

SOCRATES QUESTIONS A TEENAGER

By Sanderson Beck
(an excerpt from Lysis)

SCENE: A newly-erected Palaestra outside the walls of Athens.

SOCRATES: I dare say, Lysis that your father and mother love you very much.

LYSIS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And they would wish you to be perfectly happy.

LYSIS: Yes.

SOCRATES: But do you think that any one is happy who is in the condition of a slave, and who cannot do what he likes?

LYSIS: I should think not indeed.

SOCRATES: And if your father and mother love you, and desire that you should be happy, no one can doubt that they are very ready to promote your happiness.

LYSIS: Certainly.

SOCRATES: And do they then permit you to do what you like, and never rebuke you or hinder you from doing what you desire?

LYSIS: Yes, indeed, Socrates; there are a great many things which they hinder me from doing.

SOCRATES: What do you mean? Do they want you to be happy, and yet hinder you from doing what you like? For example, if you want to mount one of your father's chariots, and take the reins at a race, they will not allow you to do so-they will prevent you?

LYSIS: Certainly, they will not allow me to do so.

SOCRATES: Whom then will they allow?

LYSIS: There is a charioteer, whom my father pays for driving.

SOCRATES: And do they trust a hireling more than you? and may he do what he likes with the horses? And do they pay him for this?

LYSIS: They do.

SOCRATES: But I dare say that you may take the whip and guide the mule-cart if you like;-they will permit that?

LYSIS: Permit me! Indeed they will not.

SOCRATES: Then, may no one use the whip to the mules?

LYSIS: Yes, the muleteer.

SOCRATES: And is he a slave or a free man?

LYSIS: A slave.

SOCRATES: And do they esteem a slave of more value than you who are their son? And do they entrust their property to him rather than to you? and allow him to do what he likes, when they prohibit you? Answer me now: Are you your own master, or do they not even allow that?

LYSIS: Nay, of course they do not allow it.

SOCRATES: Then you have a master?

LYSIS: Yes, my tutor; there he is.

SOCRATES: And is he a slave?

LYSIS: To be sure; he is our slave.

SOCRATES: Surely, this is a strange thing, that a free man should be governed by a slave. And what does he do with you?

LYSIS: He takes me to my teachers.

SOCRATES: You do not mean to say that your teachers also rule over you?

LYSIS: Of course they do.

SOCRATES: Then I must say that your father is pleased to inflict many lords and masters on you. But at any rate when you go home to your mother, she will let you have your own way, and will not interfere with your happiness. Her wool, or the piece of cloth which she is weaving, are at your disposal: I am sure that there is nothing to hinder you from touching her wooden spindle, or her comb, or any other of her spinning implements.

LYSIS (laughing): Nay, Socrates, not only does she hinder me, but I should be beaten if I were to touch one of them.

SOCRATES: Well, this is amazing. And did you ever behave ill to your father or your mother?

LYSIS: No, indeed.

SOCRATES: But why then are they so terribly anxious to prevent you from being happy, and doing as you like?-keeping you all day long in subjection to another, and, in a word, doing nothing which you desire; so that you have no good, as would appear, out of their great possessions, which are under the control of anybody rather than of you, and have no use of your own fair person, which is tended and taken care of by another; while you, Lysis, are master of nobody, and can do nothing?

LYSIS: Why Socrates, the reason is that I am not of age.

SOCRATES: I doubt whether that is the real reason. I should imagine that Democrates, your father and your mother do permit you to do many things already, and do not wait until you are of age. For example, if they want anything read or written, you, I presume, would be the first person in the house who is summoned by them.

LYSIS: Very true.

SOCRATES: And you would be allowed to write or read the letters in any

order which you please, correct? Or to take up the lyre and tune the notes, and play with the fingers, or strike with the lyre pick, exactly as you please, and neither father nor mother would interfere with you?

LYSIS: That is true.

SOCRATES: Then what can be the reason, Lysis, why they allow you to do the one and not the other?

LYSIS: I suppose because I understand the one, and not the other.

SOCRATES: Yes, the reason is not any deficiency of years, but a deficiency of knowledge; and whenever your father thinks that you are wiser than he is, he will instantly commit himself and his possessions to you.

LYSIS: I think so.

SOCRATES: Aye, and about your neighbor, too, does not the same rule hold as about your father? If he is satisfied that you know more of housekeeping than he does, will he continue to administer his affairs himself, or will he commit them to you?

LYSIS: I think that he will commit them to me.

SOCRATES: Will not the Athenian people, too, entrust their affairs to you when they see that you have wisdom enough to manage them?

LYSIS: Yes.

SOCRATES: And oh! let me put another case: There is the great king, and he has an eldest son, who is the Prince of Asia;-suppose that you and I go to him and establish to his satisfaction that we are better cooks than his son, will he not entrust to us the prerogative of making soup, and putting in anything that we like while the pot is boiling, rather than to the Prince of Asia, who is his son?

LYSIS: To us, clearly.

SOCRATES: And we shall be allowed to throw in salt by handfuls, whereas the son will not be allowed to put in as much as he can take up between his fingers?

LYSIS: Of course.

SOCRATES: Or suppose again that the son has bad eyes, will he allow him, or will he not allow him, to touch his own eyes if he thinks that he has no knowledge of medicine?

LYSIS: He will not allow him.

SOCRATES: Whereas, if he supposes us to have a knowledge of medicine, he will allow us to do what we like with him-even to open the eyes wide and sprinkle ashes upon them, because he supposes that we know what is best?

LYSIS: That is true.

SOCRATES: And everything in which we appear to him to be wiser than himself or his son he will commit to us?

LYSIS: That is very true, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Then now, my dear Lysis, you perceive that in things which we know every one will trust us-Hellenes and barbarians, men and women-and we may do as we please about them. No one will like to interfere with us; we shall be free, and masters of others; and these things will be really ours, for we shall be benefited by them. But in things of which we have no understanding, no one will trust us to do as seems good to us. They will hinder us as far as they can; and not only strangers, but father and mother, and the friend, if there be one, who is dearer still, will also hinder us. Thus, we shall be subject to others; and these things will not be ours for we can't benefit from them. Do you agree?

LYSIS: Why yes.

SOCRATES: And shall we be friends to others, and will any others love us, in as far as we are useless to them?

LYSIS: Certainly not.

SOCRATES: Neither can your father or mother love you, nor can anybody love anybody else, in so far as they are useless to them?

LYSIS: No.

SOCRATES: And therefore, my boy, if you are wise, -all men will be your friends and kindred, for you will be useful and good; but if you are not wise, neither father, nor mother, nor kindred, nor any one else, will be your friends. And in matters of which you have as yet no knowledge, can you have any conceit of knowledge?

LYSIS: That is impossible.

SOCRATES: And you, Lysis, if you require a teacher, have not yet attained to wisdom.

LYSIS: True.

SOCRATES: And therefore you are not conceited, having nothing of which to be conceited.

LYSIS: Indeed, Socrates, I think not.