

On Virtue

ΠΕΡΙ ΑΡΕΤΗΣ

Plato

translated by George Burges

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Is Virtue a thing to be taught, or to be not taught? but do men become good by nature, or by any other means? I cannot, Socrates, state at present. But let us consider the matter in this way. Come then, (say,) if a person wished to become good in the virtue, in which clever cooks are good, from whence would he become so? It is evident, if he learnt from good cooks. Well then, if a person wished to become a good physician, by going to whom would he become a good physician? It is evident, by going to some one of the good physicians. But if he wished to become good in the art, in which clever carpenters (are good)? To (some one) of the (good) carpenters.

If then he wished to be good in the virtue, in which men are good and clever, whither must he go and learn? I conceive to (some one) of the (good) men (to learn) this, if it is to be learnt; for from whence else? Come then, (say,) who are the men that have become good? in order that we may see whether these are the persons, who make men good, Thucydides, and Themistocles, and Aristides, and Pericles.

Have we it in our power to say who was the teacher of each of these? We have not; for it is not told. Well then, (can we mention) any pupil, either amongst strangers or citizens or any one else, either a free man or a slave, who assigns as the cause of his having become wise and good his intercourse with them? This too is not told. But they did not surely grudge to share their virtue with other persons. Perhaps so. Was it that there might not be rival artists, just as cooks, and physicians, and carpenters feel a jealousy; since it is not to their advantage for many rival artists to exist, nor for them to dwell amongst many similar persons. Is it then in like manner not an advantage for good men to dwell amongst many similar persons? Perhaps so. Are not the good and the just the same? Yes, they are. Is there the individual, to whom it is an advantage to live not amongst good persons, but amongst bad? I cannot tell. Can you not tell this too, whether it is the work of good men to do a hurt, and of bad men to do a benefit, or the reverse? The reverse. The good then do a benefit, the bad do a hurt. Yes. Is there a person who wishes to be hurt rather than to be benefited? By no means. No one therefore wishes to live amongst bad persons, rather than amongst good. It is so. Not one then of the good is so jealous of another, as (not) to make him a good person and similar to himself. From this reasoning it seems so. You have heard that Cleophantus was the son of

Themistocles. I have heard it. It is evident then that Themistocles was not jealous of his son becoming the best possible; who (was jealous of) no one else, if indeed he was a good man; and (good) they say he was. Yes. You know then that Themistocles caused his son to be taught to be a clever and a good horseman. For instance he used to remain standing upright in the Meno, where Sydenham was the first to remark that this Thucydides was not the historian, but a political opponent of Pericles.

upon horses, and upright too hurled a javelin from (the backs of) the horses, and did many other wonderful feats, and taught him, and made him wise in many other things, such as are closely connected with a good education. Or have you not heard from elderly persons? I have heard it. No one then could find fault with the son's nature as being bad. Not justly so at least from what you have said. But what is this? that Cleophantus, the son of Themistocles, became; a good and wise man in the matters where his father was wise, have you ever heard from any younger or older person? I have not heard it. Do we then conceive that he wished to instruct his own son in these matters; but in the wisdom, in which he was wise himself, not to make him better than any of his neighbours, if virtue were a thing to be taught? It is not likely at least. Of such a kind then is this your teacher of virtue, to whom you have alluded? Let us then look to another, by name Aristides, who brought up Lysimachus, and instructed him the best of the Athenians on such subjects as are connected with (good) teachers; and yet he made him a man no better than any body; for both you and I have seen and associated with him. It is true. You know too that Pericles brought up well his sons Paralus and Xanthippus, of the latter of whom you seem to me to have been the lover. These, as you know yourself, he taught to be horsemen inferior to none of the Athenians; and he instructed them to be inferior to no one in the rest of contests, and all the other things that are learnt by art. But did he not wish to make them good men? But perhaps, Socrates, they would have become so, had they not died young. You reasonably come to the aid of your beloved. But Pericles would have much rather made them clever in his own wisdom, than in music and contests, had virtue been a thing to be taught, and had he been able to make them good men. But (I fear) that it is a thing not to be taught; since Thucydides brought up well his two sons, Melesias and Stephanus, in behalf of whom

you will not have it in your power to say, what you have done in behalf of the sons of Pericles; for one of these you surely know lived to old age, and the other much beyond. And yet their father taught them well other pursuits, and they wrestled the best of the Athenians. For he put one under Xanthias, and the other under Eudorus; and these were surely thought to wrestle the best of those of that period. Yes, they were. Is it not evident then, that he would not have taught his sons these things, where it was requisite to instruct them at an expense to himself, but those where without expending any thing it was requisite to make them good men. Now would he not have taught them this, if it were to be taught? It is likely at least. But perhaps Thucydides was a man of small means, and had not very many friends amongst the Athenians or their allies; and he was of a great family, and of great power in the state, and amongst the rest of the Greeks, so that if this had been a thing to be taught, he would have discovered a person amongst those of the country, or foreigners, who would have made his son a good man, if he himself had, through his attention to state affairs, no leisure. But (I fear) that virtue is a thing not to be taught. Perhaps not. But if it is not to be taught, are the good naturally so from their birth? But this perhaps we shall discover by considering the matter in this way. Come then, (say,) do there exist the natures of good horses? They do exist. Are there not men, who possess an art, by which they know the natures of good horses, both as regards their body, with reference to running, and their feelings, which of them are full of spirit or devoid of it. Yes. What is this art, and what its name? Equestrian. Is there not in like manner an art relating to dogs, by which persons discriminate between the good and bad natures of dogs? There is. What is it? The hunter's art. There are too assayers amongst us of gold and silver, who, by looking, decide upon both the better and the worse (metal). There are. And what do you call them? Silver assayers. The boy-drillers moreover know, by examining the natures of the bodies of men, which of them are useful and which not, for each of their labours, and which of the bodies of persons older and young, are about to be worthy of note, and in which there is much hope of their executing works connected with the body. It is so. Whether then are good horses and dogs, and other things of such a kind, of more importance in states, or good men? Good men. Well then, do you conceive that, if the natures of men were good for virtue,

that mankind would not have planned in every way to discover those natures? It is likely at least. Can you then mention any art, which has been exhibited and applied to the natures of good men, so as to enable persons to decide upon them? I cannot.' And yet the art would be worth much, and so too the parties possessing it. For they would have pointed out the young men, who, when they were still boys, were about to be good; and whom we should have taken and kept in the Acropolis for the public use, as if it were silver, and something more beautiful, in order that they might not suffer any mischief, either in a fight or in any other danger, but be laid up as the saviours and benefactors of the state, since they should have arrived at a proper age. But it seems almost that virtue does not exist to mankind either by nature or instruction. How then, Socrates, would persons seem to become (good), if they do not become so by nature or instruction? By what other means could the good exist? This, I think, could not be shown easily; but I conjecture that the property (of goodness) is something especially divine, and that good men exist, as prophets do and oracle chaunters. For these exist neither by nature nor by art, but become such by the inspiration of the gods. And so too good men point out to states what is about on each occasion to happen, and what is about to be, from the inspiration of a god, much more, and more clearly, than oracle chaunters do: and even women somehow say that such a person is a divine man; and the Lacedaemonians too, when they praise in a very handsome manner, say that a man is divine, and often does Homer make use of the same expression, and the rest of poets likewise. When therefore a god wishes a state to do well, he causes some men in it to be good; but when a state is about to do ill, the god takes away the good men from it. Thus then it is likely that virtue is a thing not to be taught nor (derived) from nature, but exists by a divine allotment to those who possess it.