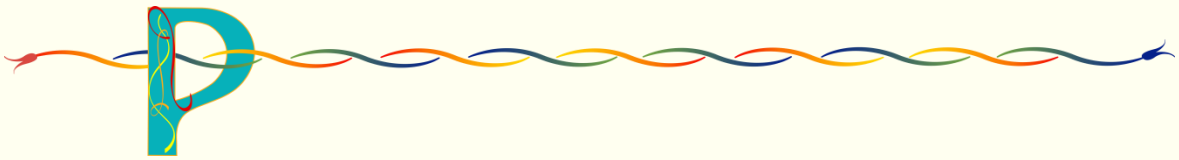
Protreptics to Moral Virtue

Train of thoughts

- There can be no progress in virtue while habits of wrong-doing continue unchanged.
- A change from vice to virtue is not instantaneous, it must be progressive.
- The opinion of the Stoics confuted that all men are equally vicious.
- As there are degrees of moral improvement, they are easily discernible.
- Constant endeavour to be good may inspire confidence of success.
- It is a good sign if our efforts after moral improvement become more intense and constant.
- And if difficulties gradually disappear.
- Examples given.
- It is a good sign if the ridicule or opposition of friends do not induce us to leave our studies.
- What may evince proficiency in virtue.
- Many fail of advantage from the study of philosophy.
- In hearing lecture's or reading, attend to things spoken rather than the words.
- Do not read merely to admire the style.
- Be more ready to hear than to speak.
- Maintain an unruffled temper.
- Cultivate presence of mind.
- Be guided by truth rather than ostentation.
- Exercise self-restraint; and moderation.
- Cultivate a serious spirit.
- Be willing to receive admonition.
- When in the wrong, willingly acknowledge it.
- Effects of careful and persistent training.
- Pleasant dreams indicate proficiency in virtue.

- Not only love and admire but imitate virtuous examples.
- Let some virtuous example ever be in our thoughts.
- Cultivate the acquaintance of the wise and good.
- Carefully avoid every fault.



Plutarch's Protreptics to Moral Virtue

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MY FRIEND SOSSIUS SENECIO,

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 anything, so long as they perceive no sensible 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 endeavour 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;[1]

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

[1] Eurip. *Iph. Taur.* 569.

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,[1]

not only holds true as to the increase of money, but also may serve as a rule to the knowledge of the advance of everything 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 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 Cirrhæans 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 labour 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 intermissions, 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

[1] *Hesiod, Works* and Days, 361.

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,[1]

will not only show that he is a proficient by his virtuous demeanour 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 a 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 solicitudes 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

[1] From Sophocles, Frag. 757.

themselves in the middle of their journey in so troublesome a maze, that they would be willing to return (if they could) to their primitive state of quiet, inactive ignorance. Sextius, a nobleman of Rome, may serve for an instance of this. He quitted all offices and places of honour, that he might more freely and undisturbedly apply himself to the study of philosophy. At first he met with many difficulties; and finding himself unable to encounter or conquer them, out of very despair and despondency, he had thoughts of throwing himself out of a little boat into the river Tiber. Parallel to this is a merry story told of Diogenes of Sinope; when he first put on his gown, it happened to be at a time when the Athenians celebrated a festival with extraordinary banquets, night-drinking, sports, and pageantry usual at great solemnities. The philosopher, as he lay in the holidays in the corner of the street, muffled up in his clothes, to try if he could take a nap, had some running thoughts in his head, which checked the resolutions he had taken as to a philosophical life, and troubled him extremely. He reasoned with himself, that there was no necessity for his entering into so troublesome and singular a way of living, that he thereby deprived himself of all the sweets and pleasures of life, and the like. While he was thinking thus with himself, he espied (as the story goes) a mouse venturing toward him, and now and then nibbling at a mouldy crust that he had in his pouch. This sight (which is much) turned his thoughts, and made him vexed and troubled at himself as much on the other side. What (says he) is the matter with thee, Diogenes? Thou seest this tiny mouse lives well, and is very glad of thy scraps; but thou, who must needs be a person of quality, forsooth, art extremely sorry and out of humour, because thou dost not feast upon down-beds, and canst not have the genteel privilege at this merry time to be drunk as well as others.

Another rational argument of gradual proficiency is when avocations are not frequent upon us, and when they happen, very short; while the substantial rules and precepts of wisdom, as if they had been violently driven out, presently return upon our minds, and dispossess all empty trouble and disconsolate thoughts.

6 And because scholars do not only fancy to themselves difficulties big enough to divert their weak resolutions, but also often meet with serious persuasions from their friends to leave their studies, and because sometimes such smart jests and drolls are put upon them as have often discouraged, frequently quite converted, the endeavours of some; it may seem to you a very good argument of a proficient, if you find yourself indifferent and unconcerned in that point. As, for example, not to be cut to the heart and repine, when you are told that such and such persons by name, your equals once, live splendidly at court, have married great fortunes, or have appeared publicly at the head of a great many freeholders, that are ready to vote for them for some great office or representative's place. He that is neither discomposed nor very much affected by such news as this is manifestly in the right, and has philosophy by the surer handle. For it is impossible we should leave admiring things which most men esteem, if the habit of virtue were not deeply rooted in us. To avoid passionately what everyone cries down may be in some persons the effect of anger and ignorance; but utterly to despise what is admired abroad is a certain sign of true and solid wisdom and resolution. With what satisfaction and complacency many persons advanced to such a height of virtue compare themselves with others, and break out in these verses of Solon! →

We will not change Virtue's immortal crown
For a whole mine of gold.
Gold is uncertain; but what we possess
Is still our own, and never can be less.

None can deny but that it was very great in Diogenes to compare his shifting from the city of Corinth to Athens, and from Thebes to Corinth, to the king of Persia's taking his progress in the spring to Susa, in winter to Babylon, and to Media in summer. Nor was it an argument of a much less spirit in Agesilaus, who, hearing this same king of Persia styled the Great, presently asked, In what is he greater than I, if he be not juster than I am? Aristotle himself had exactly such notions in the like case; for, writing to Antipater about his scholar Alexander, he says of him, that he ought not to value himself in this respect, that he was advanced above others; for whoever had a true notion of God was really as great as he. And Zeno too deserves to be mentioned, who, hearing Theophrastus commended above any of the philosophers for his number of scholars, put it off thus: His choir is indeed larger than mine, but mine has the sweeter voices.

7 From all these instances you may collect this great truth, that whenever you do, by setting the comforts of virtue and the difficulties and errors of study one against the other, perceive that you have utterly expelled all emulation, jealousy, and everything else that uses to disturb or discourage young men, you may then assuredly conclude with yourself that you have made very laudable progress.

Another argument of proficiency in virtue is the alteration of your very style of writing, and of your way of managing any argument or discourse. Most of those that nowadays design for scholars (in ordinary speaking) do prosecute almost none but popular studies; to furnish out discourse, and make themselves, as the phrase is, plausible men; some few of them there are who, like silly larks, are taken with the glaring light of natural philosophy, and, measuring themselves by their own levity and conceit, think they are able presently to attain the height of that science. Others like young whelps ('tis Plato's simile) love to snap and bite at one another, only to gratify a contentious, sceptical, and sophistical humour, which they at first got by bad tuition and ill-managed studies. Some again, as soon as ever they are initiated in the principles of logic, presently commence sophisters. Others spend their whole time in collecting sentences and historical narrations. These (as Anacharsis said of the Grecians, that he saw no occasion they had for money, but only to count and tell it over) have nothing at all to do, but go about singing and repeating what they have collected into commonplace books, without any other benefit or satisfaction from their labours. To these you may apply that of Antiphanes, which one ingeniously turned to Plato's scholars. This Antiphanes said merrily, that in a certain city the cold was so intense that words were congealed as soon as spoken, but that after some time they thawed and became audible, so that the words spoken in winter were articulated next summer. Even so, the many excellent precepts of Plato, which he instilled into the tender ears of his scholars, were scarce perceived and distinguished by many of them, till they grew men and attained the warm vigorous summer of their age.

Such a cool disposition to virtue and philosophy, as that philosopher said was in Plato's scholars when young, often lasts in the most of us (as was hinted before) till our judgments grow to a solid firmness and maturity, and we begin to value those precepts that are able to beget a composure and greatness of mind, and diligently to trace and follow those discourses and precepts whose tracks (as it is in Æsop's fables) rather look inward than outward, to ourselves rather than others. Sophocles said of himself, that in writing his tragedies he first of all abated and pricked the tumour of Æschylus' invention, then corrected the harshness and over artifice of his composition, and, last of all, changed his very style and elocution, the thing which is most considerably persuasive, and which most of all conduces to good manners. Even so, young students, when they pass from the fullness and luxuriancy of panegyric and declamation to that more solid part of philosophy that regulates manners and smooths all rugged and disorderly passions, then begin really to attain true and solid proficiency.

8 Hereupon let me advise you this — whenever you read the writings or hear the orations of the philosophers, attend always things more than words, and be not taken with what is curious and of a delicate thread and contexture, more than that which is strong, nervous, and beneficial. So also, in perusing poems or histories, be sure that nothing escape you that is appositely said, in relation to the cultivating of manners or the calming turbulent, immoderate passions; but always give it a note, and make it surely your own. Simonides said that a student in philosophy should be like a bee. That laborious creature, when it is amongst flowers, makes it its business industriously to extract the yellow honey out of them all; while others care and seek for nothing else except the smell and the colour. So, while some others employ their time in reading the poets only for diversion, or for the wit and fancy which usually adorn their works, you (my dear friend) like a bee amongst a swarm of drones, observe and collect what is sweet, palatable, and worthy your pains, and seem already, by your constant custom and application, to have attained a perfect knowledge of what is eminently good and proper.

As to those that peruse the works of Plato and Xenophon only for the style's sake, and do cull out what is elegant and Attic, as the cream and flower of those authors, pray what do they do but as it were admire the fragrancy and flavour of medicinal drugs, yet, at the same time, neither understand nor enquire after their healing and purgative qualities? Whereas, those that have advanced to a higher degree of perfection can extract benefit, not only from philosophical discourses, but also from everything they see or do, and thence draw something that may be proper and fit for their purpose. I will give you some examples of Æschylus and other very eminent men, which may be very pat to this purpose. Æschylus chanced to be a spectator at the Isthmian games, where some were engaged at sword play; seeing one of the combatants wounded, and observing that the theatre immediately made a great shouting and hollowing upon it, he jogged one Ion, an inhabitant of the island Chios, who sat next to him, and whispered him thus, Do you see what exercise can do? He that is wounded holds his peace, and the spectators cry out.

Brasidas, the Lacedæmonian captain, by chance caught a mouse among some dry figs; and, being bit by her, let her go, with this exclamation, By Hercules! there is no creature so little or so weak, that it cannot preserve its life if it dares but defend it.

Diogenes may serve for a thousand instances; when he saw a boy drink out of the palm of his hand, he threw away his dish, which he used to carry always with him in his wallet. Thus sedulity and application have a singular virtue to make us knowing and able to extract motives to virtue from everything that we meet with.

Nor is it a difficult matter to attain such a temper of mind, if the candidates for virtue intermix discourse and reading with their actions; not only "exercising themselves amidst dangers" (as Thucydides[1] said to some), but also engaging pleasures, disputing hard questions, examining precedents, pleading causes, and so (to try themselves thoroughly) undertaking some magistracy or public office, giving thereby demonstration of their opinions and resolution, or rather establishing their resolution by exercise. Whereas, those that are not bred to it, but like novices spy out and catch at anything that is curious in books, and pragmatically run away with it either to the Exchange, the College, or some club or tavern, deserve no more the name of philosophers, than those quacks that only truck off vile drugs and potions merit the character and value of physicians. Those sophisters seem to me not unlike the bird mentioned in Homer, and to have something of its quality. Whatsoever they catch abroad they presently bring home with them, and cram it into their unfledged chicks, their illiterate scholars, starving their own empty crops the while, as the poet has it; for they neither digest nor convert what they take into true nourishment.

9 It is then indispensably our duty so to manage our discourse, that it may be beneficial both to ourselves and others, we not incurring the censure of being thought vain-glorious or arrogant by any; to be always readier to hear than to teach; and, especially, so to abate and moderate all vehemency and passionate quarrelling about trivial questions, as that we may cease to attend and manage disputations with the same indifferency as you may have seen some exercise hurlbats and cudgelling — that is, so as to leave the stage with more satisfaction for having had a true hit or coming off conqueror, than for having either learned ourselves or taught our antagonist any manner of skill by the engagement.

An evenness and mildness of temper in all such affairs, which never will suffer us to enter the lists with vehemency and passion, nor to be hot and concerned in settling an argument, nor to scold and give bad words when we have vanquished our adversary, nor to be very much dejected if we chance to be quite baffled, is (I think) a true sign of a great proficient in virtue. Aristippus was a great example of this; for when in a set disputation he was baffled by the sophistry and forehead of an impudent, wild, and ignorant disputant, and observed him to be flushed and high with the conquest; Well! says the philosopher, I am certain, I shall sleep quieter to-night than my antagonist.

Not only upon the close and event of our philosophical contests, but even in the midst of disputation, we may (privately) take an estimate of this good quality in us,

[1] Thucyd. I. 18.

which is a sign of a true proficient; for example, if, upon a greater appearance of auditors than was expected, we be not afraid nor in confusion; if, at the thinness of the congregation, when there are but a few to hear us, we be not dejected and troubled; and lastly, if, when we are to speak before a numerous or honourable assembly, we do not, for want of fitting preparation, miss the opportunity for ever.

It is reported that two as famous orators as ever were, Demosthenes and Alcibiades, were somewhat weak and faulty in this point. The timorousness of the former is known to every school-boy; and as for Alcibiades, though he was (as must be confessed) as sagacious and happy in his thoughts as any man whatever, yet, for want of a little assurance in speaking a thing, he very often miserably lost himself in his pleadings; for he would falter and make pauses in the very middle of his orations, purely for want of a single word or some neat expression, that he had in his papers but could not presently remember. To give you another instance of the prince of poets, Homer; he was so blinded with an over-confidence of his abilities in poetry, that he has slipped a false quantity, and left it on record, in the very first verse of his Iliad.

Seeing then the learnedest men and greatest artists have failed and may fail for want of caution or confidence, it ought more nearly to concern those that earnestly follow virtue, not to slip the least opportunity of improvement, either by company or otherwise; and not overmuch to regard the throng or applause of the theatre, when they do exercise or make any solemn harangue.

10 Nor is it enough that one take care of all his discourses and orations; but he ought also to observe that the whole tenor of his actions be guided by profit rather than vain pomp, and by truth rather than ostentation. For if a passionate lover who has placed his affection upon any beloved object seeks no witnesses to attest its sincerity, but has such an eager desire when alone and in private, that, like a covered flame, it burns more vigorously and insensibly for being shut up; much more ought a moralist and a philosopher who has attained both the habit and exercise of virtue sit down self-contented, and applaud himself in private, neither needing nor desiring encomiasts or auditors from abroad.

There is an humour in some of the poets, of an old peevish housekeeper, that calls to his maid aloud: Do you see, Dionysia (that is his maid's name), I am now pleased, and have laid by all choler and passion. Just such like is the practice of some, who, as soon as they have done anything which is obliging and civil, presently blaze it abroad, and turn their own heralds. Such men show plainly that they look beyond themselves for satisfaction; that they are desirous of praise and applause; and that they never were admitted near spectators of virtue, never saw her in her noble, royal dress, but only had some transient sight of her in a dream or an empty airy phantasm; and indeed, that they expose their actions to the public, as painters do their pictures, to be gazed at and admired by the gaping multitude.

Another sign of a proficient in virtue is, when the proficient has given anything to his friend or done any kindness for any one, if he keeps it to himself and does not blab it to anybody; and (which is more) if he hath voted right against a majority of biassed suffragans, withstood the dishonest attempts of some rich and powerful man, gener-

ously rejected bribes when offered, abstained from inordinate drinking when athirst and alone, or at night, when none sees or knows what he does, lastly, if he hath conquered the briskest attempts of love (as is said of Agesilaus); if (I say) he contain himself from speaking of such actions, and do not in company boast of his performances. This I affirm — such a one as can prove and try himself by himself, and be fully satisfied in the verdict of his conscience, as of an unexceptionable witness and spectator of what is right and good, shows plainly that his reason looks inward and is well rooted within him, and that the man (as Democritus said) is accustomed to take satisfaction from himself.

To borrow a simile from husbandmen and those that are concerned in the business of the fields, they are always best pleased to see those ears of corn which decline and by reason of their fullness bend downwards to the earth, but look upon those as empty, deceitful, and insignificant, which, because they have nothing in them, grow bolt upright and appear above the rest. So it is amongst students in philosophy; those that are most empty-headed, and have least firmness and solidity, have always the greatest share of confidence, formality, and stiffness in their address, look biggest, walk with the most state, and top upon and condemn others, with the highest arrogance and severity of any living. But when once their brains begin to fill and become well poised with solid notions, they look down into themselves, and quite lay aside that insolent and arrogant humour, which is proper only to youngsters.

Give me leave to illustrate this by one simile more. When you pour water into bottles or any other vessels, upon its being instilled into them, the air that was in them before presently flies out and gives place to the more substantial body. Even so it is with those that have had many good precepts instilled into them, and their minds replenished with solid truths. They presently find that all empty vanity flies off; that the imposthume of pride breaks; that they do not value themselves for beard and gown only, but bend their actions and endeavours to the bettering of their rational faculties; and, lastly, that when they reprove they begin at home, turning the edge of their satire and invective upon themselves, even when at the same time they are civil and complaisant to all others beside. It is indeed an argument of a generous and truly brave disposition in a scholar, not to assume the name and character of one, and, as some use to do, to put the philosopher amongst his titles; but if any out of respect chance to give him that compellation, to be surprised, blush, and with a modest smile answer him in that of the poet,

> You compliment your friend; he whom you so commend
> Must needs be more than man — far more than I pretend.[1]

Æschylus says of a young woman that, if ever she have played the wanton, you may discover it in her eyes, and read her affections in amorous glances which she cannot conceal; so a young scholar, if he be once entered in the mysteries and have tasted the sweets of philosophy, cannot possibly suppress the passion and concern for it; as Sappho says, his tongue falters when he would speak its praise; his heart is warm with affection, →

[1] *Odyss.* XVI. 187.

A secret flame does run through every part.

You would admire and love the assurance and composedness of his looks, the affectionateness of his eyes, and especially the winning decency and agreeableness of his words and expressions.

Those that are to be initiated in the ceremonies of the Gods run to their temples at first with a great deal of noise, clamour, and rudeness; but as soon as the solemnity is seen and over, they attend with a profound silence and religious fear. So it is with the candidates in philosophy; you may perceive a throng, noise, and pother about the school-doors, by reason that several press thither eagerly, rudely, and violently for reputation, more than learning; but when you are once in, and manifestly see the great light, as if some royal shrine were opened unto you, you are presently possessed with a quite different notion of things; are struck with silence and admiration, and begin, with humility and a reverend composure, to comply with and follow the divine oracle. That which Menedemus said in another case is very apposite to this sort of men. Those that went to the school of Athens were first of all (*σοφοί*) *wise*, next (*φιλόσοφοι*) *lovers of wisdom*, then orators, and at last, in course of time, plain common men; for the longer they applied themselves to study and philosophy, so much the more all vanity, pride, and pedantry abated in them, and the nearer they came to plain, downright, honest men.

11 Again, as it is with those that are indisposed and out of order — some, if a tooth or finger do but ache, presently run to a physician; others send for one to their houses, if they find themselves but the least feverish and desire his advice and assistance; but those that are either melancholical, or but any ways crazed in their heads, cannot endure so much as the looks of a physician, but either keep out of sight when he comes or command him to be gone, being altogether insensible of their condition — so, in persons that commit any heinous crime or fall into any error, I look upon those as perfectly incurable, who take it ill to be admonished of their fault and look upon reproof and admonition as the greatest rudeness and incivility in the world, whereas those that can quietly hearken and submit to the advice of friends and superiors deserve a more favourable opinion, and may be thought to be of a much better disposition. But the greatest character of hopeful men, and such as may be probably excellent proficients in time, belongs to those who, upon a commission of a fault, immediately apply themselves to such as will reprove and correct them; who plainly disclose their grief and open their malady; who do not rejoice in concealing their distemper, and are not content to have their troubles unknown; lastly, who make a full confession of what they have done amiss, and desire the help of a friend to examine and direct them for the future. Diogenes, I am sure, was of this opinion. He said, that whosoever would be certainly and constantly in the right must get either a virtuous good friend or an incensed ill-natured enemy to his monitor; the one by gentle admonition to reprove and persuade him, the other to work upon him by severity, and awe him into a virtuous course of life.

There is a sort of men in the world, that are so vain and foolish as to take a pride in being the first discoverers of their own imperfections; if they have but a rent or spot in their clothes, or have got a torn pair of shoes on, they are the most forward of any to tell it in company; and (which is more) they are very apt, out of a silly, empty, ar-

rogant humour, to make themselves the subject of their drollery, if they are of a dwarfish stature or any way deformed; yet (which is strange) these very men, at the very same time, endeavour to excuse and palliate the internal imperfections of the mind and the more ugly deformities of the soul, as envy, evil-custom, detraction, voluptuousness, &c., and will not suffer any one either to see or probe them. These are, as it were, so many sore places, and they cannot endure to have them touched and meddled with. Such men as these (I may be bold to say) have very few signs of proficiency, or rather none at all.

Now, on the contrary, he that examines his own failings with the greatest severity, that impartially blames or corrects himself as often as he does amiss, or (which is almost as commendable) grows firmer and better by present advice, as well as more able and ready to endure a reprimand for the future, seems to me truly and sincerely to have rejected and forsaken vice.

It is certainly our duty to avoid all appearance of evil, and to be ashamed to give occasion even to be reputed vicious; yet evil reports are so inconsiderable to a wise man, that, if he have a greater aversion to the nature of evil than to the infamy that attends it, he will not fear what is said of him abroad, nor what calumnies are raised, if so be he be made the better by them. It was handsomely said of Diogenes, when he saw a young spark coming out of a tavern, who at the sight of him drew back: Do not retire, says he, for the more you go backward, the more you will be in the tavern. Even so every vicious person, the more he denies and palliates vice, the more aggravates and confirms it, and with surer footing goes farther into wickedness; like some persons of ordinary rank and quality, who, while they assume above themselves, and out of arrogance would be thought rich, are made really poor and necessitous, by pretending to be otherwise.

Hippocrates, a man of wonderful skill in physic, was very ingenuous in this point, and fit to be imitated by the greatest proficients in philosophy. He confessed publicly, that he had mistaken the nature of the sutures in the skull, and has left an acknowledgment of his ignorance upon record, under his own hand; for he thought it very unworthy a man of his profession not to discover where he was in the wrong, seeing others might suffer and err by his authority. And, indeed, it had been very unreasonable, if he, whose business and concern it was to save others and to set them right, should not have had the courage to cure himself, and to discover his weakness and imperfections in his own faculty.

Pyrrhon and Bion (two eminent philosophers) have given rules of proficiency; but they seem rather signs of a complete habit of virtue, than a progressive disposition to it. Bion told his friend, that they then might be assured of their proficiency, when they could endure a reproof from anybody with the same indifferency and unconcernedness as they could hear the highest encomiums, even such a one as this of the poet: →

Sir,

Some heavenly flame inspires your breast;
Live great, rejoice, and be for ever blest.[1]

The other, to wit, Pyrrhon, being at sea and in great danger, by reason of a tempest that arose, took particular notice (as the story goes) of a hog that was on board, which all the while very unconcernedly fed upon some corn which lay scattered about; he showed it to his companions, and told them that they ought to acquire by reading and philosophy such an apathy and unconcernedness in all accidents and dangers as they saw that poor creature naturally have.

12 The opinion which is said to be Zeno's may deserve our consideration. He said that any one might give a guess at his proficiency from the observation of his dreams, if when asleep he fancied nothing that was immodest, nor seemed to consent to any wicked actions or dishonest intentions, but found his fancy and passions of his mind undisturbed, in a constant calm, as it were, always serene, and enlightened with the beams of divine reason. This very notion was hinted by Plato[2] (as I interpret his words), where he is describing and delineating the soul which is tyrannical in its nature, and showing what manner of operations its fantasy and irrational appetite exert. When a man is asleep, he says, a vicious person designs the satisfying incestuous lust, has a longing for all sorts of meat indifferently, whether allowed or prohibited, and satisfies his appetite and desire in all manner of intemperance which is loose and unregarded, which, in the day-time, either the laws shame him out of, or fear to offend restrains

As now those brute beasts that are accustomed to labour will not, if the reins be let loose, either turn aside or offer to leave the track or stumble in it, so it is with the brutal faculty of the mind; when it is once made tame and manageable by the strength of reason, then it is unwilling carelessly to transgress or saucily to disobey its sovereign's commands or to comply with any inordinate lusts, either in sleep or sickness; but it carefully observes and maintains its dictates to which it is accustomed, and by frequent exercise advances to perfect strength and intention of virtue.

We find even in our own nature the strange effects of custom. Man is naturally able, by much exercise and the use of a stoical apathy, to bring the body and all its members into subjection, so that not one organ shall perform its operation — the eyes shall not burst out with tears upon the sight of a lamentable object, the heart shall not palpitate upon the apprehension of fear, and the passions shall not be roused at the sight of any beautiful person, whether man or woman. Now it is much more probable that the faculties of the sense may be so brought in subjection by undergoing such exercise as we speak of, that all its imaginations and motions may be smoothed and made agreeable to right reason, even when we are asleep and keep not sentry. It is reported of Stilpo the philosopher, that he thought he saw Neptune in his sleep, and that he seemed very much displeased with him, because he had not (as was usual with his priests) sacrificed an ox in honour of him. Not in the least daunt-

[1] *Odyss.* VI. 187; XXIV. 402.

[2] *Republic*, IX. *p.* 571c.

ed at the apparition, he thus boldly accosted it: Neptune! what's this business you here complain of? You come hither like a child, and are angry with me, because I did not borrow money and run in debt to please you, and fill the city with costly odours, but privately sacrificed to you in my own house such ordinary victims as I could get. At this confident reply, Neptune smiled, and (as the story goes) reached him his hand, as an assurance of his good-will to him, and told him that for his sake he would send the Megarians abundance of fish that season.

In the main we may conclude thus much, that those that have clear and pleasant dreams, and are not troubled with any frightful, strange, vicious, or irregular apparitions in their sleep, may assure themselves that they have some indications and dawnings of proficiency; whereas, on the contrary, those dreams which are mixed with any pain, fear, cowardly aversions from good, childish exultation, or silly grief, so that they are both frightful and unaccountable, are like the breaking waves or the billows of the sea; for the soul, not having attained a perfect evenness of temper, but being under the formation of laws and precepts from whose guidance and discovery it is free in time of sleep, is then slacked from its usual intenseness, and laid open to all passions whatever.

Whether this temper we speak of be an argument of proficiency, or an indication of some other habit which has taken deep root in the soul, grown strong and immovable by all the power of reason, I leave to you to consider and determine.

13 Seeing then an absolute apathy or freedom from all passions whatsoever is a great and divine perfection, and, withal, considering that progress seems to consist in a certain remission and moderation of those very passions we carry about us, it unavoidably follows, that if we will observe our passions, with relation to one another and also to themselves, we may easily find out their differences. For example, first, we may observe from the passions compared with themselves whether our desires be now more moderate than they used to be, fear and anger less and more calm, and whether or not we are more able to quench the heat and flame of our passions than we used to be.

Secondly, by comparing them with one another, we may observe whether we now have a greater share of shame than of fear, whether emulation be without any mixture of envy, whether we have greater desire of glory than of riches, whether we offend (as the musicians term it) in the Dorian or base or in the Lydian or treble notes — that is, whether we are more inured to abstinence and hardship than otherwise — whether we are unwilling rather than forward to appear in public, and, lastly, whether we are undue admirers of the persons or performances of others, or despisers both of them and what they can do.

As it is a good sign of recovery of a sick person if the distemper lie in the less principal parts of the body; so in proficiency, if vicious habits be changed into more tolerable passions, it is a symptom that they are going off and ready to be quenched. Phrynis the musician, to his seven strings adding two more, was asked by the magistrates, whether he had rather they should cut the upper or lower of them, the base or treble. Now it is our business to cut off (as it were) both what is above and below, if we would attain to the true medium and equality; for proficiency in the first place

remits the excess, and sweetens the harmony of the evil affections, which is (according to Sophocles)

The madman's greatest pleasure and disease.

14 We have already said that we ought to transfer our judgment to action, and not to suffer our words to remain bare and naked words, but to reduce them to deeds; and that this is the chiefest sign of a proficient. Now another manifest indication is a desire of those things we commend, and a readiness to perform those things which we admire, but whatsoever we discommend, neither to will or endure it. It is probable that all the Athenians highly extolled the courage and valour of Miltiades. But Themistocles (who professed that the trophies of Miltiades broke his sleep, and often forced him out of his bed) did not only praise and admire what he had done, but was manifestly struck with a zeal and emulation of his performances. Therefore we may be assured that we have profited little, while we think it a vanity to admire those that have done well, and cannot possibly be raised to an imitation of them.

To love the person of any man is not sufficient, except it have a mixture of emulation; no more is that love of virtue ardent and exciting, which does not put us forward, and create in our breasts (instead of envy to them) a zealous affection for all good men, and a desire of equal perfection with them. For it is not enough (as Alcibiades was wont to say) that the heart should be turned upside down by hearing the discourses of a philosopher, and that the tears should gush from the eyes; but he that is a proficient indeed, comparing himself with the designs and actions of a good perfect man, is pricked at the same with the consciousness of his own weakness, and transported with hope and desire, and big with irresistible assurance; and indeed such a one is (as Simonides says) like a little sucking foal running by the mother's side, and desires to be incorporated into the very same nature with a good man. For this is an especial sign of true proficiency, to love and affect their way of life whose actions we emulate, and, upon account of an honourable opinion we always entertain for them, to do as they do. But whosoever he is that entertains a contentious or malicious design against his betters, let him be assured that he is possessed with a greedy desire of honour or greatness, but has neither a true respect nor admiration for virtue.

15 When therefore we once begin so to love good men, as not only (according to Plato) to esteem the wise man himself happy, and him who hears his discourses sharer in his felicity, but also to admire and love his habit, gait, look, and very smile, so as to wish ourselves to be that very person, then we may be assured that we have made very good proficiency.

This assurance will be advanced, if we do not only admire good men in prosperity, but like lovers, who are taken ever with the lisping and pale looks of their mistresses (as Araspes is said to have been smitten with the tears and dejected looks of a mournful and afflicted Panthea), have an affection for virtue in its most mournful dress, so as not at all to dread the banishment of Aristides, the imprisonment of Anaxagoras, the poverty of Socrates, nor the hard fate of Phocion, but to embrace and respect their virtues, even under such injustice, and upon thoughts of it, to repeat this verse of Euripides →

How do all fortunes decently become
A generous, well-tuned soul!

This is certain, if any one addresses himself to virtue with this resolution, not to be dejected at the appearance of difficulty, but heartily admires and prosecutes its divine perfection, none of the evil we have spoken of can divert his good intentions. To what I have said I may add this, that when we go upon any business, undertake any office, or chance upon any affair whatever, we must set before our eyes some excellent person, either alive or dead; and consider with ourselves what Plato for the purpose would have done in this affair, what Epaminondas would have said, how Lycurgus or Agesilaus would have behaved themselves, that, addressing ourselves and adorning our minds at these mirrors, we may correct every disagreeing word and irregular passion. It is commonly said, that those that have got by heart the names of the Idæi Dactyli make use of them as charms to drive away fear, if they can but confidently repeat them one by one; so the consideration and remembrance of good men, being present and entertained in our minds, do preserve our proficiency in all affections and doubts regular and immovable; wherefore you may judge that this is also a token of a proficient in virtue.

16 You may observe further, that not to be in a confusion, not to blush, not to hide or correct your clothes or anything about you, at the unexpected appearance of an honourable and wise person, but to have an assurance as if you were often conversant with such, is almost a perfect demonstration of a very intelligent person.

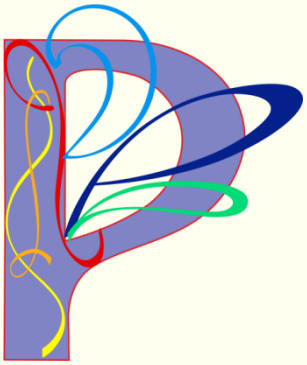
It is reported of Alexander, that one night seeing a messenger joyfully running towards him and stretching out his hand, as if he had something to deliver to him, he said to the apparition, Friend, what news do you bring me? Is Homer risen from the dead? That admirable monarch thought that nothing was wanting to his great exploits but such a herald as Homer.

Consider this, if a young man thrive in the world, it is customary for him to desire nothing more than to be seen in the company of virtuous and good men, to show them his whole furniture, his table, his wife and children, his study, his diary or collections; and he is so pleased with himself, that he wishes his father or tutor were alive, that they might see him in so good a way of living; and he could heartily pray that they were alive, to be spectators of his life and actions. But, on the contrary, those that have neglected their business, or lost themselves in the world, cannot endure the sight or company of their relations without a great deal of fear and confusion.

17 Join this, if you please, to what we said before; for it is no small sign, if the proficient thus esteem every little fault a great one, and studiously observe and avoid all. For, as those persons who despair of ever being rich make little account of small expenses, thinking that little added to a little will never make any great sum, but when they come once to have got a competency, and hope to be at last very rich, it advances their desires, so it happens in the affairs of virtue; — he that does not quiet his mind by saying with himself, “What matters it what comes after? if for the present it be so and so, yet better days will come,” but who attends everything, and is not careless if the least vice pass uncondemned, but is troubled and concerned at it, such a one

makes it appear that he has attained something that is pure, which he brightens by use and will not suffer to corrupt. For a preconceived opinion that nothing we have is valuable (according to Æschylus) makes us careless and indifferent about everything.

If anyone be to make a dry wall or an ordinary hedge, it matters not much if he makes use of ordinary wood or common stone, any old gravestones, or the like; so wicked persons, who confusedly mix and blend all their designs and actions in one heap, care not what materials they put together. But the proficients in virtue, who have already laid the golden solid foundation of a virtuous life, as of a sacred and royal building, take especial care of the whole work, examine and model every part of it according to the rule of reason, believing that it was well said by Polycletus, that the hardest work remained for them to do whose nails must touch the clay; — that is, to lay the top stone is the great business and masterpiece of the work. The last stroke gives beauty and perfection to the whole piece.



Suggested reading for students.

From our Living the Life Series.

- ATTUNE YOUR SELF WITH THE SELF IN ALL
- BLAVATSKY ON BUDDHISM
- BRAHMANISM IS THE ELDER SISTER OF BUDDHISM
- CAN THERE BE JOY WITHOUT LOVE?
- CHARITY EMPTIES HER PURSE WITH AN INVISIBLE HAND
- DELIGHT IN THE BEAUTY OF THE SOUL
- DENUNCIATION IS NOT A DUTY
- DISCORD IS THE HARMONY OF THE UNIVERSE
- EMERSON ON LOVE
- EVIL OMENS AND MYSTERIOUS DISEASES
- GODLESS BUDDHISM IS PHILOSOPHICAL AGNOSTICISM
- GOETHE'S MAXIMS AND REFLECTIONS
- HAPPINESS IS BUT A DREAM
- HARTMANN ON CHASTITY
- HYPOCRISY, DIAGNOSES AND PALLIATIVES
- IMPRISONED IN THE NARROW VASE OF DOGMATISM
- JUDGE ON THE UNIVERSAL APPLICATIONS OF DOCTRINE
- JUDGE ON THE UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD
- LET EVERY MAN PROVE HIS OWN WORKS
- LET YOUR DAILY LIFE BE YOUR TEMPLE AND GOD
- LÉVI ON THE POWER OF MIND, UNRUFFLED BY DESIRE - TR. WAITE
- LODGES OF MAGIC
- MARCUS AURELIUS' MEDITATIONS - TR. CASAUBON
- MEDICINE OF THE MIND
- OCCULT LAWS AND PARADOXES

- OCCULT LAWS CAN BE ENTRUSTED ONLY TO THOSE WHO LIVE THE LIFE DIRECTED BY THEOSOPHY
- OPPOSITE AND OPPOSING FORCES ARE CONVERTIBLE
- PARADOX IS THE LANGUAGE OF OCCULTISM
- PHILOSOPHERS AND PHILOSOPHICULES
- PLUTARCH ON HOW WE MAY PROFIT FROM OUR ENEMIES - TR. HARTCLIFFE
- PLUTARCH ON HOW WE MAY SHOW OFF WITHOUT BEING ENVIED – TR. LANCASTER
- PLUTARCH ON LOVE - TR. PHILIPS
- PLUTARCH ON MORAL VIRTUE
- PLUTARCH ON WHETHER VICE IS SUFFICIENT TO RENDER A MAN UNHAPPY
- PROCLUS ON THE GOOD, THE JUST, AND THE BEAUTIFUL
- PROVERBIAL WISDOM FROM THE HITOPADESHA
- PYTHAGOREAN ETHICS AFTER STOBAEUS
- PYTHAGOREAN SYMBOLS - TR. BRIDGMAN
- SENTENCES BY SECTUS THE PYTHAGOREAN - TR. TAYLOR
- SERJEANT COX ON THE NEGATORS OF SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION
- SEVEN OCCULT TAMIL PROVERBS
- SPIRITUALITY IS NOT A VIRTUE
- THE ENNOBLING POWER OF THORACIC EXPANSION
- THE FIRST STEP TOWARDS THE TEMPLE OF TRUTH
- THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WITHIN YOU BY TOLSTOY
- THE KREUTZER SONATA
- THE NELLORE YANADIS
- THE NILGIRI SANNYASIS
- THE NOBLE AIM OF EDUCATION IS TO AWAKEN THE DIVINITY WITHIN
- THE POWER TO HEAL
- THE PRAYER OF THE TRUE PHILOSOPHER IS HIS ADORATION
- THE SAYINGS OF LAO TZU - TR. GILES
- THE SCIENCE OF LIFE BY BLAVATSKY AND TOLSTOY
- THE STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE
- THEAGES ON VIRTUE
- THEOSOPHICAL JEWELS - LIVE IN THE IDEAL
- THEOSOPHICAL JEWELS - THE RAINBOW OF HOPE
- THOU SHALT CROUCH AT MY FEET

- TRUTH DESCENDS LIKE DEW FROM HEAVEN
- WHAT SHALL WE DO FOR OUR FELLOW-MEN?