny, than we have applied to the examination of the matter that is without us finally, to investigate the justness of our moral feelings, and to weigh the merit and demerit of human actions; which is, in other words, to judge of their tendency to produce good or evil, — to excite pleasurable or painful feelings in ourselves or others. You will observe, therefore, that, both as regards the philosophy of physics, and the philosophy of mind, all is simply a process of investigation. It is a journey of discovery, in which, in the one case, we commission our senses to examine the qualities of that matter, which is around us, and, in the other, endeavor, by attention to the varieties of our consciousness, to gain a knowledge of those qualities of matter which constitute our susceptibilities of thought and feeling."

"This explanation is new to me," observed Theon, "and I will confess, startling to my imagination. It is pure materialism!"

"You may so call it," rejoined Leontiurn, "But when you have so called it — what then? The question remains: is it true? or is it false?"

"I should be disposed to say — false, since it confounds all my preconceived notions of truth and error, of right and wrong."

"Of truth and error, of right and wrong, in the sense of correct or incorrect is, I presume, your meaning," said Leontium. "You do not involve moral rectitude or the contrary in a matter of opinion?"

"If the opinion have a moral or immoral tendency I do," said the youth.

"A simple matter of fact can have no such tendency or ought not, if we are rational creatures."

"And would not, if we were always reasoning beings," said Metrodorus; "but as the ignorance and superstition which surround our infancy and youth, favor the development of the imagination at the expense of the judgment, we are ever employed in the coining of chimeras,

rather than in the discovery of truths; and if ever the poor judgment make an effort to dispel these fancies of the brain, she is repulsed, like a sacrilegious intruder into religious mysteries."

"Until our opinions are made to rest on facts," said Leontium, "the error of our young friend — the most dangerous of all errors, being one of principle and involving many — must ever pervade the world. And it was because I suspected this leading misconception of the very nature — of the very end and aim of the science he is pursuing, that I attempted an explanation of what should be sought, and of what can alone be attained. In philosophy — that is, in knowledge — inquiry is everything; theory and hypothesis are worse than nothing. Truth is but approved facts. Truth, then, is one with the knowledge of these facts. To shrink from inquiry, is to shrink from knowledge. And to prejudge an opinion as true or false, because it interferes with some preconceived abstraction we call vice or virtue, is as if we were to draw the picture of a man we had never seen, and then, upon seeing him, were to dispute his being the man in question, because unlike our picture."

"But if this opinion interfered with another, of whose truth we imagined ourselves certain."

"Then clearly, in one or the other, we are mistaken; and the only way to settle the difficulty is to examine and compare the evidences of both."

"But are there not some truths self-evident?"

"There are a few which we may so call. That is to say, there are some facts, which we admit upon the evidence of a simple sensation; as, for instance, that a whole is greater than its part; that two are more than one; which we receive immediately upon the testimony of our sense of sight or of touch."

"But are there no moral truths of the same nature?"

"I am not aware of any. Moral truth, resting entirely upon the ascertained consequences of actions, supposes a process of observation and reasoning."

"What call you, then, a belief in a presiding providence, and a great first cause?"

"A belief resting upon testimony; which belief will be true or false, according to the correctness or incorrectness of that testimony."

"Is it not rather a self-evident moral truth?"

"In my answer, I shall have to divide your question into two. First, it cannot be a moral truth, since it is not deduced from the consequences of human action. It can be simply a truth, that is, a fact. Secondly, it is not a self-evident truth, since it is not evident to all minds, and frequently becomes less and less evident, the more it is examined."

"But is not the existence of a first or creating cause demonstrated to our senses by all we see, and hear, and feel?"

"The existence of all that we see and hear and feel is demonstrated to our senses; and the belief we yield to this existence is immediate and irresistible, that is, intuitive. —The existence of the creating cause, that you speak of, is not demonstrated to our senses; and therefore the belief in it cannot be immediate and irresistible. I prefer the expression "creating" to "first" cause, because it seems to present a more intelligible meaning. When you shall have examined farther into the phenomena of nature, you will see, that there can be as little a first as a last cause."

"But there must be always a cause, producing an effect."

"Certainly; and so your cause, — creating all that we see and hear and feel — must itself have a producing cause, otherwise you are in the same difficulty as before."

"I suppose it a Being unchangeable and eternal, itself unproduced, and producing all things."

"Unchangeable it may be, — eternal it must be — since every thing is eternal.''

"Every thing eternal?"

"Yes; that is, the elements composing all substances are, so far as we know and can reason, eternal, and in their nature unchangeable; and it is apparently only the different disposition of these eternal and unchangeable atoms that produces all the varieties in the substances constituting the great material whole, of which we form a part. Those particles, whose peculiar agglomeration or arrangement, we call a vegetable to-day, pass into, and form part of an animal to-morrow; and that animal again, by the falling asunder of its constituent atoms, and the different approximation and agglomeration of the same, — or, of the same with other atoms, — is transformed into some other substance presenting a new assemblage of qualities. To this simple exposition of the phenomena of nature (which, you will observe, is not explaining their wonders, for that is impossible, but only observing them,) we are led by the exercise of our senses. In studying the existences which surround us, it is clearly our business to use our eyes, and not our imaginations. To see things as they are, is all we should attempt, and is all that is possible to be done. Unfortunately, we can do but little even here, as our eyes serve us to see but a very little way. But, were our eyes better — were they so good as to enable us to observe all the arcana of matter, we could never acquire any other knowledge of them, than that they are as they are; — and, in knowing this, that is, in seeing every link in the chain of occurrences, we should know all that even an omniscient being could know. One astronomer traces the course of the sun round the earth, another imagines that of the earth round the sun. Some future improvements in science may enable us to ascertain which conjecture is the true one. We shall then have ascertained a fact, which fact may lead to the discovery of other facts, and so on. Until this plain and simple view of the nature of all science be generally received, all the advances we may make in it are comparatively as nothing. Until we occupy ourselves in examining, observing, and ascertaining, and not in explaining, we are idly and childishly employed. — With every truth we may discover we shall mix a thousand errors; and, for one matter of fact, we shall charge our brain with a thousand fancies. To this leading misconception of the real, and only possible object of philosophical inquiry, I incline to attribute all the modes

and forms of human superstition. The vague idea that some mysterious cause not merely precedes but produces the effect we behold, occasions us to wander from the real object in search of an imaginary one. We see the sun rise in the east: instead of confining our curiosity to the discovery of the time and manner of its rising, and of its course in the heavens, we ask also — why does it rise? What makes it move? The more ignorant immediately conceive some Being spurring it through the heavens, with fiery steeds, on wheels of gold, while the more learned tell us of laws of motion, decreed by an almighty fiat, and sustained by an almighty will. Imagine the truth of both suppositions: in the one case, we should see the application of what we call physical power in the driver and the steeds followed by the motion of the sun, and in the other, an almighty volition followed by the motion of the sun. But, in either case, should we understand why the sun moved? — why or how its motion followed what we call the impulse of the propelling power, or the propelling volition? All that we could then know, more than we now know, would be, that the occurrence of the motion of the sun was preceded by another occurrence; and if we afterwards frequently observed the same sequence of occurrences, they would become associated in our mind as necessary precedent and consequent — as cause and effect: and we might give to them the appellation of law of nature, or any other appellation; but they would still constitute merely a truth — that is a fact, and envelope no other mystery, than that involved in every occurrence and every existence."

"But, according to this doctrine," said Theon, "there would be no less reason in attributing the beautiful arrangement of the material world to the motion of a horse, than to the volition of an almighty mind.''

"If I saw the motion of a horse followed by the effect you speak of, I should believe in some relation between them; and if I saw it follow the volition of an almighty mind —the same."

"But the cause would be inadequate to the effect."

"It could not be so, if it were the cause. For what constitutes the adequacy of which you speak? Clearly only the contact, or immediate proximity of the two occurrences. If any sequence could in fact be more wonderful than another, it should rather seem to be for the consequent to impart grandeur to the precedent — the effect to the cause, — than for the cause to impart grandeur to the effect. But in reality all sequences are equally wonderful. That light should follow the appearance of the sun, is just as wonderful, and no more so, as if it were to follow the appearance of any other body — and did light follow the appearance of a black stone it would excite astonishment simply because we never saw light follow such an appearance before. Accustomed, as we now are, to see light when the sunrises, our wonder would be, if we did not see light when he rose : but were light regularly to attend the appearance of any other body, our wonder at such a sequence would, after a time, cease; and we should then say, as we now say, there is a light because such a body has risen; and imagine then, as we imagine now, that we understand why light is."

"In like manner all existences are equally wonderful. An African lion is in himself nothing more extraordinary than a Grecian horse; although the whole people of Athens will assemble to gaze

on the lion, and exclaim how wonderful! while no man observes the horse."

"True — but this is the wondering of ignorance."

"I reply — true again, but so is all wondering. If, indeed, we should consider it in this and in all other cases as simply an emotion of pleasurable surprise, acknowledging the presence of a novel object, the feeling is perfectly rational; but if it imagine anything more intrinsically marvelous in the novel existence, than in the familiar one, it is then clearly the idle — that is, the unreasoned and unreflecting marveling of ignorance. There is but one real wonder to the thinking mind: it is the existence of all things; that is the existence of matter. And the only rational ground of this one great wonder is, that the existence of matter is the last link in the chain of cause and effect at which we can arrive. You imagine yet another link — the existence of a power creating that matter. — My only objections to this additional link, or superadded cause, are, that it is imagined, and that it leaves the wonder as before; unless, indeed, we should say that it has superadded other wonders, since it supposes a power, or rather, an existence possessing a power, of which we never saw an example."

"How so? Does not even man possess a species of creating power? And do you not suppose, in your inert matter, that very property which others attribute, with more reason it appears to me, to some superior and unknown existence?'"

"By no means. No existence, that we know of, possesses creating power, in the sense you suppose. Neither the existence we call a man, nor any other of the existences comprised under the generic names of matter, physical world, nature, &c., possesses the power of calling into being its own constituent elements, nor the constituent elements of any other substance. It can change one substance into another substance, by altering the position of its particles, or intermingling them with others: but it cannot call into being, any more than it can annihilate, those particles themselves. The hand of man causes to approach particles of earth and of water, and, by their approximation produces clay; to which clay it gives a regular form, and, by the application of fire, produces the vessel we call a vase. You may say that the hand of man creates the vase, but it does not create the earth, or the water, or the fire; neither has the admixture of these substances added to, or subtracted from, the sum of their elementary atoms. Observe, therefore, there is no analogy between the power inherent in matter, of changing its appearance and qualities, by a simple change in the position of its particles, and that which you attribute to some unseen existence, who by a simple volition, should have called into being matter itself, with all its wonderful properties. An existence possessing such a power I have never seen; and though this says nothing against the possibility of such an existence, it says every thing against my belief in it. And farther, the power which you attribute to this existence — that of willing every thing out of nothing, — being, not only what I have never seen, but. that of which I cannot with any distinctness conceive — it must appear to me the greatest of all improbabilities."

"Our young friend," observed Metrodorus, "lately made use of an expression, the error involved in which, seems to be at the root of his difficulty. In speaking of matter," he continued, turning

to Theon, "you employed the epithet inert. What is your meaning? And what matter do you here designate?"

"All matter surely is, in itself, inert."

"All matter surely is, in itself, as it is," said Metrodorus with a smile; "and that, I should say, is living and active. Again, what is matter?"

"All that is evident to our senses," replied Theon, "and which stands opposed to mind."

"All matter then is inert which is devoid of mind. "What then do you understand by mind?"

"I conceive some error in my definition," said Theon, smiling. "Should I say — thought — you would ask if every existence devoid of thought was inert, or if every existence, possessing life, possessed thought."

"I should so have asked. Mind or thought I consider a quality of that matter constituting the existence we call a man, which quality we find in a varying degree in other existences; many, perhaps all animals, possessing it. Life is another quality, or combination of qualities, of matter, inherent in — we know not how many existences. We find it in vegetables; we might perceive it even in stones, could we watch their formation, growth, and decay. We may call that active principle, pervading the elements of all things, which approaches and separates the component particles of the ever-changing, and yet ever-enduring world — life. Until you discover some substance, which undergoes no change, you cannot speak of inert matter: it can only be so, at least, relatively, — that is, as compared with other substances."

"The classing of thought and life among the qualities of matter is new to me."

"What is in a substance cannot be separate from it. And is not all matter a compound of qualities? Hardness, extension, form, color, motion, rest — take away all these, and where is matter? To conceive of mind independent of matter, is as if we should conceive of color independent of a substance colored: What is form, if not a body of a particular shape? What is thought, if not something which thinks? Destroy the substance, and you destroy its properties; and so equally — destroy the properties, and you destroy the substance. To suppose the possibility of retaining the one, without the other, is an evident absurdity."

"The error of conceiving a quality in the abstract often offended me in the Lyceum," returned the youth, "but I never considered the error as extending to mind and life, any more than to vice and virtue."

"You stopped short with many others," said Leontium. "It is indeed surprising how many acute minds will apply a logical train of reasoning in one case, and invert the process in another exactly similar."

"To return, and if you will, to conclude our discussion," said Metrodorus, "I will observe that no real advances can be made in the philosophy of mind, without a deep scrutiny into the operations of nature, or material existences. Mind being only a quality of matter, the study we

call the philosophy of mind, is necessarily only a branch of general physics, or the Study of a particular part of the philosophy of matter."

"I am indebted to your patience," said the youth, "and would fain intrude farther on it. I will confine myself at present, however, to one observation. The general view of things, which you present to my mind, the simplicity of which I will confess to be yet more fascinating than its novelty, is evidently unfavorable to religion, — and, if so, unfavorable to virtue."

"An opportunity will, to-day, be afforded you," said Leontium, "of examining this important question in detail. At the request of some of our youth, the Master will himself give his views on the subject."

"I am all curiosity," said Theon. "Other teachers have commanded my respect, inflamed my imagination, and, I believe, often controlled my reason. The son of Neocles inspires me with love, and wins me to confidence, by encouraging me to exercise my own judgment, in scanning his arguments, and examining the groundwork of his own opinions. With such a teacher, and in such a school, I feel suspicion to be wholly misplaced; and I shall now start in the road of inquiry, anxious only to discover truth, and willing to part with every erroneous opinion, the moment it shall be proved to be erroneous."

NOTE BY THE TRANSLATOR. — How beautifully have the modern discoveries in chemistry and natural philosophy, and the more accurate analysis of the human mind — sciences unknown to the ancient world — substantiated the leading principles of the Epicurean ethics and physics — the only ancient school of either, really deserving the name.

To what have all our ingenious inventions and contrivances for the analysis of material substances led us, but to the atoms of Epicurus? To what, our accurate observation of the decomposition of substances, and the arresting and weighing of their most subtle and invisible elements, but to the eternal and unchangeable nature of those atoms? We have, in the course of our scrutiny, superadded to the wonderful qualities of matter with which he was acquainted, those which we call attraction, repulsion, electricity, magnetism, &c. How do these discoveries multiply and magnify the living powers inherent in the simple elements of all existences, and point our admiration to the sagacity of that intellect which 2,000 years ago, started in the true road of inquiry; while, at this day, thousands of teachers, and millions of scholars are stumbling in the paths of error!

If we look to our mental philosophy, to what has our scrutiny led, but to the leading principles of Epicurean ethics. In the pleasure, — utility, — propriety of human action — whatever word we employ, the meaning is the same — in the consequences of human actions, that is, in their tendency to promote our good or our evil, we must ever find the only test of their intrinsic merit or demerit.

It might seem strange that, while the truth of the leading principles of the Epicurean philosophy have been long admitted by all sound reasoners, the abuse of the school and of its founder is continued to this day: this might and would seem strange and incomprehensible, did we not, on every subject find the same cowardly fear effacing, openly and honestly, the prejudices of men.

Teachers, aware of the ignorance of those they teach, develop their doctrines in language intelligible only to the few; or, where they hazard a more distinct exposition of truth, shelter themselves from obloquy by echoing the vulgar censure against those who have taught the same truth, with more explicitness, before them. The mass, even of what is called the educated world, know nothing of the principles they decry, or of the characters they abuse. It is easy, therefore, by joining in the abuse against the one, to encourage a belief that we cannot be advocating the other. This desire of standing fair with the wise, without incurring the enmity of the ignorant, may suit with the object of those who acquire knowledge only for its display, or for the gratification of mere curiosity. But they whose nobler aim, and higher gift it is, to advance the human mind in the discovery of truth, must stand proof equally to censure and to praise. That such lips and such pens should employ equivocation, or other artifice, to turn aside the wrath of ignorance, is degrading to themselves and mortifying to their admirers. The late amiable and enlightened teacher, Thomas Brown, of Edinburgh, whose masterly exposition of old and new truths, and exposure of modern as well as ancient errors, has so advanced the science he professed, is yet chargeable with this weakness. After inculcating the leading principles of the Epicurean philosophy, and building upon those principles, the whole of his beautiful system, he condescends to soothe the prejudices which all his arguments have tended to uproot, by passing a sweeping censure on the school, whose doctrines he has borrowed and taught. We might say — how unworthy of such a mind! But we will rather say — how is it to be lamented that such a mind bears not within itself the conviction that all truths are important to all men; and that to employ deception with the ignorant, is to defeat our own purpose; which is, surely, not to open the eyes of those who already see, but to enlighten the blind!