

HOW A MAN MAY BE SENSIBLE OF HIS PROGRESS
IN VIRTUE.

MY FRIEND SOSSIUS SENECEO,

1. Is it possible, do you think, that all the arguments in the world can make a man sensibly assured that he is a proficient in virtue, upon this supposition, that his proceedings do not in the least alleviate and abate his folly, but that the vice in him, weighing in equal balance against his good inclinations, holds him down, as

Heavy lead pulls down the yielding net?

In the study of music or grammar, I am sure, such a conclusion would be very absurd; for the scholar could never be certain that he had made any improvement in those sciences, if all the while he is a learning he did not exhaust by little and little his former ignorance about them, but remained during the whole progress of his application under the same degree of unskilfulness as at first setting out.

The like may be said of those that are under the hands of a physician. According to this assertion, if the patient take physic which does not recruit his strength or give him ease by abating the severity of the distemper, it is absolutely impossible that he should discern any alteration in himself, before the contrary habit is perfectly and in the highest degree induced, and his body thoroughly sound and well. As in these instances you cannot say the persons have advanced any thing, so long as they perceive no sen-

sible change in themselves by the abatement of the contrary weight, and do not find that their minds are elevated, as it were, in the opposite scale ; just so, in truth, is it with those that profess philosophy. They cannot be assured of any progress or improvement, if the soul do not gradually advance and purge off the rest of its former imperfections, but still lie under the like equal pressure and grievance of pure, absolute, unmixed evil, till it have attained the state of perfect, supreme good ; for the truth of it is, a wise man cannot in a moment of time change from the lowest degree of vice imaginable to the most heroic perfection of virtue, if he only make a brisk attempt to throw off vice all at once, and do not constantly and resolutely endeavor by little and little to lighten the burthen and dispossess the evil habit of it.

You know very well how much trouble those give themselves who maintain this assertion, and what strange questions they raise with regard to it, — for instance, why a wise virtuous man should never perceive how he became such, but should either be quite ignorant, or at least doubt, that ever by little and little, now adding something, now subtracting and removing others, he advanced to the aggregate perfection of virtue. Now if (as they affirm) the change from bad to good were either so quick and sudden, as that he that was extremely vicious in the morning may become eminently virtuous at night, or that any one going to bed wicked might chance to rise a virtuous man next morning, and, having all the former day's errors and imperfections absolutely removed out of his mind, might say to them, as it is in the poet,

Vain dreams ! farewell, like spectres haste away,
At the new light of virtue's glorious day ; *

do you think that any one in the world could be ignorant of so extraordinary a conversion, and perfectly shut his

* Eurip. Iph. Taur. 569.

eyes upon the beams of virtue and wisdom so fully and manifestly breaking in upon his soul? In my opinion, if any person should have Caeneus's foolish wish, and be changed (as it is reported he was) from one sex to the other, it is more probable that such a one should be altogether ignorant of the metamorphosis, than that any should, from a lazy, unthinking, debauched fellow, commence a wise, prudent, and valiant hero, and from a sottish bestiality advance to the perfection of divine life, and yet know nothing at all of the change.

2. It is very good advice, Measure the stone by your rule, and not your rule by the stone. But the Stoics have not observed it; for they, not applying principles to things, but forcing things which have no foundation of agreement in nature to agree to their principles, have filled philosophy with a number of difficulties. One of the hardest to be solved is this, that all men whatsoever (except him who is absolutely perfect) are equally vicious. Hence is that enigma, called progress or proficiency, which, though it has puzzled the learned to solve, is in my opinion very foolish; for it represents those that have advanced a little, and are partly free from inordinate passions and distempers of mind, to be as unhappy as those that are guilty of the most heinous enormities. And indeed the assertion is so absurd, that their own actions are enough to confute it; for while they maintain in their schools that Aristides and Phalaris are equally unjust, that Brasidas and Dolon are equal cowards, and that Plato and Meletus are equally senseless, still in all affairs of life they seem to reject and avoid the latter of these, as too harsh and severe to be softened into compliance, but credit and quote the former in all their writings, as persons of extraordinary worth and esteem. This is what the Stoics assert.

3. But we, who can better agree with Plato in this point, finding by observation that in all kinds of evils, especially

that of a weak and unmanaged disposition of mind, there are several degrees of more and less (for herein one advance differs from another, that the miserable darkness which the soul lies under begins more sensibly to abate, when reason by little and little illuminates and purges the soul), may be bold to affirm that the change from bad to good is very easily and manifestly discernible; not as if one were drawn out of a pit on a sudden, and could give no account of the degrees of the ascent, but so plain that the several steps and advances may be computed.

The first argument that comes in my mind is this, by way of simile; pray examine it. You know the art of navigation; when the seamen hoist sail for the main ocean, they give judgment of their voyage by observing together the space of time and the force of the wind that driveth them, and compute that, in all probability, in so many months, with such a gale, they have gone forward to such or such a place. Just so it is in the study of philosophy; one may, if he mind it, give a probable conjecture of a scholar's proceedings. He that is always at his business, constantly upon the road, never makes any steps or halts, nor meets with obstacles and lets in the way, but under the conduct of right reason travels smoothly, securely, and quietly along, may be assured that he has one true sign of a proficient. This of the poet,

Add many lesser numbers in account,
Your total will to a vast sum amount,*

not only holds true as to the increase of money, but also may serve as a rule to the knowledge of the advance of every thing else, especially of proficiency in virtue. Reason, besides its ordinary influence, requires the constancy of application and address which is necessary and usual in all other affairs. Whereas, on the contrary, the irregular proceedings and inconsistent silly assertions of some

* Hesiod, Works and Days, 361.

philosophers do not only lay rubs in the way, and break the measures of a virtuous improvement, but seem to give great advantage to vice, during their lingering and idling upon their journey, to tempt them into by-paths, or over-persuade them to return whence they set out.

Astronomers tell us that planets, after they have finished their progressive motion, for some small time acquiesce and become stationary, as they term it. Now in the study of philosophy it is not so ; there is no point of rest or acquiescence during the whole procedure, for the nature of progress is to be always advancing, more or less. The scales in which our actions are, as it were, weighed cannot at all stand in equilibrio, but our soul is continually either raised by the addition of good, or cast with the counterpoise of evil.

Therefore, as the oracle told the Cirrhaeans that they ought to fight continually, day and night ; so you and every wise man ought to be perpetually upon your guard, and if you can be assured that you maintain a constant combat with vice, that you are always at enmity with it and never so much as come to terms, or receive any diversions, applications, or avocations, as so many heralds from the enemies' camp, in order to a treaty with it ; then you may, with a great deal of confidence and alacrity, go on with the management of your warlike expedition, and very reasonably at last expect a conquest, and enjoy a crown of righteousness for your reward.

4. It is another very good argument to prove that by labor and exercise you have shaken off all stupidity and sluggishness of temper, and that you are arrived at a perfection of virtue, if for the future your resolutions be more firm and your application more intense than they were when you first set out. This appears true, if you but observe its contrary ; for it is a very bad sign if, after a small time spent in trial, you find many and repeated intermis-

sions, or your affections yielding or cool in the pursuit. This may be illustrated by what is observable in the growth of a cane. At first it appears above ground with a full and pleasing sprout, which by little and little, taper-wise, by a continued and equal distribution of matter, rises to a very great height. Towards the root you may observe that there are formed certain steps and joints, which are at a considerable distance from one another, because (there) the juice is plentiful and strong. But toward the top the nutrimentive particles vibrate and palpitate, as if they were quite spent with the length of their journey, and thereupon, you see, they form themselves many small, weak, and tender joints, as so many supports and breathing-places. So it happens with those that study philosophy: at first setting out they take long steps and make great advances; but if, after some attempts, they perceive not in themselves any alteration for the better, but meet with frequent checks and avocations the further they go, ordinarily they faint, make any excuses to be off from their engagement, despond of ever going through with it, and thereupon proceed no farther. But, on the contrary, he that is winged with desire flies at the proposed advantage, and by a stout and vigorous pursuit cuts off all pretences of delay from crowding in upon him or hindering his journey.

In love, it is a sign the passion is predominant, if the lover be not only pleased in the enjoyment of the beloved object (for that's ordinary), but also troubled and grieved at the absence of it. After a manner not unlike this, many youngsters (as I've observed) stand affected at the study of philosophy. At first, they buckle to their work with the greatest concern and emulation imaginable; but as soon as ever they are diverted, either by business or any little pretences, the heat of their affection immediately flies off, and they sit down ignorant and very well content. But

He that perceives the pleasing sting of love,
Whose poignant joy his trembling heart doth move,*

will not only show that he is a proficient by his virtuous demeanor and agreeableness in all company and discourse; but if he be called from his business, you may perceive him all on fire, in pain, and uneasy in whatsoever he does, whether alone or in company, and so concerned that he is unmindful of his best friends till he is restored to the quest of his beloved philosophy. All of us ought to imitate such a noble example in all our studies. We must not be affected with good discourse only while we are in place, as we are with rich fragrant perfumes (which we never mind, but while we are smelling to them); but if by chance marriage, an estate, love, or a campaign take us from our business, we must still hunger and thirst after virtue; and the more our proficiency is advanced, by so much the more ought our desire to know what we have not attained disquiet and excite us to the further pursuit and knowledge of it.

5. The grave account which Hesiod gives of proficiency is, in my judgment, either the very same, or comes very near to this which I have now set down. Proficiency is (says he) when all difficulties are removed, all unevenness smoothed and cleared, and the way made easy and passable. It must be smoothed by frequent exercise, cleared by beams of divine light that guide the way to true philosophy, nothing at all of the clouds of doubt, error, or inconstancy in good resolutions remaining, which are as usually incident to learners in their first attempts upon philosophy, as distraction and solitudes are to those who, sailing from a known land, cannot yet discover the place whither they are bound. Thus I have known impatient sophisters skip over common and ordinary notions, before they have learned or attained better, and lose themselves

* From Sophocles, Frag. 757.

END OF SAMPLE TEXT



The Complete Text can be found on our CD:
Primary Literary Sources For Ancient Literature
which can be purchased on our Website :
www.Brainfly.net

or

by sending **\$64.95** in check or money order to :
Brainfly Inc.
5100 Garfield Ave. #46
Sacramento CA 95841-3839

TEACHER'S DISCOUNT:

If you are a **TEACHER** you can take advantage of our teacher's discount. Click on **Teachers Discount** on our website (www.Brainfly.net) or **Send us \$55.95** and we will send you a full copy of *Primary Literary Sources For Ancient Literature* **AND** our *5000 Classics CD (a collection of over 5000 classic works of literature in electronic format (.txt))* plus our *Wholesale price list*.

If you have any suggestions such as books you would like to see added to the collection or if you would like our wholesale prices list please send us an email to:

webcomments@brainfly.net