

AFDIA - Chapter Sixteen - Text and Discussion

Post by “Cassius” of February 15, 2019 at 7:01 PM

CHAPTER XVI.

A MORE than usual crowd attended the instructions of the sage. The gay, and the curious, the learned, and the idle, of all ages, and of either sex, from the restless population of the city; many citizens of note, collected from various parts of Attica; and no inconsiderable portion of strangers from foreign states and countries.

They were assembled on the lawn, surrounding the temple already frequently mentioned. The contracting waters of Ilyssus flowed nearly in their accustomed bed; and earth and air, refreshed by the storm of the preceding night, resisted the rays of the uncurtained sun, now climbing high in the heavens. A crowd of recollections rushed on the young mind of Theon, as he entered the beautiful enclosure, and gazed on the stream which formed one of its boundaries. His thoughts again played truant to philosophy, and his rapid glance sought another and a fairer form than any it found there, when the approach of Epicurus divided the throng, and hushed the loud murmur of tongues into silence. The sage passed on, and it was not till he ascended the marble steps, and turned to address the assembly, that Theon perceived he had been followed by the beautiful being who ruled his fancy. The hues of Hebe now dyed her lips and her cheeks; but the laughing smiles of the preceding evening were changed for the composure of respectful attention. Her eye caught that of Theon. She gave a blush and a smile of recognition. Then, seating herself at the base of a column to the right of her father, her face resumed its composure, and her full dark eyes fastened on the countenance of the sage, in a gaze of mingled admiration and filial love.

"Fellow-citizens, and fellow-men! We purpose, this day, to examine a question of vital importance to human kind: no less a one than the relations we bear to all the existences that surround us; the position we hold in this beautiful material world? the origin, the object, and the end of our being; the source from which we proceed, and the goal to which we tend. — This question embraces many. It embraces all most interesting to our curiosity, and influential over our happiness. Its correct or incorrect solution must ever regulate, as it now regulates, our rule of conduct, our conceptions of right and wrong; must start us on the road of true or false inquiry, and either open our minds to such a knowledge of the wonders working in and around us, as our senses and faculties can attain, or close them for ever with the bands of superstition, leaving us a prey to fear, the slaves of our ungoverned imaginations, wondering and trembling at every occurrence in nature, and making our own existence and destiny sources of dread and mystery."

"Ere we come to this important inquiry, it behoves us to see that we come with willing minds; that we say not, 'so far will we go and no farther; we will make one step, but not two; we will

examine, but only so long as the result of our examination shall confirm our preconceived opinions.' In our search after truth, we must equally discard presumption and fear. We must come with our eyes and our ears, our hearts and our understandings open; anxious, not to find ourselves right, but to discover what is right; asserting nothing which we cannot prove; believing nothing which we have not examined; and examining all things fearlessly, dispassionately, perseveringly."

"In our preceding discourses, and, for such as have not attended these, in our writings, we have endeavored to explain the real object of philosophical enquiry; we have directed you to the investigation of nature, to all that you see of existences and occurrences around you; and we have shown that, in these existences and occurrences, all that can be known, and all that there is to be known, lies hid. We have exhorted you to use your eyes, and your judgments, never your imagination; to abstain from theory, and rest with facts; and to understand that in the accumulation of facts, as regards the nature and properties of substances, the order of occurrences, and the consequences of actions, lies the whole science of philosophy, physical and moral. We have seen, in the course of our enquiry, that in matter itself exist all causes and effects; that the eternal particles, 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. We have seen, in the course of our inquiry, that in matter itself exist all causes and effects; that the eternal particles, composing all substances, form the first and last links in the chain of occurrences, or of cause and effect, at which we can arrive; that the qualities, inherent in these particles, produce, or are followed by, certain effects; that the changes, in position, of these particles, produce or are followed by certain other qualities and effects; that the sun appears, and that light follows his appearance; that we throw a pearl into vinegar, and that the pearl vanishes from our eyes, to assume the form or forms of more subtle, but not less real substances; that the component particles of a human being fall asunder, and that, instead of a man, we find a variety of other substances or existences, presenting new appearances, and new properties or powers; that a burning coal touches our hand, that the sensation of pain follows the contact, that the desire to end this sensation is the next effect in succession, and that the muscular motion of withdrawing the hand, following the desire, is another. That in all this succession of existences and events, there is nothing but what we see, or what we could see, if we had better eyes; that there is no mystery in nature, but that involved in the very existence of all things; and that things being as they are is no more

wonderful than it would be if they were different. That an analogous course of events, or chain of causes and effects, takes place in morals as in physics; that is to say, in examining those qualities, of the matter composing our own bodies, which we call mind, we can only trace a train of occurrences, in like manner as we do in the external world; that our sensations, thoughts, and emotions, are simply effects following causes, a series of consecutive phenomena, mutually producing and produced."

"When we have taken this view of things, observe how all abstruse questions disappear; how all science is simplified; all knowledge rendered easy and familiar to the mind! Once started in this only true road of inquiry, every step we make is one in advance. To whatever science we apply, that is, to whatever part of matter, or to whichever of its qualities, we direct our attention, we shall, in all probability, make important, because true, discoveries. It is the philosophy of nature in general, or any one of those subdivisions of it, which we call the philosophy of Mind, Ethics, Medicine, Astronomy, Geometry, &c., the moment we occupy ourselves in observing and arranging in order the facts, which are discovered in the course of observation, we acquire positive knowledge, and may safely undertake to develop it to others."

"The ascertaining the nature of existences, the order of occurrences, and the consequences of human actions constituting, therefore, the whole of knowledge, what is there to prevent each and all of us from extending our discoveries to the full limits prescribed by the nature of our faculties and duration of our existence? What nobler employment can we invent? What pleasure so pure, so little liable to disappointment? What is there to hold us back? What is there not to spur us forward? Does our ignorance start from the very simplicity of knowledge? Do we fear to open our eyes lest we should see the light? Does the very truth we seek alarm us in its attainment? — How is it that, placed in this world as on a theatre of observation, surrounded by wonders and endowed with faculties wherewith to scan these wonders, we know so little of what is, and imagine so much of what is not? Other animals, to whom man accounts himself superior, exercise the faculties they possess, trust their testimony, follow the impulses of their nature, and enjoy the happiness of which they are capable. Man alone, the most gifted of all known existences, doubts the evidence of his superior senses, perverts the nature and uses of his multiplied faculties, controls his most innocent, as well as his noblest impulses, and to poison all the sources of his happiness. To what are we to trace this fatal error, this cruel self-martyrdom, this perversion of things from their natural bent? In the over-development of one faculty and neglect of another, we must seek the cause. In the imagination, that source of our most beautiful pleasures when under the control of judgment, we find the source of our worst afflictions."

"From an early age, I have made the nature and condition of man my study. I have found him in many countries of the earth, under the influence of all varieties of climate and circumstance; I have found him the savage lord of the forest, clothed in the rough skins of animals less rude than himself, sheltered in the crevices of the mountains and caves of the earth from the blasts of winter and heats of the summer sun; I have found him the slave of masters debased as himself, crouching to the foot that spurns him, and showing no signs of miscalled civilization but its sloth and its sensualities. I have found him the lord over millions, clothed in purple and

treading courts of marble; the cruel destroyer of his species, marching through blood and rapine, to thrones of extended dominion; the iron-hearted tyrant, feasting on the agonies of his victims, and wringing his treasure from the hard-earned mite of industry; I have found him the harmless but ignorant tiller of the soil, eating the simple fruits of his labor, sinking to rest only to rise again to toil, toiling to live and living only to die; I have found him the polished courtier, the accomplished scholar, the gifted artist, the creating genius; the fool and the knave; rich and a beggar; spuming and spurned."

"Under all these forms and varieties of the external and internal man, still, with hardly an exception, I have found him unhappy. With more capacity for enjoyment than any other creature, I have seen him surpassing the rest of existences only in suffering and crime. "Why is this and from whence? A master error, for some there must be, leads to results so fatal — so opposed to the apparent nature and promise of things? Long have I sought this error — this main-spring of human folly and human crime. I have traced, through all their lengthened train of consequents and causes, human practice and human theory; I have threaded the labyrinth to its dark beginning; I have found the first link in the chain of evil; I have found it — in all countries — among all tribes and tongues and nations; I have found it, — fellow-men, I have found it in — RELIGION!"

A low murmur here rose from one part of the assembly. A deep and breathless silence succeeded. The sage turned his gaze slowly around, and with a countenance, pure and serene as the skies which shone above him, proceeded.

"We have named the leading error of the human mind, — the bane of human happiness — the perverter of human virtue! It is Religion — that dark coinage of trembling ignorance! It is Religion — that prisoner of human felicity! It is Religion — that blind guide of human reason. It is Religion — that dethroner of human virtue! -which lies at the root of all the evil and all the misery that pervade the world!"

"Not hastily formed, still less hastily expressed, has been the opinion you hear this day. A long train of reflection led to the discarding of religion as an error, a life of observation to the denouncing it as an evil. In considering it as devoid of truth, I am but one of many. Few have looked deeply and steadily into the nature of things and not called in question belief in existences unseen and causes unknown. But while smiling at the credulity of their fellow-beings, philosophers have thought reason good only for themselves. They have argued that religion, however childish a chimera in itself, was useful in its tendencies: that, if it rested upon nothing, it supported all things; that it was the stay of virtue, and the source of happiness. However opposed to every rule in philosophy, physical and moral; however apparently in contradiction to reason and common sense that a thing untrue could be useful; that a belief in facts disproved or unproved could afford a sustaining prop to a just rule of practice; the assertion came supported by so universal a testimony of mankind, and by individual names of such authority in practical wisdom and virtue, that I hesitated to call it mistaken. And as human happiness appeared to me the great desideratum, and its promotion the only object consistent with the views of a teacher of men, I forbore from all expression of opinion, until I had fully

substantiated, to my own conviction, both its truth and its tendency. The truth of my opinion is substantiated, as we have seen, by an examination into the nature of things; that is, into the properties of matter, which are alone sufficient to produce all the chances and changes that we behold. Its tendency is discovered by an examination into the moral condition of man."

"The belief in supernatural existences, and the expectation of a future life, are said to be sources of happiness, and stimuli to virtue. How, and in what way? Is it proved by experience? Look abroad over the earth; everywhere the song of praise, the prayer of supplication, the smoke of incense, the blow of sacrifice, arise from forest, and lawn, from cottage, palace, and temple, to the gods of human idolatry. Religion, is spread over the earth. If she be the parent of virtue and happiness, they too should cover the earth. Do they so? Read the annals of human tradition! Go forth and observe the actions of men! Who shall speak of virtue — who of happiness, that hath eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to feel? No! experience is against the assertion. The world is full of religion, and full of misery and crime."

"Can the assertion be sustained by argument, by any train of reasoning whatsoever? Imagine a Deity under any fashion of existence; how are our dreams concerning him in an imaginary heaven to affect our happiness or our conduct on a tangible earth? Affect it indeed they may for evil, but how for good? The idea of an unseen Being, ever at work around and about us, may afflict the human intellect with idle terrors, but can never guide the human practice to what is rational and consistent with our nature. Grant that, by any possibility, we could ascertain the existence of one god, or of a million of gods: we see them not, we hear them not, we feel them not. Unless they were submitted to our observation, were fashioned like unto us, had similar desires, similar faculties, a similar organization, how could their mode of existence afford a guide for ours? As well should the butterfly take pattern from the lion, or the lion from the eagle, as man from a god. To say nothing of the inconsistency of the attributes, with which all gods are decked, it is enough that none of them are ours. We are men; they are gods. They inhabit other worlds; we inhabit the earth. Let them enjoy their felicity; and let us, my friends, seek ours."

"But it is not that religion is merely useless, it is mischievous. It is mischievous by its idle terrors; it is mischievous by its false morality; it is mischievous by its hypocrisy; by its fanaticism; by its dogmatism; by its threats; by its hopes; by its promises. Consider it under its mildest and most amiable form, it is still mischievous, as inspiring false motives of action, as holding the human mind in bondage, and diverting the attention from things useful, to things useless. The essence of religion is fear, as its source is ignorance. In a certain stage of human knowledge, the human mind must of necessity, in its ignorance of the properties of matter, and its dark insight into the chain of phenomena arising out of those properties — must of necessity reason falsely on every occurrence and existence in nature; it must of necessity, in the absence of fact, give the rein to fancy, see a miracle in every uncommon event, and imagine unseen agents as producing all that it beholds. In proportion as the range of our observation is enlarged, and that we learn to connect and arrange the phenomena of nature, we curtail our list of miracles, and the number of our supernatural agents. An eclipse is alarming to the vulgar, as denoting the wrath of offended deities; to the man of science it is a simple

occurrence, as easily traced to its cause as any the most familiar to our observation. The knowledge of one generation is the ignorance of the next. Our superstitions decrease as our attainments multiply; and the fervor of our religion declines as we draw nearer to the conclusion which destroys it entirely. That conclusion, based upon accumulated facts, is as we have seen, that matter alone is at once the thing acting, and the thing acted upon, — eternal in duration, infinitely various and varying in appearance: never diminishing in quantity, and always changing in form. Without some knowledge of what is styled natural philosophy, or physics, no individual can attain this conclusion. And in a certain stage of that knowledge, more or less advanced according to the acuteness of the intellect, it will be impossible for any individual, not mentally obtuse, to shun that conclusion. This truth is one of infinite importance. The moment we consider the hostility directed against what is called Atheism, as the natural result of deficient information, the mind must be diseased which could resent that hostility. And perhaps a simple statement of the truth would best lead to examination of the subject, and to the conversion of mankind.

"Imagine this conversion, my friends! Imagine the creature man in the full exercise of all his faculties; not shrinking from knowledge, but eager in its pursuit; not bending the knee of adulation to visionary beings armed by fear for his destruction, but standing erect in calm contemplation of the beautiful face of nature; discarding prejudice, and admitting truth without fear of consequences; acknowledging no judge but reason, no censor but that in his own breast! Thus considered, he is transformed into the god of his present idolatry, or rather into a far nobler being, possessing all the attributes consistent with virtue and reason, and none opposed to either. How great a contrast with his actual state! His best faculties dormant; his judgment unawakened within him; his very senses misemployed; all his energies misdirected; trembling before the coinage of his own idle fancy; seeing over all creation a hand of tyranny extended; and instead of following virtue, worshiping power! Monstrous creation of ignorance! monstrous degradation of the noblest of known existences! Man, boasting of superior reason, of moral discrimination, imagines a being at once unjust, cruel, and inconsistent; then, kissing the dust, calls himself its slave! "This world is," says the theist, "therefore it was made." — By whom? — "By a being more powerful than I." Grant this infantine reasoning, what follows as the conclusion? "That we must fear him," says the theist. — And why? Is his power directed against our happiness? Does your god amuse himself by awakening the terrors of more helpless beings? Fear him then indeed we may; and, let our conduct be what it will, fear him we must. "He is good as well as powerful," says the theist; "therefore the object of love," — How do we ascertain his goodness? I see indeed a beautiful and curious world; but I see it full of moral evils, and presenting many physical imperfections. Is he all-powerful? perfect good or perfect evil might exist. Is he all-powerful and all-good? perfect good must exist. Of the sentient beings comprised in the infinity of matter I know but those which I behold. I set no limits to the number of those which I behold not; no bounds to their power. One or many may have given directions to the elementary atoms, and may have fashioned this earth as the potter fashions its clay. Beings possessing such power may exist, and may have exercised it. All-powerful still they are not, or being so they are wicked: evil exists. I know not what may be — but this my moral sense tells me cannot be — a fashioner of the world I inhabit, in his nature all-good and all-powerful. I

see yet another impossibility; a fashioner of this world in his nature all-good and fore-knowing. Granting the possibility of the attributes, their united existence were an impossible supposition in the architect of our earth."

"Let us accord his goodness the most pleasing and valuable attribute. Your god is then the object of our love, and of our pity. Of our love, because being benevolent in his own nature, he must have intended to produce happiness in forming ours; of our pity, because we see that he has failed in his intention. I cannot conceive a condition more unfortunate than that of a deity contemplating this world of his creation. Is he the author of some — say, of much happiness? of what untold misery is he not equally the author? I cannot conceive a being more desperately — more hopelessly wretched than that we have now pictured. The worst of human miseries shrink into comparative insignificance before those of their author. How must every sigh drawn from the bosom of man rend the heart of his god! How must every violence committed on earth convulse the peace of heaven! unable to alter what he had fashioned, how must he equally curse his power and his impotence! And in bewailing our existence, how must he burn to annihilate his own!"

"We will now suppose his power without limit; and his knowledge extending to the future, as to the past. How monstrous the conception! What demon drawn from the fevered brain of insanity ever surpassed this deity in malignity! Able to make perfection, he hath sown through all nature the seed of evil. The lion pursues the lamb; the vulture, in his rage, tears the dove from her nest. Man, the universal enemy, triumphs even in the sufferings of his fellow-beings; in their pain finds his own joy; in their loss, his gain; in the frenzy of his violence, working out his own destruction; in the folly of his ignorance, cursing his own race, and blessing its cruel author! Your deity is the author of evil, and you call him good; the inventor of misery, and you call him happy! What virtuous mind shall yield homage to such a Being? Who shall say that homage, if tendered, degrades not the worshiper? Or, who shall say that homage, when rendered, shall pacify the idol? Will abjectness in the slave ensure mercy in the tyrant? Or, if it should, my friends, which of us would be the abject? Are men found bold to resist earthly oppression, and shall they bow before injustice because she speak from heaven? Does the name of Harmodius inspire our songs? Do crowns of laurel bind the temples of Aristogiton? Let our courage rise higher than theirs, my friends; and, if worthy of ambition, our fame! Dethrone, not the tyrant of Athens, but the tyrant of the earth! — not the oppressor of Athenians but the oppressor of mankind! Stand forth! Stand erect! Say to this god, 'if you made us in malice, we will not worship you in fear. We will judge of you by your works: and judge your works with our reason. If evil pervade them, you are chargeable with it as their author. We care not to conciliate your injustice, any more than to strive with your power. We judge of the future from the past. And as you have disposed of us in this world, so, if it please you to continue our being must you dispose of us in another. It would be idle to strive with Omnipotence, or to provide against the decrees of Omniscience. We will not torment ourselves by imagining your intentions; nor debase ourselves by expostulations. Should you punish, in us, the evil you have made, you will punish it as unjustly as you made it maliciously. Should you reward in us the good, you will reward it absurdly, as it was equally your work, and not ours.' "

"Let us now concede in argument the union of all the enumerated attributes. Let us accord the existence of a being perfect in goodness, wisdom, and power, who shall have made all things by his volition, and decreed all occurrences in his wisdom. Such a being must command our admiration and approval: he can command no more. As he is good and wise, he is superior to all praise; as he is great and happy, he is independent of all praise. As he is the author of our happiness, he has ensured our love; but as he is our creator, he may command from us no duties. Supposing a god, all duties rest with him. If he has made us, he is bound to make us happy; and failing in the duty, he must be an object of just abhorrence to all his sentient creation. Kindness received must necessarily inspire affection. This kindness, in a divine creator, as in an earthly parent, is a solemn duty, — a sacred obligation, — the nonperformance of which were the most atrocious of crimes. When performed, love from the creature, as from the child, is a necessary consequence, and an all-sufficient reward."

"Allowing then to the theist his god, we stand to him in no relation that can inspire fear, or involve duty. He can give us no happiness that he was not bound to bestow: he can cherish us with no tenderness, that he was not bound to yield. It is for him to gratify all our desires, — or, if they be erroneous, to correct them. It is for us to demand every good in his power to grant, or in ours to enjoy. Let then, the theologian banish fear and duty from his creed. It is love — love alone that can be claimed by gods or yielded by men."

"Have we said enough? Surely the absurdity of all the doctrines of religion, and the iniquity of many, are sufficiently evident. To fear a being on account of his power, is degrading; to fear him if he be good, ridiculous. Prove to us his existence, and prove to us his perfections; prove to us his parental care; love springs up in our bosoms, and repays his bounty. If he care not to show us his existence, he desires not the payment of our love, and finds in the contemplation of his own works their reward."

"But, says the theist, his existence is evident — and, not to acknowledge it a crime. It is not so to me, my friends. I see no sufficient evidence of his existence: and to reason of its possibility, I hold to be an idle speculation. To doubt that which is evident is not in our power. To believe that which is not evident, is equally impossible to us. Theist! thou makest of thy god a being more weak, more silly, than thyself. He punisheth as a crime the doubt of his existence! Why, then, let him declare his existence, and we doubt no more. Should the wandering tribes of Scythia doubt the existence of Epicurus, should Epicurus be angry? What vanity — what absurdity — what silliness, O theists! do ye not suppose in your God! Let him exist, this god, in all the perfection of a poet's imagery; I lift to him a forehead assured and serene. I see thee, O God! in thy power, and admire thee: I see thee in thy goodness, and approve thee. Such homage only is worthy of thee to receive, or of me to render.' And what does he reply? 'Thou art right, creature of my fashioning! Thou canst not add to, nor take away from the sum of my felicity. I made thee to enjoy thy own, not to wonder at mine. I have placed thee amid objects of desire, I have given thee means of enjoyment. Enjoy, then! Be happy! It was for that I made thee.'"

"Hearken, then, my children! hearken to your teacher! Let it be a god or a philosopher who speaks, the injunction is the same: Enjoy, and be happy! Is life short? It is an evil: but render life happy, its shortness is the only evil. I call to you, as, if he exist, God must call to you from heaven: Enjoy, and be happy! Do you doubt the way? Let Epicurus be your guide. The source of every enjoyment is within yourselves. Good and evil lie before you. The good is — all which can yield you pleasure: the evil — what must bring you pain. Here is no paradox, no dark saying, no moral hid in tables."

"We have considered the unsound fabric of religion. It remains to consider that, equally unsound, of morals. The virtue of man is false as his faith. What folly invented, knavery supports. Let us arise in our strength, examine, judge, and be free!"

The teacher here paused. The crowd stood, as if yet listening.

"At a convenient season, my children, we will examine farther into the nature of man, and the science of life."

FINIS.