

Plotinus

ON DIALECTIC

Ennead I, iii

Translated by Thomas Taylor

I. What art, or method, or study, will lead us to that end to which we ought to proceed? That we ought, indeed, to arrive at *The Good Itself*, and the first principle of things, is granted, and is demonstrated through many arguments. The arguments also through which this is demonstrated, are a certain elevation to this end.

But what kind of a person is it necessary the man should be who is elevated thither? Is it not, as Plato says, one who has seen all, or most things? And who in his first generation has descended into the seed of a man who will be a philosopher, or a musician, or a lover? The philosopher, therefore, the musician, and the lover, are naturally adapted to be elevated. What, therefore, is the mode? Is there one and the same mode for all these? Or is there a different mode for each? There is, indeed, a twofold progression to all of them; one to those who are ascending; but the other to those who have arrived at the supernal realms. For the former proceeds from things beneath; but the latter ranks among those who are now in the intelligible region, and who in that place have as it were fixed their footstep. There, also, it is necessary for them to proceed, till they have arrived at the extremity of the place. The end of the progression, however, is then obtained, when some one arrives at the summit of the intelligible world. But let this at present remain [without any further discussion]. And let us first endeavour to speak concerning this elevation.

In the first place, therefore, let these men be distinguished by us, and let us begin from the musician, and show who he naturally is. We must admit, then, that he is easily excited, and astonished at the beautiful; yet is not disposed to be moved from himself, but is prepared from casual occurrences as from certain types or impressions, to be excited by sounds, and to the beautiful in these, just as the timid are by noises. He likewise always flies from dissonance; and pursues in songs and rhythms, that which is one, congruous, and elegant. After these sensible sounds, rhythms, and figures therefore, he is thus to be elevated, *viz.*, by separating the matter, in which analogies and ratios are inherent, and contemplating the beauty which they contain. He must also be taught that the things about which he was astonished were, intelligible harmony, and the beauty which is in it, and in short, the beautiful itself, and not a certain beauty only. The reasonings, likewise, of philosophy must be inserted in him, through which he will be led to a belief of truths of which he is ignorant, though he [occultly] possesses them. What these reasonings however, are, will be hereafter unfolded.

II. But the lover, into which the musician may be changed, and being changed will either remain [in that character] or will pass beyond it, has in a certain respect a recollection of beauty. Being however separated from it, he is incapable of learning what it is. But as he is struck by the beautiful objects which present themselves to the sight, he is seized with astonishment about them. He therefore must be taught not to be abjectly astonished about

one beautiful body, but he must be led by the exercise of the reasoning power to all beautiful bodies, and he who does this must exhibit to him that which is one and the same in all of them, and inform him that it is different from and is derived elsewhere, than from bodies, and is rather inherent in other things, such as beautiful pursuits, and beautiful laws. For the lover will now become accustomed to incorporeal natures. He likewise must be led to the beauty which is in the arts, in sciences, and the virtues, and afterwards to that which is one and the same in all these; and he must be taught after what manner beauty is inherent in each of them. But after the virtues, he must now ascend to intellect, and being itself, and there commence the progression on high.

III. The philosopher, however, is naturally prompt, and as it were, winged, and does not require a separation [from sensible objects] like the other characters; since he is excited to the supernal region, but is dubious, and therefore is only in want of one that may point out the way. The path, therefore, must be shown to him, and he must be liberated, since he is naturally willing, and was formerly freed [from the fetters of a corporeal nature]. Hence, he must be instructed in the mathematical disciplines, in order that he may be accustomed to the perception of and belief in an incorporeal essence. For he will easily admit its subsistence, as he is desirous of learning. As he is naturally, therefore, endued with virtue, he must be led to the perfection of the virtues; and after the mathematics, he must be taught dialectic reasonings, and in short, must be rendered skilful in dialectic.

IV. What, then, is the dialectic which ought to be delivered in addition to the former particulars? It is, indeed, a habit enabling its possessor to reason about every thing, to know what each thing is, and in what it differs from other things, what the common something is which it participates, where each of these subsists, if a thing is, what it is, what the number is of beings, and again of non-beings [which are not nothing] but different from beings. This, also, discusses *The Good*, and that which is not good; such things as are under *The Good*, and such as are under the contrary to it; and what that is which is eternal, and that which is not a thing of this kind.

All these likewise it discusses scientifically, and not from opinion. Resting, also, from the wandering about a sensible nature, it establishes itself in the intelligible world, and there has its employment, dismissing falsehood, and nourishing the soul in what is called the plain of truth, employing for this purpose the division of Plato, and also for the separation of forms. It likewise employs this division for the purpose of defining what a thing is, and in order to obtain a knowledge of the first genera of things, intellectually connecting that which results from these, till it has proceeded through the whole of an intelligible nature; and again, by an analytic process it arrives at that to which it had proceeded from the first. Then, however, it becomes quiescent, because so far as it arrives thither it is at rest, and being no longer busily employed, but becoming one, it surveys what is called logic, which is occupied about propositions and syllogisms, - just as if giving to another art, the knowledge of writing; some of which it considers as necessary, and prior to art. But it forms a judgment of these, as well as of other things, and thinks that some of them are useful, but others superfluous, and pertaining to the method by which these are discussed.

V. Whence, however, does this science derive its principles? May we not say that intellect imparts clear principles to the soul that is able to receive them? Afterwards, the soul compounds the things consequent to these principles, and connects and divides them, till it

arrives at a perfect intellect. For, as Plato says, this science is the purest part of intellect and [intellectual] prudence. It is necessary, therefore, since it is the most honourable habit of those things that are in us, that it should be conversant with being, and the most honourable nature; and that prudence, indeed, should be conversant with being, but intellect with that which is beyond being.

What, then, is philosophy? That which is most honourable. Is philosophy, therefore, the same as dialectic? Or is not dialectic the most honourable part of philosophy? For it must not be fancied that it is the instrument of the philosopher; since it does not consist of mere theorems and rules, but is conversant with things, and has beings as it were for its subject matter. Nevertheless, it proceeds in a path to beings, possessing things themselves together with theorems. It knows, however, that which is false and sophistical accidentally, something else being the cause of these; and it forms a judgment of them as of that which is foreign, knowing the false by the truths it contains in itself, when it is adduced by any one, because it is contrary to the rule of truth. Propositions, therefore, are not the object of its knowledge; for these are letters. But, knowing truth, it knows that which is called a proposition. And universally, it knows the motions of the soul, what the soul admits, and what it rejects, and whether it rejects that which it admits, or something else. Likewise, whether different or the same things are adduced; applying itself to them in a way resembling sense.¹ But it assigns to another power an accurate discussion of these particulars.

VI. This, therefore, is an honourable part; since philosophy has also other parts. For it speculates about nature, receiving assistance from dialectic, in the same manner as the other arts use arithmetic. Philosophy, however, proximately derives assistance from dialectic. And, in a similar manner, it speculates about manners, surveying them through dialectic, but adding habits, and the exercises from which habits proceed. The rational virtues also have habits, and what are now as peculiarities, which they derive from thence. And the other virtues, indeed, have their reasonings in peculiar passions and actions; but prudence is a certain ratiocination, and is conversant with that which is more universal. For it considers whether it is proper now to abstain or hereafter, or in short, whether another thing is better.

Dialectic, however, and wisdom, introduce all things to the use of prudence, universally and immaterially. But whether is it possible to know inferior concerns without dialectic and wisdom? Or may they be known in a different and defective way? It is possible, however, for a man to be thus wise and skilled in dialectic without a knowledge of these. Or this will not be the case, but they will coalesce, either previously, or together. And perhaps some one may have certain physical virtues, from which, when wisdom is possessed, the perfect virtues will be obtained. Wisdom, therefore, is posterior to the physical virtues, but afterwards it perfects the manners; or rather, the physical virtues existing, both are co-increased, and mutually perfected. Or, one of them being previously assumed, the one will perfect the other. For, in short, physical virtue has an imperfect eye, and imperfect manners; and the principles of both are, for the most part, derived from those things which we possess.

¹ *i.e.* By intuition, so as to come into immediate contact with the objects of its knowledge. It does this, however, so far as its energy is purely intellectual.

Thomas Taylor's note on Dialectic

1 The dialectic of Plato, which is here discussed, is not the same with that dialectic which is the subject of opinion, and is accurately investigated in the *Topics* of Aristotle. For the former is irreprehensible and most expeditious; since it is connate with things themselves, and employs a multitude of powers in order to the attainment of truth. It likewise imitates intellect, from which it receives its principles, and ascends through well-ordered gradations to real being itself. It also terminates the wandering of the soul about sensibles; and explores every thing by methods which cannot be confuted, till it arrives at the ineffable principle of things. The business, likewise, of this first of sciences, is to employ definitions, divisions, analyzations, and demonstrations, as primary sciences in the investigation of causes; imitating the progression of beings from the first principle of things, and their continual conversion to it as the ultimate object of desire.

"But there are three energies," says Proclus (in his *Commentary on Parmenides*, 653) "of this most scientific method; the first of which is adapted to youth, and is useful for the purpose of exciting their intellect, which is, as it were, in a dormant state. For it is a true exercise of the eye of the soul in the speculation of things, leading forth through opposite positions, the essential impression of ideas which it contains, and considering not only the divine path, as it were, which conducts to truth, but exploring whether the deviations from it contain any thing worthy of belief; and lastly, stimulating the all various conceptions of the soul. But the second energy takes place when intellect rests from its former investigations, as becoming most familiar with the speculations of beings, and beholds truth itself firmly established on a pure and holy foundation. This energy, according to Socrates, by a progression through ideas, evolves the whole of an intelligible nature, till it arrives at that which is first; and this by analyzing, defining, demonstrating, and dividing, proceeding upwards and downwards, till having entirely investigated the nature of intelligibles, it raises itself to a nature superior to beings. But the soul being perfectly established in this nature, as in her paternal port, no longer tends to a more excellent object of desire, as she has now arrived at the end of her search. And you may say that what is delivered in the *Phædrus* and *Sophista*, is the employment of this energy, giving a twofold division to some, and a fourfold to other operations of the dialectic art. Hence it is assigned to such as philosophize purely, and no longer require preparatory exercise, but nourish the intellect of their soul in pure intellection. But the third energy, which is declarative according to truth, purifies from twofold ignorance,² when its reasons are employed upon men, full of opinion; and this is spoken of in the *Sophista*."

² *i.e.* When a man is ignorant that he is ignorant; and this is the disease of the multitude.