On Virtue

"Do you know where Socrates can be found?" I asked the gatekeepers. Their mouths dropped. They stared at me for some time without answering, seemingly confused by my question, so I rephrased it.

"Please, could you tell me where I might find Socrates?"

They looked at each other, still dumbfounded by my simple query, so I walked past them, through the gates of the Isles of the Blest, and proceeded towards the nearest city.

As I walked, I could overhear the gatekeepers having an animated conversation about me. From the snatches of conversation I heard, I gathered that their confusion had been my fault. I was the first new arrival who had not gaped at their brilliant, golden uniforms, nor at their bright-white auras, but had simply asked them a straightforward question about a man who could not possibly be important, as they had never even heard his name mentioned by the Isles' leading citizens.

Their conversation shook my conviction that only philosophers were invited to these Isles. I could see that the gatekeepers were not used to us. That made me wonder if I had come to the right place, but my doubts wandered away as I approached the beautiful city before me.

After I had entered the city gates, I headed straight for the marketplace, as I assumed Socrates would be there, if anywhere. I was right. I saw him from behind, seated on the steps of a small temple, conversing with a man, a young woman and a boy.

"Socrates!" I called out as I crossed the square.

His head turned, and he saw me, but he didn't recognize me at first. After a few moments passed, though, he did.

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"Plato!" he shouted as he ran up to me. But when he was near, he added, "my, how you have aged!"

"Well, time does pass, you know—it's been more than 50 years."

"Really? And I thought I'd just settled here a few years ago."

I laughed. "You must have found some real enthusiasts for discussion here, or you would have been more aware of the time."

"Perhaps—as I have indeed. But I'm glad you have come to join us, all the same."

"Tell me then, who are your new friends?"

Socrates turned to his companions and introduced them to me.

"This is Apollonios. He arrived here some time ago. He's a priest of the Orphic religion and—"

"Not so," Apollonios interrupted. "Let's just say that I am an admirer of theirs, as they brought me safely to this pleasant place."

Socrates raised his eyebrows at this. I could see that Apollonios's views on religion had already given Socrates much material for his probing questions.

Socrates then turned to the young woman and the boy.

"This is Armonia and her son Alexis. They perished recently when their ship sank off the coast of Crete."

"And our prayers to Neptune saved us. He has brought us safely here," Armonia said.

"And I am Plato," I said, introducing myself.

"A fine young man, who may amount to someth—" Socrates started to say, but he suddenly realized I was no longer the fine young man whom he had known, but quite an old one. Alexis's laughter at Socrates's description of me had made Socrates pause.

"Yes, you have changed quite a bit," he thought out loud.

"Of course," I replied, "doesn't everyone?"

"As to that, I would like to know," Socrates said.

"Well, shall we discuss it?"

"By all means," he said, and the five of us sat down on the steps of the temple.

"The question is whether we change or not, true?" Socrates began.

"Well of course we change," Armonia said, "how silly even to ask."

"Not at all," Socrates replied, "for I am not referring to physical change, which does apparently occur, but to spiritual change. And whether we do change spiritually is not so obvious."

"The question," I said, "is important because on it hinges the possibility of whether virtue can be taught or not. If the spiritual character of the soul is immutable, then virtue cannot be taught, then good men can have no influence on the bad, and thus all efforts to be instructive in this way are vain."

"But I can say quite definitely that I became virtuous as a result of Orpheus's teachings," Apollonios offered, "and that is proof of the soul's ability to improve."

"Apollonios," Socrates said, "may I ask you a few questions?"

"Certainly," Apollonios said.

"In which virtues did you improve as a result of Orpheus's teachings?"

"Well, first, I no longer ate meat—"

"And do you consider *that* a virtue?"

"Of course!" Apollonios said defensively. "It means I do not kill other beings for my own food. And that is a virtue."

"Excuse me, Apollonios, but did you kill animals before, when you used to eat meat, or did you simply buy your meat at the market?"

"It is all the same, one way or the other. But, to tell the truth, I never have killed an animal myself," Apollonios said.

"Then what virtue did you actually acquire?"

"Why, a greater respect for life, of course."

"So the virtue acquired was respect?"

"Yes, that is it."

"And did you have any respect for life before your conversion?"

"Of course—but not as much."

"Then the degree of respect increased, but respect itself you already had?"

"Yes. I suppose you can say that."

"It is important that I can, for I must say that Orpheus did not teach you respect, but, rather, that he stimulated what you already possessed. And even here I have my doubts."

"Why, Socrates, what could be more obvious?"

"It is just this that puzzles me. It *is* obvious that some change has occurred. But, tell me this, did all who heard Orpheus's teaching react in the way you did?"

"No. Some even laughed at the idea and ridiculed me for believing such nonsense."

"Then Orpheus's teaching not only did not improve their respect for other life, but actually caused them to disrespect it even more."

"That was not Orpheus's fault," Apollonios pleaded. "Those people were simply crude and would not listen. They are damned—"

"Well, let's not get into that," Socrates interrupted, "but if Orpheus is not to blame for his failures, then why should he be praised for his successes?"

"Because, because—" Apollonios said, but he could not continue.

"No, Apollonios, I cannot agree. Orpheus's teachings definitely have an influence, but for some it is beneficial and for others it is the opposite. Now, if a geometry teacher took on your son as a pupil, and returned him to you a year later, during which time your son had acquired no knowledge of geometry, you would be bound to cite one of two causes: either the teacher did not know geometry or your son was a dull student. But if your son came home with *less* knowledge of geometry than before, what would you say?"

"That the teacher not only did not know his subject, but actually taught ignorance of geometry."

"And thus, by your own acknowledgment, we must assume that, if virtue can be taught, Orpheus was, at one and the same

time, capable of teaching virtue and capable of teaching ignorance of virtue. Obviously that cannot be the case. Either he was a teacher of virtue or he was not. He cannot be both at once."

"But he was a great man, that I know," Apollonios objected.

"That is fine. I can agree. But at the same time I must assert that he could not, and did not, teach virtue."

"But the effect?" Apollonios wondered out loud.

"I recognize that the effect exists, but its cause cannot be the art of teaching."

"I have my own doubts about this, Socrates," I said, joining his conversation with Apollonios, "as I agree with Apollonios that an effect has been created. I look to my own life, and see the effect your own ideas had on me, and how my own ideas affected my students, and I cannot help doubting your contention that virtue cannot be taught, that it is neither natural nor acquired, but is inspired by the gods."

"Plato, I too am uneasy about this contention, but—"

"The uneasiness for me can be pinpointed," I said. "It is in this: if virtue is inspired by the gods, then why don't they inspire everyone? Why is virtue such a rare phenomenon if it needs only the will of some god to create it? You do agree that the gods do only that which is good, don't you?"

"Of course," Socrates said.

"And you do think that virtue is a good?"

"The highest."

"Then why wouldn't the gods inspire everyone?"

"Because," Socrates said, "they inspire everyone in different ways. For example, they inspire the poets, the artisans and the philosophers each in their own way."

"But," I objected, "in the case of the poets and the artisans, the limited value of their skills demands that not everyone be so inspired. A society of poets would be ill-prepared to survive more than a few days. Without farmers, shoemakers, tailors and the other artisans, they would soon flounder. There is a limit to the useful-

ness of each of these arts, necessary as they may be. Whereas, philosophy is different."

"In what way?" Apollonios asked skeptically.

"In that its value is unlimited."

"I dare say a society of philosophers would flounder even more quickly than that one of poets you just condemned," Apollonios said merrily.

"Perhaps," I said, "but that is not precisely what I meant. The art of philosophy, the love of wisdom, could be shared by all. One person could be a philosopher-farmer, another a philosopher-shoemaker—and so on. Is it not possible?"

"It certainly is," Armonia said, "but you could also have a poet-farmer, a poet-shoemaker, and so on—couldn't you?"

"You have me there," I replied. "My fondness for philosophy sometimes blinds me to the charms of others, but I admit that what you say is true. One could even have a farmer-shoemaker, I suppose. Practical artistic skills must come first, but the finer artistic endeavors: music, poetry, painting, sculpture and, of course, philosophy, should be, or at least could be, enjoyed by all."

"So why are they not, if they are goods, and are inspired by the gods—is that it?"

"Yes, Socrates, that is my point," I said. "Since these goods are not shared by all and are, in fact, rarer than the practical skills of limited value, I must conclude either that the gods selfishly hoard these goods or that the cause of these goods is not divine inspiration."

"But the proposition that the gods hoard their highest gifts is absurd!" Socrates exclaimed.

"I agree," I said, "which is why I cannot accept your conclusion that virtue is neither natural nor acquired, but inspired."

"By Zeus—you just might be right!" Socrates said. "But, then, what *are* we to make of virtue? Shall we start all over again and look into her nature?"

"It seems we must," I said.

"What a delightful prospect," Socrates thought out loud, his eyes sparkling with interest, "so where shall we begin?"

"I'd personally like to hear once again your objections to the theory that virtue is acquirable," I said.

"Well, first of all," Socrates began, "if virtue is acquirable, if it can be taught, then why have we failed to teach it?"

"But you have not failed," I protested, thinking, at the same time, that I had also not failed.

"No, Plato, I have. There are those who have been influenced by me, but there are others who have not. In all my years in Athens I could never find a single man, virtuous or otherwise, who was capable of imparting his character to others."

"But the ability to influence some, even if not all, must be recognized as a real achievement. And why not as virtue itself having been taught?"

"Because, Plato, it can be explained better in another way. I have never taught anyone anything. I have simply reminded them of something they already knew. Those with good memories seemed to be influenced by my teaching, while those with weak memories were not. And then there were a few whose memories rebelled against the concept of virtue, and they seemed to be influenced for the worse by what I taught. So I cannot accept the idea that my teaching influenced these young men. Their own memories are far more responsible for the change—which is why you prospered and your uncle destroyed himself. But I don't consider either your success, or your uncle's failure, to be my responsibility."

"Granted," I said, "but I still have two objections. The first is that you can still be considered responsible for having stimulated your listeners' memories, and the second is that what you are saying about the teachability of virtue is equally applicable to all disciplines. Mathematics is also based on memory. The teaching of it is merely a stimulus to the rerecognition of the numerical principles which govern life. Geometry likewise. It is just reclarifying the concept of form which is inherent in every mind."

"But what of history? Surely you don't consider that all those events are in every person's memory," Apollonios objected.

"True. However, details are not important in the study of history, except as examples, regardless of what history teachers might say to that. Facts we are all able to communicate. For example, we can all say how many brothers we have, or who our parents are, and so on, but facts do not make a man wise. Understanding does. Therefore, even though the understanding of history cannot be taught, just as virtue cannot be taught, an understanding of history can be reawakened in a mind by the elucidation of the principles which govern history. Unfortunately, some teachers are less aware of the principles than their own students are, because the facts tend to hide the principles from superficial minds, while, at the same time, they reveal themselves to those who are accustomed to abstracting knowledge from experience. So I think our difficulty lies—"

"In not having defined what we mean by teaching!" Socrates said.

"Precisely."

"Well, then, we have already separated it," Socrates said, "into two parts: the transmission of facts and the stimulation of another's memory. Correct?"

"Correct."

"And what is meant by teaching, commonly speaking?"

"Well, Socrates, I do believe that the transmission of facts covers nearly the whole ground. Attempts to stimulate other minds to a recollection of what they have forgotten are rare, although they do occasionally occur. However, usually it is the bright student's own initiative which is responsible for those rare successes. The exceptions to the rule are teachers, like yourself, who stimulate other minds to think. It is clear that two very different processes are at work here under the jurisdiction of one word."

"Then, since the word 'teaching' is already accepted as meaning the transmission of facts, and is, moreover, seen as an active process on the teacher's side, and as a passive process on the

student's, we can leave that word alone. It will now mean to us the process of transmitting facts."

"In that case it is clear that virtue cannot be taught," Apollonios said, "but there is still the effect, which we cannot ignore, and that is the beneficial influence Orpheus's 'teachings', for lack of a better word, had on me."

"As to that effect," Socrates said, "we have already concluded that Orpheus only *increased* your respect for life, and did not create it within you. But I don't want to lose the thread of our argument. It was taking us someplace interesting, wasn't it?"

"It certainly was," I said, "and Apollonios is right. Defined as such, it is clear that virtue cannot be taught. However, we still have to give a name to that other process: the stimulation of another's memory."

"It is clear that another force is at work there," Socrates said, "for that is an active process on the part of the 'teacher' and on the part of the student. One draws the other's mind on, stimulating it, making it think, making it remember—"

"Which reminds me of another word: 'educate'," I said. "That word implies an active process on both sides, and also suggests that the 'teacher' is not adding something to the student, but is simply making what already did exist more obvious."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Apollonios.

"Then we can define the word 'educating' as the process of stimulating another's memory," Socrates said.

"Not exactly," I objected, "because one could simply stimulate him to remember a fact, such as one you had just told him."

"Good objection," Socrates said. "Then let us say the word 'educating' means the process of stimulating another's memory of—of—"

"Of Eternal Ideas," I said.

"What?"

"Eternal Ideas," I repeated. "It is a theory I've been developing for many years, and this discussion has already refined my method of perceiving this concept."

"Explain what you mean by Eternal Ideas," Socrates said, having never heard of that concept before.

"They are simply that: Ideas. Ideas which exist in our minds, and always have, and always will. But I have been thinking of these Ideas unclearly until now. Perhaps the fresh air of these enchanted Isles is responsible, I don't know, but I have a new perception of them which is much simpler—and much better. Until now I have been thinking of them as the Eternal Forms which the forms of life on Earth are cheap imitations of. Things decay and change on Earth so quickly that I imagined there must be a place where the perfect Ideas behind such imperfect earthly forms could be found. And that if a person were there, in that divine gallery, he could contemplate the unchanging, eternal, perfect Forms of Beauty, Justice and Truth without being hindered by the imperfections of the inferior, temporary forms of those ideas which we experience every day.

"That, I say, *was* my idea. But since being here, and seeing that the forms of the Isles of the Blest, though better, and more beautiful, are nonetheless not at all as I had conceived them, my ideas have been slowly undergoing a change for the better."

"An interesting idea, anyway," Socrates mused.

"And how do you conceive of them now?" Armonia asked.

"As Ideas, pure and simple. Without form, but not wholly formless—"

"Say that again," Apollonios interrupted, quite confused by such a contradiction.

"Well, I should say they do have a form," I continued, "but not as I previously conceived of it. Form is a material concept—the form of a man, for example. That is why I conceived of the eternal form of a man as a perfect, flawless statue of a man. But now that I am no longer a man, exactly, but one of the Blest, I think that there probably is no Eternal Idea of a man—or of a horse, or of any other animal for that matter. It is life which is eternal, not the forms of life. It may be that mankind exists for only a twinkling of an eyelash, from an eternal point of view. It is a form of life adapted