

Clitophon

ΚΛΕΙΤΟΦΩΝ

Plato

translated by David Horan

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SOCRATES: Someone told us recently that Clitophon¹, the son of Aristonymus, in conversation with Lysias², was critical of Socrates' discourses, while his praise of the instruction of Thrasymachus³ knew no bounds.

CLITOPHON: Whoever said so, Socrates, misinformed you about the discussion I had with Lysias concerning yourself. For although in some respects I did not praise you, in other respects I did. But since you are obviously rebuking me, while pretending to be unconcerned, I would be glad to recount these discussions to you myself now that we are on our own, so that you may be less inclined to believe that I think badly of you. Indeed, at the moment what you have heard is probably incorrect, and so you seem to be somewhat harder on me than I deserve. But if you allow me to speak freely, I'll do so gladly as I wish to explain myself.

SOCRATES: Well, it would indeed be a shame for me to be intolerant when you are so eager to benefit me. For obviously, having recognised in what way I am good or bad, I shall practise and pursue the one and flee from the other as best I can.

CLITOPHON: Listen then, for, while in your company, I was often amazed at what I was hearing, and I thought that in comparison with other speakers your discourse was the most exalted, as you rebuked the people like a god descending upon the tragic stage chanting your words: "People, whither are you being carried, ignorant of the fact that you are doing nothing you should do, you who are so utterly serious about money and acquiring it for yourselves? Yet in the case of your sons to whom you will bequeath all this, you seek out no teachers of justice so that they will know how to use the wealth in a just manner, if this is actually teachable. But even if this is a matter of practice and exercise, you don't look for anyone who is up to the task of training them thoroughly and guiding them carefully, nor have you looked after yourselves in this way. Rather, when you see that yourselves and your children still prove to fare no better when it comes to using your wealth, despite being adequately instructed in writing, music and gymnastics, which you regard as a complete education in excel- that brother behaves towards brother and cities towards cities in an unmeasured and discordant manner, through conflict and warfare in which they carry out and suffer extremes of

depravity. Yet you maintain that unjust people are unjust not because of a lack of education or because of ignorance, but intentionally, and again you dare to say further that injustice is shameful and detested by the gods. Now, how could anyone intentionally choose such an evil as this? Because, you reply, he is overcome by pleasures. But this is also unintentional, is it not, since to prevail is intentional? In any case, the argument proves that doing injustice is unintentional, and every man privately, and likewise all cities publicly, should exercise more care about this than they do at present.” Now, Socrates, whenever I hear you saying all this, as you frequently do, I am much pleased, and I praise you wondrously; and also whenever you go on after this to say that those who develop their bodies but neglect souls are doing something else of this sort by being neglectful of the part that should rule, while attending to the part that should be ruled; and also when you say that it is better for someone to refrain from using whatever he knows not how to use. As, for instance, when someone knows not how to use eyes, ears or body as a whole, it is better for him neither to hear nor see nor use his body for any other purpose rather than using it in any way whatsoever. And, indeed, the same holds for skill, since whoever does not know how to use his own lyre obviously does not know how to use his neighbour’s lyre either, nor does anyone who does not know how to use other people’s lyres know how to use his own lyre, nor any other instrument or possession at all. And this argument of yours then beautifully concludes that whoever knows not how to use soul is better off keeping his soul quiescent and not living at all, rather than being alive and acting according to his own whims. And if it is necessary for such a person to be alive, it is better that he spend his life as a slave rather than a free man, entrusting the rudder of his mind, just like a ship, to someone else who had learned the skill of steering humanity, which you, Socrates, often call statesmanship, saying that this is the same as jurisprudence and justice. Now, I have nothing to say against these arguments, and very many others of this sort, wonderfully expressed, stating that excellence is teachable and that we should care most of all for our own self. I do not really have anything to say against these, and I don’t think I ever will, and I believe that they are exhortative in the extreme, and beneficial too, as if we are simply asleep and these are waking us up. So, I paid attention in order to hear what was to follow this, putting my

questions, initially, not to yourself, Socrates, but to your like-minded comrades or companions, or whatever such associates of yours should be called. I first questioned those whom you held in the highest regard, asking them what argument would come next, and somewhat after your manner, I made a suggestion to them. "Best of men," said I, "how are we now to take Socrates' exhortation that we turn towards excellence? Is this all there is to say, and is it not possible to pursue the matter further and understand it completely? Is it to be our lifelong task to exhort those who have not yet been exhorted, and are they in turn to exhort others? Or should we ask Socrates, and one another, a further question; having agreed that this is exactly what a human being is to do, what follows? How, according to us, should we start learning about justice? It's as if someone exhorted us to care for the body, having observed that we, like children, were unaware that there is such a thing as gymnastics and medicine. What if he were to reproach us on this basis, saying that it is a disgrace to care totally for wheat and barley and vines and whatever else we work for and acquire for the sake of the body, while searching neither for a skill nor a means whereby the body might be in as good a condition as possible, even though there are such skills? And what if we were to question the person who exhorted us in this way by asking him what these skills are? He would probably reply that these are gymnastics and medicine. In the present case then, what, according to us, is the skill concerned with the excellence of the soul? What do you say?" The one among them who was regarded as the most formidable in these matters replied to me. He told me what this skill was. "It is," said he, "the very one you hear Socrates speaking of, none other than justice." I replied by saying, "Don't just tell me its name. No, proceed as follows. Medicine is, presumably, a skill of which there are two outcomes, the first being ongoing production of additional physicians, the second being health. But the second of these is not yet a skill; it is rather the result of the skill of teaching and being taught, a result we call health. Similarly, in the case of the carpenter's skill, there is the house and there is carpentry, one being a result, the other being a subject that is taught. And the same applies to justice; one outcome is the production of just people in the same way that the other skills produce people with those particular skills. But what is its other outcome, the result that the just man can produce for us?

What do we say this is? Tell me.” That man replied, I believe, that it is ‘the advantageous’, another said that it is ‘the appropriate’, someone else suggested ‘the beneficial’, another ‘the profitable’. So, I returned to the question and said, “In the other realm too, these terms such as acting correctly, being profitable, beneficial, and so on, are applicable to any of the skills. But to what are these all directed? Each skill will give its own reply, and so carpentry, for instance, will say that what is good, beautiful, and necessary, is directed to the provision of wooden objects, which are, of course, not the skill itself. So, describe the result of justice in like manner.” Finally, Socrates, one of your companions replied with what seemed like the most ingenious response, saying that the particular result of justice, which belongs to none of the other skills, is to produce friendship in cities. This man, when questioned further, said that friendship is good and is never bad, and as the questioning continued, he would not accept that what we refer to as the friendship of children and beasts is indeed friendship. For he had to conclude that such friendships are, for the most part, harmful rather than good. So to avoid such a conclusion, he said that such friendships are not friendships at all, and that anyone who refers to them in this way is naming them falsely. And he said that real and true friendship is, precisely, like-mindedness. When asked whether he would say that the like-mindedness is likeness of opinion or of knowledge, he did not favour likeness of opinion because it is unavoidable that many instances of harmful likeness of opinion occur among people, while he had agreed that friendship is entirely good and is a result of justice. And so, he said like-mindedness was the same, being knowledge and not opinion. Now, at this stage in the argument we were getting nowhere. But those present were well able to take him to task and say that the argument had come full circle back to where we began and they said, “Medicine too is a sort of like-mindedness, and so are all of the skills and they are all able to say what they are concerned with. But what you call justice or like-mindedness has completely forgotten what it is directed towards, and there is no clarity as to what precisely the result of justice is.” That’s why, Socrates, in the end, I also put the question to you, and you told me that justice is doing harm to enemies and good to friends. But later it turned out that a just person never harms anyone, since everything he does to anyone is for their benefit. Having been patient with this process, not

once or twice but over a considerable time, my persistence failed me, and although I believe you are better than anyone at exhorting people to care for excellence, there are two possibilities; either this is as much as you can do and you can do no more, as if someone, without being a helmsman, were to teach himself to praise this skill as being of great value to humanity. And the same analogy applies to any of the skills, and so, in relation to justice, someone might accuse you of being none the more knowledgeable about justice simply because you are good at praising it. Now, I myself don't think that this is the case, but there are two possibilities: either you are not knowledgeable or you are unwilling to share your knowledge with me. I think that's why, in my perplexity, I go to Thrasyarchus and to anyone else I can. But if you are prepared at this stage to stop giving me these exhortatory speeches, that's what should happen now. Act as if I had been exhorted, in respect of gymnastics, not to neglect my body. Following your exhortatory speech, you would then explain the nature of my body and the sort of care it needs. Take it then that Clitophon agrees that it is laughable to care for other things while neglecting the soul for whose sake we work so hard at everything else. And at this stage you should also presume that I have, in this way, said whatever follows those arguments that I have gone through just now. So, I am saying, please just do as I ask so that I won't do what I am now doing, praising you before Lysias, and before others in some respects, while criticising you in other respects. Indeed, Socrates, I declare that you are worth everything to a person who has not yet been exhorted, but to someone who has already been exhorted, you almost get in the way of their attaining happiness by arriving at complete excellence.

Notes

1. Clitophon was an Athenian statesman and thinker. He was involved in a coup that overthrew the democratic Athenian government and installed a short-lived oligarchy during the Peloponnesian War. He is an interlocutor of Socrates in Book I of the Republic 340a-d.
2. Lysias was an influential Athenian orator, Phaedrus 277a ff. He is present at the discussion in Book I of the Republic.

3. Thrasymachus was a sophist who is famously depicted conversing with Socrates in Book I of the Republic 336b ff.