

Plotinus on dialectic

Plotinus – the philosopher who gave so much impulse to the Platonic tradition in the 3rd century CE – wrote a short treatise on dialectic which begins, "What art is there, what method or practice, which will take us up there where we must go? Where that is, that it is to the Good, the First Principle, we can take as agreed and established by many demonstrations; and the demonstrations themselves were a kind of leading up on our way." In other words, the very act of exploring the ultimate goal of the philosophic life gives us a path towards it, in just the same way as exploring the possibilities of harmony in the making of music leads us to harmony itself. After pondering the different ways of approaching the Good – the very fountain of all reality and beauty – and discussing "musicians, lovers and philosophers" as outlined as the primary kinds of life in Plato's Phaedrus, he begins to answer his opening question:

4. What then is dialectic, which the former kinds of men as well as philosophers must be given?

It is the science which can speak about everything in a reasoned and orderly way,

and say what each thing is and how it differs from other things and what it has in common with them;

in what class each thing is and where it stands in that class,

and if it really is what it is,

and how many really existing things there are,

and again how many non-existing things [which are not nothing], different from real beings.

It discusses good and not good,

and the things that are classed under good and its opposite,

and what is the eternal and what not eternal, with certain knowledge about everything and not mere opinion.

It stops wandering about the world of sense and settles down in the world of intellect, and there it occupies itself, casting off falsehood and feeding the soul in what Plato calls "the plain of truth," using his method of division to distinguish the Forms, and to determine the essential nature of each thing, and to find the primary kinds, and weaving together by the intellect all that issues from these primary kinds, till it has traversed the whole intelligible world; then, turning back on itself, it returns that world back to its starting-point; and then, keeping quiet (for it is quiet in so far as it is present ^{There}¹) it busies itself no more, but contemplates, having arrived at unity. (It leaves what is called logical activity, about propositions and syllogisms, to another art, as it might leave knowing how to write. Some of the matter of logic it considers necessary, as a pre-

¹ Plotinus often refers the eternal and intelligible world as "There"; and, in contrast, the temporal world of material existence as "Here".

liminary, but it makes itself the judge of this, as of everything else, and considers some of it useful and some superfluous, as belonging to lower forms of study.

5. But from where does this science derive its principles? Intellect² gives clear principles to any soul which can receive them: afterwards the soul combines and interweaves and distinguishes their consequences, till it arrives at perfect intelligence. For, Plato says, dialectic is "the purest part of intelligence and wisdom." So, since it is the noblest of our faculties, it must be concerned with real being and what most noble; as wisdom it is concerned with real being, as intelligence with 'That which is beyond being.'³ But surely philosophy is the most valuable thing? Are dialectic and philosophy the same? It is the noblest part of philosophy. For it must not be thought to be a tool the philosopher uses. It is not just bare theories and rules; it deals with things and has real beings as a kind of material for its activity; it approaches them methodically and possesses real things along with its theories.⁴ It knows falsehood and sophism incidentally, as another's product, and judges falsehood as something alien to the truths in itself, recognising, when anyone brings it forward, something contrary to the rule of truth. So it does not know about propositions – they are just letters⁵ – but in knowing the truth it knows what they call propositions, and in general it knows the movements of the soul,⁶ what it affirms and what it denies, and whether it affirms the same thing as it denies or something else, and if things are different from each other or the same; whatever is submitted to it it perceives by directing intuition, as sense-perception also does, but it hands over petty precisions of speech to another discipline which finds satisfaction in them.

6. So dialectic is the noble part. Philosophy has other parts; it also surveys the nature of the physical world with assistance from dialectic, as the other skills use arithmetic to help them; though natural philosophy stands closer to dialectic in its borrowing; in the same way moral philosophy derives from dialectic on its contemplative side, but adds the virtuous dispositions and the exercises which produce them. . . .

(Trans. Armstrong with amendments.)

² *Intellect* here refers not to the faculty of the soul that knows, but rather to the eternal and causal principle which gives birth to the soul and which is, therefore, prior to the soul, causally speaking.

³ "That which is beyond being" takes us to the highest reality – for the Intelligible is real being, and the cause of all which is given existence in our world, but it is not the highest principle for its own cause is even simpler and even more powerful than being.

⁴ Theories: the word being translated here is *theoremasi* – Taylor translates this as 'theorems' – but no English word really conveys what is being said by Plotinus here: the French of Bouillet has 'idée' (idea), for *theoria* in Greek, from which the word is derived, means contemplation, and therefore the sentence is actually saying that dialectic approaches both the real being of its objects, and the idea of that being which is thrown off by it (and perceived by the mind) in the same way that material objects throw off an image by which physical sight obtains its perception of whatever it beholds.

⁵ In just the same way that reader, when reading a passage, is not really thinking of the letters which make up the words from which he or she is extracting information, so dialectic is not focussed upon propositions but the truth which together they point towards.

⁶ The movements of soul: since intellect has inserted its eternal truths in the soul, the stable reality of these resurfaces, so to speak, in the orderly movements of the soul as it passes from one aspect of a particular truth to another, circling ever closer to the unmoved truths of intellect.