

Contribution to Academy Colloquium

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Polemon, *der grosse Schatten* of the Old Academy

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Illustrative Passages

1. "Polemon used to say that we should exercise ourselves with facts (*pragmata*), and not with logical speculations (*dialektika theôrêmata*), which leave us, like a man who has got up some paltry handbook on harmony but never practised, able, indeed, to win admiration for skill in asking questions (*erôtêsis*), but utterly at variance with ourselves in the ordering of our lives (*diathesis*)." (trans. Hicks).

2. As to the former group, as I was reading over the account of Polemon's conversion to philosophy, something possibly significant struck me, which had not done so previously.¹ This is a very popular anecdote, of which Gigante is able to list fully 19 versions in his collection of the 'fragments,'² which involves Polemon, who at this stage is a notorious rake, on the head of an agreement with his young friends (*synthemenos tois neois*) – presumably some sort of wager was involved – lurching into Xenocrates' seminar, drunk and garlanded (*methyôn kai estephanômenos*), with the purpose, we must imagine, of causing some sort of mayhem, and discomfiting the notoriously unflappable Xenocrates. Instead, however, Polemon slumps down at the back of the lecture-room, and finds himself listening to Xenocrates calmly continuing to deliver a lecture on *sôphrosynê*, which results in his becoming hooked on philosophy as a way of life, the *bios philosophikos*.

3. . His colleague Crantor, when asked what especially attracted him to Polemon, is said to have replied, "The fact that I never heard him raise or lower his voice in speaking" (*ibid.* 24). There is further the remarkable story of his remaining quite calm after being bitten by a mad dog, despite the general uproar which surrounded the incident. We must presume that the dog was not really rabid -- otherwise even philosophic calm would not have

¹ Having arrived at this insight, if insight it be, I find myself now largely anticipated by the perceptive remarks of Harold Tarrant, in his contribution to *Alcibiades and the Socratic Lover-Educator*, edd. M. Johnson & H. Tarrant, London, 2012, 'Improvements by Love from Aeschines to the Old Academy', pp. 158-60. I find this most encouraging.

² M. Gigante, *Polemonis Academici Fragmenta*, Naples, 1977, Frs. 15-33.

prevented a deeply unpleasant death from rabies; but the story plainly imprinted itself upon the public consciousness.

4. "Every living creature, from the moment of birth, loves itself and all its parts; primarily this self-regard embraces the two main divisions of mind and body, and subsequently the parts of each of these. Both mind and body have certain excellences; of these the young animal grows vaguely conscious, and later begins to discriminate, and to seek for the primary endowments of nature and shun their opposites... And this is the fountain-head from which one's whole theory of goods and evils must necessarily flow. Polemon, and also before him Aristotle, held that the primary objects were the ones I have just mentioned. Thus arose the doctrine of the Old Academy and of the Peripatetics, maintaining that the end of goods is to live in accordance with nature, that is to enjoy the primary things granted by nature (*prima a natura data = ta prôta kata physin*) with the accompaniment of virtue." (trans. Rackham)

5. "Xenocrates of Chalcedon defines happiness (*eudaimonia*) as the acquisition of the virtue proper to us and of the resources with which to service it. Then as regards the proper seat (*en hôi*) of this, he plainly says the soul; as the motive causes of it (*hyph' hôn*) he identifies the virtues; as the material causes (*ex hôn*), in the sense of parts, noble actions and good habits and attitudes (*hexeis te kai diatheseis*); and as indispensable accompaniments (*hôn ouk aneu*), bodily and external goods."

6. "Polemon, the associate of Xenocrates, seems to wish happiness to consist in self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) in respect of all good things, or at least the most and greatest of them. For he lays it down that happiness can never be achieved apart from virtue, while virtue is sufficient for happiness *even if bereft of bodily and external goods.*"

7. "He laid it down that the natural substance that was the parent of all things, even of the senses and the mind, was fire. He also differed from the same thinkers in holding that an incorporeal substance, such as Xenocrates and the older thinkers also had pronounced the mind to be, was incapable of any activity, whereas anything capable of acting or being acted upon in any way could not be incorporeal."