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Lovers

Plato (c. 428-348 BCE)

English EDITION

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Lovers

I entered the grammar school of the teacher Dionysius, and saw there the young men who are accounted the most comely in form and of distinguished family, and their lovers. Now it chanced that two of the young people were disputing, but about what, I did not clearly overhear: it appeared, however, that they were disputing either about Anaxagoras [1] or about Oenopides; [2] at any rate, they appeared to be drawing circles, and they were imitating certain inclinations [3] with their arms, bending to it and taking it most earnestly. Then I—for I was sitting beside the lover of one of the pair—nudged him with my elbow and asked him what on earth the two youngsters were so earnest about, and I said: Is it then something great and fine, in which they are so earnestly immersed?

Great and fine, indeed! he replied: why, these fellows are prating about the heavenly bodies, and babbling philosophy. Then I, surprised at his answer, said: Young man, do you consider philosophizing to be shameful? Else, why do you speak so sharply?

Then the other youth—for he chanced to be sitting near him, as his rival in love—when he heard my question and his rival's answer, said: You do yourself no good, Socrates, by pressing this fellow with a further question, as to whether he considers philosophizing to be shameful. Do you not know that he has spent the whole of his life in practising the neckhold, and stuffing himself, and sleeping? So why did you suppose he would make any other reply than that philosophy is

[1] The Ionian philosopher who lived in friendship with Pericles at Athens.

[2] A philosopher of Chios, distinguished as a geometer and astronomer.

[3] i.e., the slopes of the contours of the earth, and of the apparent course of the sun(ecliptic).

shameful? Now this one of the two lovers had spent his time on humane studies, [4] whereas the other, whom he was abusing, had spent his on athletics. So I decided that I had best relinquish the other, whom I had been questioning, since he did not even himself set up to be experienced in words, but only in deeds; and that I should interrogate the one who set up to be wiser, in order that so far as I was able I might get some benefit from him. I said therefore: I addressed my question to both in common; but if you think you could answer more creditably than he, I put the same question to you as I did to him: do you consider philosophizing to be honorable or not?

Then the two striplings, overhearing us speak somewhat like this, were silent, and ceasing from their own contention they became listeners to ours. What their lovers' sensations were, I do not know, but I myself, at any rate, was staggered; for every time I am staggered by handsome young people. It seemed to me, however, that my young friend too was in as great a flutter as myself; but nevertheless he answered me in a most ambitious spirit: Why, of course, Socrates, he said, if I should ever consider philosophizing to be shameful, I should not account myself so much as a man, nor anyone else either who was disposed to think so. Here he pointed to his rival lover, and spoke with a loud voice, in order that his favorite might hear every word.

Then I remarked: So philosophizing seems to you to be honorable?

Quite so, he said.

Well now, I said; does it seem to you possible to know whether anything is honorable or shameful without knowing what it is fundamentally?

No, he said. Then do you know, I went on, what philosophizing is?

Certainly I do, said he.

Then what is it? I asked.

Why, just what Solon called it; you know it was Solon who said:"And ever, as I older grow, I learn yet more and more;"*Solon Fr. 18*—and I agree with him that a man who intends to philosophize should in this way be ever learning something or other, whether he be younger or older, in order that he may learn as many things as possible in his life. Now at first I felt there was something in his reply, but then, on second thoughts, I asked him whether he considered philosophy to be much learning. To which he answered: Certainly.

[4] Literally, on music, which with the Greeks included poetry and general literature as well as music.

And do you consider philosophy to be merely honorable, I asked, or good as well?

Good as well, he said: very much so.

Then do you observe this as peculiar to philosophy, or do you find it similarly in everything else? For example, do you consider the love of athletics to be not merely honorable, but good as well, or do you not?

Whereupon he, most slily, gave a double answer: To him my statement must be "neither"; but to you, Socrates, I acknowledge it to be both honorable and good: for I consider this the right view.

Then I asked him: Well now, in athletics, do you consider that much exercise is love of athletics?

To which he replied: Certainly, just as in philosophizing I consider much learning to be philosophy.

Then I said: And do you then consider that the lovers of athletics desire anything else than that which will cause them to be in good bodily condition?

Only that, he replied.

And does much exercise, I asked, cause them to be in good bodily condition?

Yes, for how, he replied, could one be in good bodily condition through little exercise?

Here I felt it was time to stir up the lover of athletics, in order that he might give me the support of his athletic experience; so I proceeded to ask him: And you then, pray, why are you silent, excellent sir, while your friend here is speaking thus? Do you agree that men are in good bodily condition through much exercise, or is it rather through moderate exercise?

For my part, Socrates, he said, I thought even a pig— as the saying is—would have known that moderate exercise causes them to be in good bodily condition, so why should not a fellow who is sleepless and unfed, with unchafed neck and slender, care-worn frame! And when he had said this the boys were delighted and laughed their approval, while the other lover blushed.

Then I said to him: Well, do you now concede that it is neither much, nor little, but moderate exercise that causes men to be in good bodily condition? Or do you bid defiance to the two of us on this point? To which he answered: Against him I should be only too glad to fight it out, and I am certain I should prove able to support the

theory I have put forward, even had I put forward a weaker one; for he is naught. But with you I do not aim at winning an unscrupulous success; and so I admit that not a great but a moderate amount of athletics causes good condition in men.

And what of food? Moderate or much? I asked.

The same applied to food, he admitted. Then I went on and tried to compel him also to admit that everything else connected with the body when most beneficial, was the moderate thing, not the much or the little; and he admitted that it was the moderate thing.

And now, I said, as regards the soul; are moderate or immoderate things beneficial, as adjuncts of it?

Moderate things, he replied.

And are studies among the adjuncts of the soul?

He admitted they were.

So among these also it is the moderate that are beneficial, and not the much?

He agreed.

Then whom should we be justified in asking what sort of exercise or food is moderate for the body?

The three of us agreed that it must be a doctor or a trainer. And whom should we ask about the moderate measure in the sowing of seed?

In that matter, we agreed, it must be a farmer.

And whom should we be justified in asking as to the moderate degree and kind, in regard to the sowing and planting of studies in the soul?

At this point we all began to be full of perplexity; then I, mocking at them, asked: Do you mind, since we are in perplexity, if we ask these boys here? or perhaps we are ashamed, as Homer [5] said the suitors were, and do not think it fit there should be someone else who will string the bow?

Then, as it seemed to me that they were losing their zeal for the argument, I tried to pursue the inquiry in another way, and said: But what, as nearly as we can guess, are the kinds of learning which the philosopher should learn, since he is not to learn all things or many things? At this the wiser one interjected: The finest and most suitable kinds of learning are those which will bring him the most reputation for

[5] *Od.* xxi. 285 foll., where the suitors of Penelope are ashamed, after they have failed to string the great bow of Odysseus, to let its owner, disguised as a beggar, try his strength on it, and perhaps succeed.

philosophy; and he will get most reputation if he appears well versed in all the arts, or if not in all, in as many of them, and those the most considerable, as he can, by learning so much of them as befits a free man to learn, that is, what belongs to the understanding rather than the handiwork of each.

Well now, do you mean, I asked, in the same way as in carpentry? For there, you know, you can buy a carpenter for five or six minae, [6] but a first-rate architect cannot be got for even ten thousand drachmae; few such, indeed, could be found throughout the whole of Greece. Is it something of this sort that you mean? When he heard me say this, he admitted that something like this was what he himself meant.

I next asked him if it was not impossible for the same person to learn in this way merely two of the arts, not to speak of many or the principal ones; to which he replied: Do not conceive me, Socrates, to be stating that the philosopher must have accurate knowledge of each of the arts, like the actual adept in any of them; I mean only so far as may be expected of a free and educated man: that is, he should be able to follow the explanations of the craftsman more readily than the rest of the company, and to contribute an opinion of his own which will make him appear the cleverest and most accomplished of the company who may at any time be present at some verbal or practical exposition of the arts.

Then, as I was still unsettled in my mind as to the drift of his words, I asked him: Do I quite grasp the sort of man whom you mean by the philosopher? For you seem to me to mean someone like the all-round athletes [7] in contest with the runners or the wrestlers: the former yield, you know, to the latter in their particular exercises, and are their inferiors in these, but are superior to the usual sort of athletes and beat them.

I daresay it may be something of this sort that you would suggest as the effect produced by philosophy on those who make it their pursuit: they yield to those who are first-rate in an understanding of the arts, but in taking the second place they surpass the rest; and in this way the man who has studied philosophy comes just next to the top in everything. That is the kind of person whom you appear to me to indicate.

You are quite right, it seems to me, Socrates, he said, in your con-

[6] A mina(=100 drachmae)would be about 6-8 pounds in our money today.

[7] Literally, athletes trained for the contest of the five exercises of leaping, running, disc-flinging, javelin-throwing, and wrestling.

ception of the philosopher's position, with your comparison of him to the all-round athlete. For it is precisely his nature not to be enslaved to any business, or to work out anything exactly, so as to let his application to that one matter make him deficient in the rest, as the craftsmen do, but to have a moderate contact with all of them.

Well, after this answer I was eager to know clearly what he meant, so I inquired of him whether he conceived of good men as useful or useless.

Useful, I should say, Socrates, he replied.

Then if good men are useful, are wicked men useless?

He agreed that they were.

Again, do you consider that philosophers are useful persons or not? He agreed that they were useful; nay, more, that he considered they were most useful of all.

Come now, let us make out, if what you say is true, where these second-best men are also useful to us: for clearly the philosopher is inferior to any particular adept in the arts.

He agreed.

Well now, I went on, if you yourself, or one of your friends for whom you feel great concern, should have fallen sick, would you fetch that second-best man into the house with a view to obtaining health, or would you summon a doctor? For my part, I should have both, he replied.

Please do not say "both," I said, but which of the two you would prefer and also summon first.

No one, he replied,would make any question but that the doctor should be preferred and also summoned first.

And again, if you were in a ship that was making rough weather, to which would you rather entrust yourself and yours, the pilot or the philosopher?

I should choose the pilot.

And so it will be in everything else: so long as there is some craftsman, the philosopher will not be useful?

Apparently, he replied. So now we find that the philosopher is a useless person? For I suppose we always have craftsmen; and we have agreed that good men are useful, and bad ones useless.

He was obliged to agree to this.

Then what follows? Am I to ask you, or will it be too ill-mannered?

Ask whatever you please.

Well, my aim, I said, is merely to recall our agreements upon what has been stated. The matter stands somewhat like this. We agreed

that philosophy is an honorable thing, and that philosophers are good; and that good men are useful, and wicked men useless: but then again we agreed that philosophers, so long as we have craftsmen, are useless, and that we always do have craftsmen. Has not all this been agreed?

Yes, to be sure, he replied.

Then we agreed, it seems, by your account—if philosophizing means having knowledge of the arts in the way you describe—that philosophers are wicked and useless so long as there are arts among mankind. But I expect they are not so really, my friend, and that philosophizing is not just having a concernment in the arts or spending one's life in meddlesome stooping and prying and accumulation of learning, but something else; because I imagined that this life was actually a disgrace, and that people who concerned themselves with the arts were called sordid. [8] But we shall know more definitely whether this statement of mine is true, if you will answer me this: What men know how to punish horses rightly? Is it those who make them into the best horses, or some other men?

Those who make them into the best horses.

Or again, is it not the men who know how to make dogs into the best dogs that know also how to punish them rightly?

Yes.

Then it is the same art that makes them into the best dogs and punishes them rightly?

It appears so to me, he replied.

Again, is the art that makes them into the best ones and punishes them rightly the same as that which knows the good and the bad ones, or is it some other?

The same, he said.

Then in the case of men also will you be prepared to agree that the art which makes them into the best men is that which punishes them rightly and distinguishes the good and the bad ones?

Certainly, he said.

And that which does this to one, does it also to many, and that which does it to many, does it also to one?

Yes.

And so it is also with horses and everything else?

I agree.

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[8] *βάναυσος* expresses the peculiar contempt felt by Greek gentlemen for the work of artisans and even artists. Manual labor was the business of slaves and persons who were unfit for military and political life.

Then what is the knowledge which rightly punishes the licentious and law-breaking people in our cities? Is it not judicature?

Yes.

And is it any other art than this that you call justice?

No, only this. And that whereby they punish rightly is that whereby they know the good and bad people?

It is.

And whoever knows one will know many also?

Yes.

And whoever does not know many will not know one?

I agree.

Then if one were a horse, and did not know the good and wicked horses, would one not know which sort one was oneself?

I think not.

And if one were an ox and did not know the wicked and good oxen, would one not know which sort one was oneself?

That is so, he said.

And so it would be, if one were a dog?

He agreed.

Well now, when one is a man, and does not know the good and bad men, one surely cannot know whether one is good or wicked oneself, since one is a man also oneself?

He granted this.

And is "not knowing oneself" being temperate, [9] or not being temperate?

Not being temperate.

So "knowing oneself" is being temperate?

I agree, he said.

So this is the message, it seems, of the Delphic inscription—that one is to practise temperance and justice.

It seems so.

And it is by this same art that we know also how to punish rightly?

Yes.

Then that whereby we know how to punish rightly is justice, and that whereby we know how to distinguish our own and others' quality is temperance?

It seems so, he said.

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[9] Cf. *Charmides* (Introduction and 164) for the connection in thought and language between temperance and self-knowledge.

Then justice and temperance are the same thing?

Apparently.

And further, it is thus, you know, that cities are well ordered—when the wrongdoers pay the penalty.

That is true, he said.

Hence this is also statecraft.

He concurred.

Again, when one man governs a city rightly, is he not called a despot and king?

I agree.

And he governs by a kingly and despotic art?

That is so.

And these arts are the same as the former?

Apparently. Again, when a man singly governs a house aright, what is he called? Is he not a house-manager and master?

Yes.

Then would he also govern his house well by justice, or by some other art?

By justice.

Hence they are all the same, it seems,—king, despot, statesman, house-manager, master, and the temperate man and the just man; and it is all one art,—the kingly, the despotic, the statesman's, the master's, the house-manager's, and justice and temperance.

It is so, apparently, he said. Then, if it is disgraceful in the philosopher to be unable, when a doctor speaks about the sick, either to follow his remarks or to contribute anything of his own to what is being said or done, and to be in the same case when any other of the craftsmen speaks, is it not disgraceful that he should be unable, when it is a judge or a king or some other of the persons whom we have just instanced, either to follow their words or contribute anything to their business?

It must indeed be disgraceful, Socrates, to have nothing to contribute to subjects of such great importance! Are we then to say, I asked, that in these matters also he is to be an all-round athlete, a second-rate man, taking the second place in all the subjects of this art—he, the philosopher—and is to be useless so long as there is one of these persons; or that, first of all, he is to entrust his own house to nobody else and is not to take the second place in it, but is himself to judge and punish rightly, if his house is to be well managed?

He granted me that it must be so.

Secondly, I presume, whether his friends entrust him with an arbitration, or the state charges him to determine or judge any matter, it is

disgraceful for him, my good friend, in such cases, to be found in the second or third place, and not to lead?

I agree.

Hence we see, my excellent sir, that philosophizing is very far from being much learning and that affair of busying oneself with the arts.

On my saying this the cultivated youth was silent, feeling ashamed for what he had said before, while the unlearned one said it was as I stated; and the rest of the company praised the argument.

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