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978-1-108-06734-8 - The Works, Literary, Moral, and Medical, of Thomas Percival, M.D.:
To which are Prefixed, Memoirs of his Life and Writings, and a Selection from his
Literary Correspondence: Volume 2

Thomas Percival

Excerpt

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A
SOCRATIC DISCOURSE
ON
T R U T H.



INTER SILVAS ACADEMI QUÆRERE VERUM.

HOR.

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A

SOCRATIC DISCOURSE

ON

TRUTH.

TO

T. B. P.

YOU have often been a witness, my dear Son, of the pleasure experienced by me in the recollection of the Academical years which I passed at —, in the pursuit of general science, before I engaged in my professional studies at the university of —: and you have no less frequently heard me express the highest veneration for the profound learning and exalted character of Philocles, under whose tuition the charms of knowledge first attracted my regard. I have lately revisited those scenes so delightful to my youth; but, leaving to your conception the emotions which I felt, I shall relate to you a SOCRATIC CONVERSATION that occurred there in my presence, between Philocles and your kinsman Sophron. This amiable youth, who is likely to reflect a lustre on the sacred office, to which, I trust,

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he will ere long be called, had been reciting to his professor an academical composition on the importance of TRUTH, and on the folly, infamy, and baseness of LYING and DECEIT: and, when he laid down the book, Philocles expressed an earnest wish, that such sentiments might ever influence the heart, and direct the conduct of his pupil. But general rules, continued he, are insufficient for our government in the diversified and complicated occurrences of life: and, if we be ambitious of acting with wisdom, honour, and virtue, it is necessary that we should make ourselves acquainted with the various branches and subordinations of each moral duty. Let us, therefore, take a particular view of TRUTH, and of her inseparable companion FAITHFULNESS. You are no novice in these subjects; and Euphronius, I am persuaded, will be pleased to hear you exercised in the discussion of them.

I presume you will concur with me in opinion, that MORAL TRUTH is the *conformity of our expressions to our thoughts*; and FAITHFULNESS, *that of our actions to our expressions*: And that LYING or FALSEHOOD is generally a mean, selfish, or malevolent, and always an unjustifiable, endeavour to deceive another, by signifying or asserting that to be truth or fact, which is known or believed to be otherwise; and by making promises, without any intention to perform them.

But if we believe our assertions or signs to be true, and they should afterwards prove to be false, tell me, Sophron, are we then guilty of lying?

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No, replied Sophron; we shall have committed only an error or mistake: for under such circumstances we must have been deceived ourselves, and could have had no design of imposing upon others?

But is every breach of promise a lie, continued Philocles?

I should think not, answered Sophron, if the promise were made with sincerity, and the violation of it be unavoidable.

Your distinction is just, said Philocles; and there are also certain conditions, obvious to the general sense of mankind, understood or implied in almost every promise, on which the performance must depend. Whang-to, emperor of China, who governed his people like a father, and regarded his own elevation and power as trusts delegated for their good, had a daughter who was his only child, and the darling of his old age. He promised her in marriage to Oufan-quey, the son of his favourite mandarine; and that he would bequeath to him all his dominions as her dowry. Oufan-quey was at that time a youth of the most promising abilities and dispositions; but the prospect of royalty, and the adulation of a court, soon corrupted his heart. He became haughty, insolent, and cruel; and the people anticipated, with horror, the tyranny which they must endure under his government. By the institutions of the Chinese, the great officers of state may remonstrate to the emperor, when his decrees are injurious to the public interest; and this privilege has often tended to abate

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the rigour of despotism. Whang-to heard, with grief and astonishment, the complaints of his mandarines against Oufan-quey. He summoned him into his presence; and being satisfied with the proofs of his demerit, he addressed the officers of state in the following terms: “ I engaged my daughter in marriage, “ and promised the inheritance of my dominions, to “ Oufan-quey, a youth who was wise, humane, and “ just. In departing from virtue, he has cancelled “ these obligations, and forfeited his title to both.” Then turning to Oufan-quey, he said, “ I command “ you to retire from my court, and to pass the remainder of your days in the most distant province “ of my empire.”

But is it not deemed peculiarly honourable, Sophron, to perform a promise, when passion or self-interest strongly incites us to the violation of it?

Nothing raises our admiration higher, said Sophron; and I beg leave to relate to you a story, which places this truth in a very striking point of view. A Spanish cavalier, without any reasonable provocation, assassinated a Moorish gentleman, and instantly fled from justice. He was vigorously pursued; but availing himself of a sudden turn in the road, he leaped, unperceived, over a garden wall. The proprietor, who was also a Moor, happened to be at that time walking in the garden; and the Spaniard fell upon his knees before him, acquainted him with his case, and in the most pathetic manner implored concealment. The Moor listened to him

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with compassion, and generously promised his assistance. He then locked him in a summer-house, and left him, with an assurance that, when night approached, he would provide for his escape. A few hours afterwards, the dead body of his son was brought to him; and the description of the murderer exactly agreed with the appearance of the Spaniard, whom he had then in custody. He concealed the horror and suspicion which he felt; and retiring to his chamber, remained there till midnight. Then, going privately into the garden, he opened the door of the summer-house, and thus accosted the cavalier: "Christian," said he, "the youth whom you have murdered was my only son. Your crime merits the severest punishment. But I have solemnly pledged my word for your security; and I disdain to violate even a rash engagement with a cruel enemy." He conducted the Spaniard to the stables, and furnishing him with one of his swiftest mules, "Fly," said he, "whilst the darkness of the night conceals you. Your hands are polluted with blood; but GOD is just; and I humbly thank Him that my faith is unspotted, and that I have resigned judgment unto Him."*

When Sophron had finished this narrative, I took the liberty of observing that Faithfulness is a virtue, which we sometimes meet with in very abandoned characters, who are neither influenced by a sense of religious nor of moral obligation. In such persons it

* See *Histor. Mirror.*

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is founded on certain ideas of HONOUR, which originally spring from the best natural principles.* After the battle of Culloden, in the year 1745, a reward of thirty thousand pounds was offered to any one, who should discover or deliver up the young Pretender. He had taken refuge with the Kennedies, two common thieves; who protected him with fidelity, robbed for his support, and often went in disguise to Inverness to buy provisions for him. A considerable time afterwards, one of these men, who had resisted the temptation of thirty thousand pounds, was hanged for stealing a cow, of the value of thirty shillings.†

But I apprehend, resumed Sophron, with much modesty, that there are cases in which it would be more culpable to fulfil than to violate a promise.

To this proposition Philocles gave his full assent, and illustrated it by the following supposititious case. A brace of loaded pistols have been left in my hands by a friend, to whom I have engaged to restore them, whenever he shall make the demand. But if he claim them when intoxicated with liquor, or mad with passion and resentment, it is evident that the performance of my promise would not only be weak, but extremely reprehensible: and my friend himself, in his calm and sober moments, would be amongst the first to charge me with all the mischiefs occasioned by my erroneous sense of duty. Hasty declarations and rash asseverations are sometimes made

Vide Appendix, sect. i. † See Pennant's Tour in Scot.

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by good men, who cannot however reasonably or conscientiously fulfil them. When JESUS had washed the feet of several of his disciples, he came to Simon Peter: *And Peter said unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? JESUS answered and said, what I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter said unto him, thou shalt never wash my feet! JESUS answered him, if I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter said unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.** Nor can even vows, however solemn, be binding, when the object of them is the commission of a crime: for though appeals to the Deity are sacred pledges of our sincerity, they make no change in the nature or legality of actions; and it would be the grossest superstition to suppose, that the violation of GOD's ordinances can either be honourable or acceptable to Him.† David, in revenge for an insult offered him by Nabal, vowed that he would put to the sword every male of his family. But his wrath was afterwards appeased; and he became so sensible of the injustice of his design, that he said, *Blessed be the LORD who has kept his servant from evil.‡*

It should seem, that the Roman emperor Trajan thought it might be criminal in his officers, under certain circumstances, to maintain the allegiance which they had sworn to him.¶ On the appointment of Suberanus to be captain of the royal guard,

* John, chap. xiii.

† See Appendix, sect. ii.

‡ 1 Sam. xxv. 22.

¶ See Appendix, sect. iii.

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he presented him with a sword, as the badge of his fealty, saying, “ Let this be drawn in my defence, if “ I rule according to equity; but if otherwise, it may “ be employed against me.”*

The conclusion concerning the observance of promises may be extended to Veracity, notwithstanding the extravagant declaration of one of the Fathers, “ that he would not violate truth, though he were “ sure to gain heaven by it.” Whenever, from the concurrence of extraordinary circumstances, the practice of one virtue is rendered incompatible with the performance of another of much higher obligation, it is evident that the inferior must yield to the superior duty. An example will elucidate and evince the justness of this observation.

After the horrid massacre of the Huguenots in France, which began on St. Bartholomew’s day 1572, the King of Navarre was very rigorously guarded, by the order of the Queen-mother, Catherine de Medicis. But one day, when he was hunting near Senlis, during the heat of the chase, he seized a favourable opportunity of making his escape; and galloping through the woods, with a few faithful friends, amongst whom was young Rosny, afterwards Duke of Sully, he crossed the Seine at Poissy,† and fled to the castle of a nobleman, who was a zealous though secret Protestant, and strongly attached to his interest. Troops of horse were soon dispatched different ways

* Pliny.

† See Sully’s Memoirs; and also the Preface to this Work.