

Axiochus

ΑΞΙΟΧΟΣ

Plato

tr. George Burges

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Soc.: When I had gone out on the road to Cynosarges,- and had arrived at the Ilissus, the voice of some one reached me, calling out, " Socrates, Socrates." And when on turning towards (the sound) I looked round to see from whence it might be, I beheld Clinias, the son of Axiochus, running towards the fountain Callirrhoe, together with Damon the musician, and Charmides, the son of Glaucon. Of these, one was the other's music-master, and the other was, from a feeling of friendship, at once the loving and beloved. I determined therefore to give up the direct road, and to meet them, that we might come together in the easiest manner. And Clinias, with tears in his eyes, said — Now, Socrates, is the time for you to exhibit the wisdom ever bruited by you. For my father has at some sudden season become powerless, and is at the end of life, and with pain supports the idea of dissolution; although at a former period he used to ridicule those, who were afraid of the bugbear of death, and to rebuke them mildly. Come then, and console him as you are wont, in order that he may without a groan proceed on the road of fate, and that, together with the remaining acts of piety, this too may be done by me. In no moderate matter, Clinias, (said I,) shall you be disappointed in me; especially as you are inviting me to do a holy act. Let us then make haste; for if such is the state of affairs, there is a need of haste.

Clin.: On merely seeing you, Socrates, he will rally; for often has he been on his legs again after a (serious) symptom. Soc. When we had traversed rather quickly the road along the wall, at the Itonian gates — for he dwells near there, close to the pillar of the Amazon — we came upon him, when he had already recovered his senses, and his body some strength, although his mind was weak, and he stood greatly in need of consolation; and frequently did he raise himself up, and give vent to moans, together with the shedding of tears, and the noisy beating of his hands. On beholding him, Why is this,

Axiochus? said I. Where are your former boastings and frequent praises of virtue, and your boldness not to be broken down? since, like a cowardly combatant, you have exhibited yourself of noble bearing in the place of exercise, but have failed in the fight. Will not you, a man of so long a life, and the hearer of (the finest) reasonings, and, if nothing else, at least an Athenian, after surveying nature consider that this is surely a common (saying), and bruited amongst all, that life is a kind of sojourn (upon earth); and that we must pass through it in a reasonable and good-tempered manner, and take our departure, only not singing paeans on the road to fate; while to conduct yourself in so cowardly a manner, and to be torn with difficulty from existence, is to exhibit, like a child, a period of life not otherwise.

Axio.: This, Socrates, is true; and you appear to me to speak correctly. And yet I know not how, when I am at the very point of what is dreadful, those powerful and very clever reasonings unconsciously fall away, and are held in no honour; while in their stead a fear lays hold of me, tearing my mind in various ways, if I am to be deprived of this light here, and of the good things (of life), and to lie rotting, wherever it may be, unseen and unheard of, after passing into worms and nondescript creatures.

Soc.: Through your own ignorance, Axiochus, you are combining sensation with the want of sensation; and you are acting and speaking in a manner at variance with yourself; and you do not consider that you are at one and the same time lamenting your want of sensation, and pained at the idea of your rotting away, and of being deprived of what is pleasant, as if you are to die and live in another state, and not to pass into insensibility complete, and the same as that before you were born. As then none of the mischief during the political period of Draco and Clisthenes pertained to yourself — for

you, to whom it might have pertained, did not exist at all — so it will not after death occur to you; for you, to whom it might occur, will not be in existence. Throw aside then all silliness of this kind, and think upon this, that, after the union of soul with body has been once dissolved by the former being settled in its own home-place, what is left of the latter is of the earth and devoid of reason, nor is it a man. For we are soul, a thing of life and immortal, pent up in a mortal prison. And nature has for some mischief fitted round this tabernacle, to which pleasant things are in a recess, and on the wing, and mixed up with the majority of pains; but the things of sorrow are unmixed, and last a long time, and have no share in what is pleasant: (I say nothing) of diseases and inflammations in the sensoria and of internal ills, with which the soul, as if sown with pores, does, when it sympathizes, of necessity desire its congenial atmosphere of heaven, and feels a thirst for the life that is there, and a hankering after its dancing; so that a removal from this life is but a change from an evil to a good.

Axio.: Since then, Socrates, you consider life to be an ill, why do you remain in it? and this too, when you are a person of reflection, and excel us, the mass, in mind.

Soc.: You do not, Axiochus, testify truly in my case; but you conceive, as the mass of Athenians do, that, since I am searcher after facts, I am acquainted with something. And indeed I would pray to know all things of even a common kind, so much am I deficient in what are superior. But what I am now saying are the proclaimed doctrines of Prodicus the wise, that have been bought, some for half a drachm, others for two drachms, and others for four; for that person never teaches any thing for nothing, but his custom is perpetually to proclaim the sentiment of Epicharmus — Hand handwashes; give then something, 'and get something in return. And lately, when he was making a display at the house of Callias,

the son of Hipponicus, he spoke so much against living, that I drew a line through (the word) life as a thing of the least value; and from that time, Axiochus, my soul yearned for death.

Axio.: And what was said then?

Soc.: I will tell you all can remember. For what part of life, said he, is free from pain? Does not the infant cry at its first birth, beginning to live from pain? Nor is it deficient in any suffering, but is affected painfully either by the want of something, or excessive cold or heat, or a blow; and being unable to tell what it is suffering, it cries continually, possessing this voice alone of its discontentment. And when it reaches its seventh year, after having gone through many troubles, there are boy-leaders, and teachers of grammar, and drilling-masters tyrannizing over him. And as he grows bigger, there is a still larger- number of despots, who teach him correctness in composition, and geometry, and military tactics.

And when he is registered amongst the young men, there are, what is a worse fear, the Lyceum and Academy, and the Gymnasiarchs and their staves, and a measureless amount of ills. And the whole period of youth is under Moderators and the selection of those placed over young persons by the Council of the Areopagus. And when he is forced from them, cares straightway come upon him in secret, and considerations as to what road of life he is to tread; and (compared with) the after difficulties the first appear to be childish, and the terrors in truth of infants; for there are campaigns, and wounds, and continuous contests. And then old age stealthily and unconsciously comes on, to which flow together all that is on the verge of death and hard to be remedied. And should a person not pay, as a debt, his life rather quickly, Nature, like an usurer, stands near and takes

as a pledge from one his eye-sight, and from another his hearing, and frequently both; and should he still delay, she brings on a paralysis, (or) a mutilation (or) a distortion of limbs; while they, who on the threshold of old age are still vigorous, in mind, become twice children, though grown old. And hence even the gods, who take cognizance of human affairs, release more quickly from life those, on whom they set the greatest value. For example, Agamedes and Trophonius, who built up the close, sacred to the god at Pytlio, did, after praying that the best thing might befall them, lay themselves on their bed and never rise from it again. So too the sons of the priestess at Argos, after their mother had in like manner prayed for some honour to be paid them by Juno in return for their piety, when, through the pair (of mules) being too late, they undressed themselves, and drew her (in the car) to the temple, they did, after the prayer, change, during the night, their existence. And long would be the story to go through of the poets, who, with their more divine mouths, have told in holy hymns the tales relating to life, how they utter lamentations against living. Of one alone I will however remember me, the most worthy to be spoken of, who says, The gods for mortals, in a hapless state To live, in sorrow wove the web of fate — and, (II. xvii.,)

Of all that breathe and creep upon the earth, There's nought than man more wretched (from his birth).

And what does he say of Amphiraus? (Od. xv. .) Him heartily the Egis-bearing Zeus Loved, and Apollo with the feelings all Of friendship; yet he did not of old age The threshold reach.

And what does he appear to you, who bids us

Weep for the ills, to which the new-born comes.

But I will stop here, lest, contrary to my engagement, I become prolix by making mention of others likewise. With

what pursuit or art does not he, who has chosen it, find fault, and is discontented with his present state? Let us go to handicraftsmen and workers at a furnace, who labour from night to night, and with difficulty procure the necessaries of life, and let (us hear) them bewailing their fate and filling up their sleepless hours with lamentations and tears. Or let us reckon up the sailor's (life), passed in the midst of so many dangers', and which, as Bias has shown, is neither amongst the living nor the dead; for the man who belongs to earth, has, as if he were amphibious, thrown himself upon the sea, and become wholly in the power of fortune. But farming is at least a pleasant thing. Clearly so. But is it not wholly a sore, for ever finding for itself a pretext for sorrow? crying now at a drought; now at a continued rain; now at a burning up; now at a mildew; now at unseasonable heat or cold. And the much-honoured statesmanship — for many things I pass over — through revolutions how great is it driven, while it possesses a pleasure, like that of a state of fever, in its quiverings and palpitations, but a failure, full of pain, and worse than a thousand deaths. Who then living for the mob can be happy? even if he has been favourably received with a gentle buzz, or noisy hubbub, as the plaything of the people, (but afterwards) rejected, hissed, fined, put to death, and pitied. Tell me this, thou statesman, Axiochus, where died Miltiades? where Themistocles? where Ephialtes? and where recently the ten army-leaders? when I did not put (the question) to the vote; for it did not seem to me a solemn act to hold office in union with a maddened mob; whereas Theramenes and Callixenus did on the day after introduce secretly fictitious chairmen (of the meeting), and got against the men a vote of death without a trial; and yet did you (Axiochus) lawfully defend them and Euryptolemus likewise, while thirty thousand were at the general meeting.

Axio.: It is so, Socrates. And from that time I have had enough of the platform, and nothing has seemed to me more disagreeable than statesmanship. And this is plain to those who have been engaged in the business. And you indeed speak thus, as taking a view from a look-out; but we, who have made the experiment, know it more accurately. For the mob, my dear Socrates, is a thing ungrateful, satiated with the mere touch, cruel, envious, uneducated, as being made up of a mass of persons brought together, violent (and) triflers; while he, who acts the courtesan to it, is more miserable by far.

Soc.: Since then, Axiochus, you lay down the science, which is the most free, as the least to be prayed for amongst the rest, what shall we think of the remaining pursuits? Are they not to be avoided? I once indeed heard Prodicus saying that death does not exist as regards either the living or those, who have changed their existence.

Axio.: How say you, Socrates?

Soc.: That as regards the living, it does not exist; while they, who are dead, do not exist; so that neither, as regards you, does it exist; for you are not dead; nor, should you suffer aught, will it exist, as regards you; for you will then not exist. Vain then is the sorrow in Axiochus grieving for Axiochus, touching a thing that neither is nor will be; and it is just the same, as if a person were to grieve for Scylla or the Centaur, which, as regards you, do not exist now, nor will they, after your close of life, exist. For what is fearful is so to those, who exist; but to those, who do not exist, how can it be so?

Axio.: These clever things you have said from the talkativeness, which is floating on the surface (of society) just now. For from thence is this idle speaking, which has been cleverly got up for the young men. But the deprivation of the good things of life is what gives me pain, even should you

rattle out reasons, Socrates, still more plausible than those just now. For the mind, when it is wandering, thinks nothing of fine-spoken words; nor do these touch even its surface, which affect indeed a mere pomp and splendour of diction, but are wanting in truth. Now sufferings do not endure sophisms; and upon those things alone, that can reach the soul, rests there any aid.

Soc.: You are putting together, Axiochus, (words) without reason, in bringing the perception of things that are bad as opposed to the deprivation of things that are good, through your forgetting that you are dead. For the counter- suffering of ill pains him who is deprived of good; but he, who does not exist, does not lay hold even of deprivation. How then should there be a grief for that, which is about to furnish no knowledge of the things that will cause pain? For had you, Axiochus, at the beginning laid down (with me), in some way that there is no perception (to the dead), you would not, through your ignorance, have shuddered at death. But now you are turning yourself round, while fearing that you shall be deprived of soul, and place a soul round deprivation; and you fear that you shall not have a perception; and yet you imagine that you shall by perception comprehend a perception, that will not exist. In addition to their being many and beautiful reasons for the immortality of the soul. For a mortal nature would surely not have proceeded and been lifted up to such a greatness in action, as to despise the violence of superior wild animals, and to pass over seas, and to build cities, and to lay down forms of polity, and to look up to heaven and behold the revolutions of the stars, and the courses of the sun and moon, and their eclipses, and rapid return to their former state, and the equality of days, and the two tropical movements, during winter and summer, and the rising and setting of the Pleiades, and the winds, and the fall of rain, and the ill-fated trailing along of fiery meteors, and to lay

down on a tablet what the universe is to undergo for ages, unless there had been in the soul some breath of divinity, through which he possessed the power of thinking upon and knowing subjects of so vast a kind; so that you are not, Axiochus, changing your existence for death, but for immortality; nor will you have a deprivation of good things, but a still purer enjoyment of them; nor pleasures mixed up with a mortal body, but unmixed with every pain. For you will, when released from this prison, depart thither, where all is without trouble, and moanings, and old age, and life is a calm, and with no taste of ill, and where in a mild atmosphere of unruffled tranquillity you (will dwell), looking round upon Nature, and acting the philosopher not before a mob and a theatre, but in the presence of Truth, blooming around.

Axio.: You have by your discourse brought me round to a contrary point. For I have no longer a fear of death, but already a desire to say myself, in imitation of the orators, something still more; and for a long time I have been thinking upon things on high, and I will go through the eternal and divine course, since after my weakness I have collected my strength and am become a new man.

Soc.: (Hear too), if you are willing, another account which Gobryas related to me — a man of the Magi, (who) said that during the expedition of Xerxes, his grandfather, we thus recover a noun, required to govern Πλειάδων, but perceive likewise why the Pleiades are introduced here; since, as we learn from Hesiod Epy. and, both farmers and sailors were wont to pay attention to the rising and setting of the Pleiades, who was his namesake, was sent to Delos to watch over the island, where the two deities presided, according to some brazen tablets, that Opis and Hecaergus had brought from the Hyperboreans; and that he learnt that after the soul was released from the body, it departed to the uncertain spot, and

some dwelling under ground, where is the royal palace of Pluto, not less than the hall of Zeus, inasmuch as the earth possesses the middle portion of the world, and the pole (of heaven) is spherical; of which the gods of heaven have obtained by lot one portion of the hemisphere, and the gods below the other, being some of them brothers, and others the children of brothers; and that the gates before the road to Pluto's domain are fast bound by iron locks and keys; and that the river Acheron receives him, who has opened them, and, after it, Cocytus, both of which it is necessary for him to pass over, and to be led to Minos and Rhadamanthus, (where is) what is called the plain of Truth. There are they seated as judges to sift each of the comers as to what life he had led, and in what pursuits he had dwelt in the body; and that to tell a falsehood is out of his power. On such then as a kind daemon has breathed during life, these are located in the region of the pious. There without stint the seasons bloom with every kind of produce, and fountains of pure water flow; and every where are meadows made beautiful by flowers of varied hues, and places of discussions for philosophers, and theatres of poets, and cyclic choirs, and the hearing of music, and elegant banquets, and feasts self-furnished, and an unmixed freedom from pain, and a delightful mode of living. Nor is produced there violent cold or heat, but a well-tempered air is diffused around, mixed with the sun's mild beams. There is the seat of honour to those, who have shared in the Mysteries; for they perform together their holy rites even thither. How then is there not to you first a share in the honour, as being of the family of the goddesses? And there is a report that Heracles and Dionysus descended to Hades after having previously shared in the Mysteries here; and that they put on a boldness for the journey thither from the Eleusinian (rites). But they, whose life has been passed in a course of evil doings, are driven by the Furies to Erebus and

Chaos through Tartarus, where is the region of the impious, and the unfilled urns of the daughters of Danaus, and the thirst of Tantalus, and the entrails of Tityus, and the uncompleted stone of Sisyphus, To whom begins again his labour's end. There too are persons licked round by wild beasts, and terrified by the torches of the Furies glaring around them; and enduring every kind of ignominious treatment, they are by eternal punishments worn down. This account did I hear from Gobryas; and you, Axiochus, can decide upon it. For carried along myself by reason I know firmly this alone, that the soul is wholly immortal, and that, when it is removed from this spot, it is there without pain; so that it must needs be, Axiochus, that, if you have lived piously, you will be happy either below or above.

Axio.: I am ashamed, Socrates, to say a word. For so far am I from fearing death, that already I feel a desire for it; so greatly has this beautiful discourse of yours persuaded me, as if it were a heavenly one. And even now I have a contempt for life, as being about to remove to a better home. For the present then I will cast up quietly with myself what has been said; and at mid-day you will be with me, Socrates.

Soc.: I will do as you say. And for a while I will go back for a walk to Cynosarges, from whence I was sent for hither.