

THAT IT IS NOT POSSIBLE TO LIVE PLEASURABLY
ACCORDING TO THE DOCTRINE OF EPICURUS.

PLUTARCH, ZEUXIPPUS, THEON, ARISTODEMUS.

1. EPICURUS's great confidant and familiar, Colotes, set forth a book with this title to it, that according to the tenets of the other philosophers it is impossible to live. Now what occurred to me then to say against him, in the defence of those philosophers, hath been already put into writing by me. But since upon breaking up of our lecture several things have happened to be spoken afterwards in the walks in further opposition to his party, I thought it not amiss to recollect them also, if for no other reason, yet for this one, that those who will needs be contradicting other men may see that they ought not to run cursorily over the discourses and writings of those they would disprove, nor by tearing out one word here and another there, or by falling foul upon particular passages without the books, to impose upon the ignorant and unlearned.

2. Now as we were leaving the school to take a walk (as our manner is) in the place of exercise, Zeuxippus began to us: In my opinion, said he, the debate was managed on our side with more softness and less freedom than was fitting. I am sure, Heraclides sufficiently signified his disgust at us at parting, for handling Epicurus and Metrodorus more roughly than they deserved. Yet you may remember, replied Theon, how you told them that Colotes himself, compared with the rhetoric of those two gentlemen, would appear the complaisantest man alive;

for when they have raked together the lewdest terms of ignominy the tongue of man ever used, as buffooneries, trollings, arrogancies, whorings, assassinations, whining counterfeits, vile seducers, and blockheads, they faintly throw them in the faces of Aristotle, Socrates, Pythagoras, Protagoras, Theophrastus, Heraclides, Hipparchus, and which not, even of the best and most celebrated authorities. So that, should they pass for very knowing men upon all other accounts, yet their very calumnies and reviling language would bespeak them at the greatest distance from philosophy imaginable. For emulation can never enter that God-like consort, nor such fretfulness as wants resolution to conceal its own resentments. Aristodemus then subjoined: Heraclides, you know, is a great philologist; and that may be the reason why he made Epicurus those amends for the poetic din (so that party style poetry) and for the fooleries of Homer; or else, it may be, it was because Metrodorus had libelled that poet in so many books. But let us let these gentlemen pass at present, Zeuxippus, and rather return to what was charged upon the philosophers in the beginning of our discourse, that it is impossible to live according to their tenets. And I see not why we two may not despatch this affair betwixt us, with the good assistance of Theon; for I find this gentleman (meaning me) is already tired. Then Theon said to him,

Our fellows have that garland from us won;

therefore, if you please,

Let's fix another goal, and at that run.*

We will even prosecute them at the suit of the philosophers, in the following form: We'll prove, if we can, that it is impossible to live a pleasurable life according to their tenets. Bless me! said I to him, smiling, you seem to me to level your foot at the very bellies of the men, and to

* Odyss. XXII. 6.

design to enter the list with them for their lives, whilst you go about to rob them thus of their pleasure, and they cry out to you,

“Forbear, we’re no good boxers, sir;

no, nor good pleaders, nor good senators, nor good magistrates either;

Our proper talent is to eat and drink,*

and to excite such tender and delicate motions in our bodies as may chafe our imaginations to some jolly delight or gayety.” And therefore you seem to me not so much to take off (as I may say) the pleasurable part, as to deprive the men of their very lives, while you will not leave them to live pleurably. Nay then, said Theon, if you think so well of this subject-matter, why do you not set in hand to it? By all means, said I, I am for this, and shall not only hear but answer you too, if you shall require it. But I must leave it to you to take the lead.

Then, after Theon had spoken something to excuse himself, Aristodemus said: When we had so short and fair a cut to our design, how have you blocked up the way before us, by preventing us from joining issue with the faction at the very first upon the single point of honesty! For you must grant, it can be no easy matter to drive men already possessed that pleasure is their utmost good yet to believe a life of pleasure impossible to be attained. But now the truth is, that just when they failed of living honestly they failed also of living pleurably; for to live pleurably without living honestly is even by themselves allowed inconsistent.

3. Theon then said: We may probably resume the consideration of that in the process of our discourse; in the interim we will make use of their concessions. Now they suppose their last good to lie about the belly and such other conveyances of the body as let in pleasure and not

* Odyss. VIII. 246, 248.

pain ; and are of opinion, that all the brave and ingenious inventions that ever have been were contrived at first for the pleasure of the belly, or the good hope of compassing such pleasure, — as the sage Metrodorus informs us. By which, my good friend, it is very plain, they found their pleasure in a poor, rotten, and unsure thing, and one that is equally perforated for pains, by the very passages they receive their pleasures by ; or rather indeed, that admits pleasure but by a few, but pain by all its parts. For the whole of pleasure is in a manner in the joints, nerves, feet, and hands ; and these are oft the seats of very grievous and lamentable distempers, as gouts, corroding rheums, gangrenes, and putrid ulcers. And if you apply to yourself the exquisitest of perfumes or gusts, you will find but some one small part of your body is finely and delicately touched, while the rest are many times filled with anguish and complaints. Besides, there is no part of us proof against fire, sword, teeth, or scourges, or insensible of dolors and aches ; yea, heats, colds, and fevers sink into all our parts alike. But pleasures, like gales of soft wind, move simpering, one towards one extreme of the body and another towards another, and then go off in a vapor. Nor are they of any long durance, but, as so many glancing meteors, they are no sooner kindled in the body than they are quenched by it. As to pain, Aeschylus's Philoctetes affords us a sufficient testimony :

The cruel viper ne'er will quit my foot ;
Her dire envenomed teeth have there ta'en root.

For pain will not troll off as pleasure doth, nor imitate it in its pleasing and tickling touches. But as the clover twists its perplexed and winding roots into the earth, and through its coarseness abides there a long time ; so pain disperses and entangles its hooks and roots in the body, and continues there, not for a day or a night, but for several seasons of years, if not for some revolutions of Olym-

piads, nor scarce ever departs unless struck out by other pains, as by stronger nails. For who ever drank so long as those that are in a fever are adry? Or who was ever so long eating as those that are besieged suffer hunger? Or where are there any that are so long solaced with the conversation of friends as tyrants are racking and tormenting? Now all this is owing to the baseness of the body and its natural incapacity for a pleasurable life; for it bears pains better than it doth pleasures, and with respect to those is firm and hardy, but with respect to these is feeble and soon palled. To which add, that if we are minded to discourse on a life of pleasure, these men won't give us leave to go on, but will presently confess themselves that the pleasures of the body are but short, or rather indeed but of a moment's continuance; if they do not design to banter us or else speak out of vanity, when Metrodorus tells us, We many times spit at the pleasures of the body, and Epicurus saith, A wise man, when he is sick, many times laughs at the very extremity of his distemper.

With what consistence then can those that account the pains of the body so light and easy think so highly of its pleasures? For should we allow them not to come behind its pains either in duration or magnitude, they would not yet have their being without them. For Epicurus hath made the removal of all that pains the common definition of all pleasure; as if Nature had intended to advance the pleasurable part only to the destruction of the painful, but would not have it improved any further in magnitude, and as if she only diverted herself with certain useless diversifications after she hath once arrived to an abolition of pain. But now the passage to this, conjoined with an appetence which is the measure of pleasure, is extremely short and soon over. And therefore the sense of their narrow entertainment here hath obliged them to transplant their last end from the body, as from a poor and lean soil,

to the mind, in hopes of enjoying there, as it were, large pastures and fair meadows of delights and satisfactions.

For Ithaca is no fit place
For mettled steeds to run a race.*

Neither can the joys of our poor bodies be smooth and equal ; but on the contrary they must be coarse and harsh, and immixed with much that is displeasing and inflamed.

4. Zeuxippus then said : And do you not think then they take the right course to begin at the body, where they observe pleasure to have its first rise, and thence to pass to the mind as the more stable and sure part, there to complete and crown the whole ?

They do, by Jove, I said ; and if, after removing thither, they have indeed found something more consummate than before, they take a course too as well agreeing with nature as becoming men adorned with both contemplative and civil knowledge. But if after all this you still hear them cry out, and protest that the mind of man can receive no satisfaction or tranquillity from any thing under Heaven but the pleasures of the body either in possession or expectance, and that these are its proper and only good, can you forbear thinking they make use of the soul but as a funnel for the body, while they mellow their pleasure by shifting it from one vessel to another, as they rack wine out of an old and leaky vessel into a new one and there let it grow old, and then imagine they have performed some extraordinary and very fine thing ? True indeed, time may both keep and recover wine that hath thus been drawn off ; but the mind, receiving but the remembrance only of past pleasure, like a kind of scent, retains that and no more. For as soon as it hath given one hiss in the body, it immediately expires, and that little of it that stays behind in the memory is but flat and like a queasy fume ; as if a man should lay up and treasure in his fancy

* Odyss. IV. 605.

what he either ate or drank yesterday, that he may have recourse to that when he wants fresh fare. See now how much more temperate the Cyrenaics are, who, though they have drunk out of the same bottle with Epicurus, yet will not allow men so much as to practise their amours by candle-light, but only under the covert of the dark, for fear seeing should fasten too quick an impression of the images of such actions upon the fancy and thereby too frequently inflame the desire. But these gentlemen account it the highest accomplishment of a philosopher to have a clear and retentive memory of all the various figures, passions, and touches of past pleasure. We will not now say, they present us with nothing worthy the name of philosophy, while they leave the refuse of pleasure in their wise man's mind, as if it could be a lodging for bodies; but that it is impossible such things as these should make a man live pleasurable, I think is abundantly manifest from hence.

For it will not perhaps seem strange if I assert, that the memory of pleasure past brings no pleasure with it if it seemed but little in the very enjoyment, or to men of such abstinence as to account it for their benefit to retire from its first approaches; when even the most amazed and sensual admirers of corporeal delights remain no longer in their gaudy and pleasant humor than their pleasure lasts them. What remains is but an empty shadow and dream of that pleasure that hath now taken wing and is fled from them, and that serves but for fuel to foment their untamed desires. Like as in those that dream they are adry or in love, their unaccomplished pleasures and enjoyments do but excite the inclination to a greater keenness. Nor indeed can the remembrance of past enjoyments afford them any real contentment at all, but must serve only, with the help of a quick desire, to raise up very much of outrage and stinging pain out of the remains of a feeble and befooling pleasure.

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