

Episode Thirty-One - Continuation of Episode Thirty / Polyaenus

Post by “Cassius” of August 9, 2020 at 8:58 AM

Reference: [A Few Days In Athens Chapter 15:](#)

“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.”