

WHETHER WATER OR FIRE BE MOST
USEFUL.

1. "WATER is the best of things, but gold is like burning fire," says Pindar.* Therefore he positively assigns the second place to fire; with whom Hesiod agrees, where he says,

First of all Chaos being had.†

For most believe that by the word chaos he meant water, from *χῶσις*, signifying *diffusion*. But the balance of argument as to this point seems to be equal. For there are some who will have it that fire is the principle of all things, and that like sperm it begets all things out of itself, and resolves all things again by conflagration. Therefore, not to mention the persons, let us consider the arguments on both sides, which are to us the most convincing.

2. Now then, is not that the most useful to us, which in all places and always and most of all we stand in need of, —like a piece of household-stuff or a tool, nay, like a friend that is ready at all hours and seasons? But fire is not always useful; for sometimes it is a prejudice to us and we avoid it if we can. But water is useful, winter and summer, to the healthy and sick, night and day; neither indeed is there any time but that a man has need of it. Therefore it is that the dead are called *alibantes*, as being without moisture (*λιβάς*) and by that means deprived of life; and man may be without fire, but never

* Pindar, Olymp. I. 1.

† Hesiod, Theog. 116.

was any man without water. Besides, that which was existent from the beginning and with the first creation of man must be thought more useful than what was afterwards invented. From whence it is apparent, that Nature bestowed the one upon us as a thing absolutely necessary, the other fortune and art found out for superfluity of uses. Nor was the time ever known when man lived without water, nor was it an invention of any of the Gods or heroes; for it was present almost at their generation, and it made their creation possible. But the use of fire was a late invention of Prometheus, at what time life was without fire, but not without water. And that this is no poetical fiction is demonstrable from this, that there are many sorts of people that live without fire, without houses, and without hearths, in the open air. And Diogenes the Cynic made no use of fire; so that after he had swallowed a raw fish, "This hazard," said he, "do I run for your sakes." But without water no man ever thought it convenient or possible to live.

3. But why do I so meanly confine my discourse to the nature of men, seeing there are many, nay, infinite sorts of creatures? The race of man is almost the only one that knows the use of fire; the others live and feed without fire. Indeed, beasts, birds, and creeping things live upon roots, fruits, and raw flesh, without fire; but without water neither fish nor fowl nor land animals can subsist. For all beasts that feed upon flesh, of which there are some (as Aristotle reports) that never drink, nevertheless support life and being merely by moisture. So that of necessity that must be most profitable without which no sort of life can subsist or endure.

4. Let us therefore make a step from animals that eat to things that we ourselves make use of, such are plants and fruits; of which some are altogether void of heat, others enjoy it but imperfectly and obscurely. But moist-

ure causes all things to germinate, increase, and bring forth. Why should I stand to reckon up wine and oil, milk and honey, and whatever else we reap and bring forth and see before our eyes, when wheat itself, which is looked upon as a dry nourishment, grows by alteration, putrefaction, and corruption of the moist matter?

5. Then again, that is most useful which is no way detrimental. Now fire easily becomes most pernicious, but the nature of water is never prejudicial. In the next place, that is most useful which affords the benefit which it brings with least expense, and without any preparation. But the benefit of fire requires cost and materials, and therefore the rich make more use of it than the poor, and princes than private persons; but water has that kindness for mankind, that it freely offers itself to all alike, a benefit perfect in itself, indigent of nothing, and wanting neither tools nor implements.

6. Moreover, that which by augmentation loses its benefit is of least use. Such is fire, which like a devouring beast ravages all before it, useful rather by art and skilful moderation, than of its own nature. But from water there is nothing to be feared. Furthermore, that is most useful which may be joined with another. But fire will not admit of water, neither is it any way profitable by conjunction with it. But water becomes profitable by joining with fire; and therefore hot waters are wholesome, and sensibly cure several diseases. Neither shall you ever find moist fire; but water both cold and hot is profitable for the body of man.

7. Then again, there being four elements, water produces a fifth out of itself, which is the sea, no less beneficial than the rest, as well for commerce as for many other things. So that it may be said, this element united and perfected our manner of living, which before was wild and unsociable, correcting it by mutual assistance. and

creating community of friendship by reciprocal exchanges of one good turn for another. And as Heraclitus said, If there were no sun, it would be perpetual night; so may we say, If there were no sea, man would be the most savage and shameless of all creature. But the sea brought the vine from India into Greece, and out of Greece transmitted the use of corn to foreign parts; from Phoenicia translated the knowledge of letters, the memorials that prevent oblivion; furnished the world with wine and fruit, and prevented the greatest part of mankind from being illiterate and void of education. How is it possible then but that water should be the most useful, when it thus furnishes us with an entirely new element?

8. Or can any man speak as follows in defence of the contrary? We say then that God, as a master workman, had before him the four elements, to complete the fabric of the universe; and these again were different one from another. But earth and water were placed at the foundation, like matter, to be formed and fashioned, participating of form and order and of power to procreate and bring forth, so far as they are assisted by air and fire,—the great artificers that mould them into various shapes,—and lying dead till roused by them to act and generate. Of these two latter, fire is the ruling agent. This is manifest by induction. For earth without warmth and heat is altogether barren and unfruitful; but fire, by virtue of its rousing and inflaming quality, renders it diffusive, and swells it into generation. Nor can any man find out any other cause why rocks and the dry tops of mountains are not productive, but because they participate either nothing at all or very little of fire.

9. Then generally for water, it is so far from being sufficient of itself for the generation and preservation of other things, that it is itself destroyed for want of fire. But fire is that which upholds every thing in its proper being, and

preserves it in its proper substance, as well water itself as all other things; so that when fire leaves it, water will stink, and it may be said that the want of fire is the death and destruction of water. And thus we find in regard to pools and all manner of standing waters, and such as are settled in pits and holes without issue, what an offensive and dead stench they send forth, and all for want of motion; for this kindles and preserves heat in all things, and more especially in running waters and swift streams, which being thus agitated and enlivened by heat, we commonly say such waters "live." Why then should not that be accounted the most useful of the two, that affords to the other the cause of its being, as fire does to water? Moreover, that is the most useful, of which if an animal be wholly deprived, it must perish; for it is evident, that anything without which an animal cannot live affords the reason and cause why it exists. There is moisture also in things after they are dead, nor are they altogether dried up; for otherwise moist bodies would never putrefy; since putrefaction is the alteration of dry into moist, or rather the corruption of moisture in flesh. Neither is death any other than an absolute defect and want of heat, and therefore dead carcasses are the coldest of all; so that if you do but touch them with a razor, they will blunt the edge of it through excess of coldness. Also in living creatures, those parts that least partake of heat are most insensible, as the bones and hair, and those parts which are most distant from the heart. Nay, to some of the most important things the absence of fire and the presence of water are destructive. For plants and fruits are not produced by moisture, but by the warmth of the moisture; and cold waters are most certainly either less productive, or altogether barren. For if water were fruitful in itself, it would always, and that spontaneously too, bear fruit. But the contrary is apparent, and it is rather baneful to generation.

10. Let us begin anew. As to the use of fire, considered as fire, we have no need of water. Rather the contrary is to be made out; for water extinguishes fire. And as for water, there is no use to be made of it in most things without fire. For water heated becomes more useful, whereas otherwise it is prejudicial. So that, of the two, that is to be accounted best which is profitable of itself without the assistance of another. Besides, water is beneficial only to the feeling, when you either wash with it or touch it; but fire is profitable to all the senses, being not only felt, but also seen at a distance; so that you may add this to the rest of the virtues of it, that its uses are manifold.

11. Then to say that man did once subsist without fire is a mistake, it being impossible that man should be without it. But we must acknowledge there are differences in this kind, as well as in other things. Thus heat has rendered the sea more beneficial, as having a greater portion of heat in it than other waters, from which it otherwise differs not at all. And as for those that have no need of outward fire, they do not avoid it because they do not want it, but because they abound in heat within themselves. So that the use of fire seems to be more excellent in this, that water is never in such a condition as not to want external aids, but fire, endued with manifold virtues, contents itself with its own sufficiency. Therefore, as he is the best commander who so manages the affairs of his city as not to have any need of foreign assistance, so that element excels that supplies us in such a manner as to want the least of other helps from without. And this is to be said of other creatures that have no need of external heat.

Now, to argue on the other side, a man may say thus, that whatever we singly and alone make use of is more profitable, since we are by our reason best fitted to choose what is best. For what is more useful and beneficial to us

than reason? . . . And yet brute animals want fire. What then? Is it the less profitable, because found out by foresight of a higher power?

12. And since our discourse has brought us to it, what is more beneficial to life than art? Yet fire invented and preserves all manner of arts. And therefore Vulcan is feigned to be the prince of all artificers. Man has allowed him but a little time to live; and as Aristo said, sleep, like a toll-gatherer, deprives him of the one-half of that too. I would rather say that the darkness does this; for a man may watch all night. But he would have no benefit of his watchfulness unless fire afforded him all the benefit of the light of day, and removed the difference between night and day. Since then there is nothing more beneficial to man than life, and this is prolonged by fire, why should not fire be accounted the most beneficial of all things?

13. Lastly, that is to be thought most profitable, of which the temperament of the senses participates most. Now do you find that there is any of the senses, which of itself makes use of moisture without an intermixture of air and fire? But every sense partakes of fire, as being that which quickens the vital faculty; more especially the sight, which is the most acute of all the senses in the body, being a certain fiery efflux, that gave us our first light into the belief of a Deity, and by virtue of which we are able, as Plato says, to conform our souls to the motions of the celestial bodies.

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