

Proclus on Dialectic

from his Commentary on the Parmenides

Thomas Taylor introduces the subject of dialectic with the following observations:

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* [1,4,101b] 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.¹ It also terminates the wandering of the soul about sensibles;² and explores everything 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,³ 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.⁴

"But there are three energies," says Proclus in his *Commentary on the Parmenides* [I, 653]⁵ "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 beholding 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.

¹ In Platonic writings, the term "real being" is full of meaning: it refers to that which truly *is* and not in a state of coming-to-be; as such it is immutable, eternal, and truly knowable.

² i.e. objects which are perceptible to the senses.

³ i.e. It Defines, Divides, Analyses, and Demonstrates.

⁴ In the Platonic vision of reality, everything arises from a single principle: the whole of reality is unfolded stage by stage from this supreme and inexpressible One in a great procession and again returns to it because it is the ultimate object of desire to all things – as the primary source it is known as the One, and the final goal it is known as the Good.

⁵ The numbers within square brackets refer to the pagination in the text of *Commentary* translated by Morrow and Dillon, Princeton UP.

But the second energy takes place when intellect rests from its former investigations, as becoming most familiar with the contemplation of beings, and beholds truth itself firmly established on a pure and holy foundation. This energy, according to Socrates, by a progression through ideas, unfolds the whole of an intelligible nature, till it arrives at that which is first; and this by analyzing,⁶ defining, demonstrating, and dividing, proceeding upwards and downwards, till having entirely investigated the nature of intelligibles,⁷ it raises itself to a nature superior to beings.⁸ 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 *Phaedrus*⁹ and *Sophista*, is the employment of this energy, giving a twofold division to some, and [I.654] 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,¹⁰ when its reasons are employed upon people, full of opinion; and this is spoken of in the *Sophist*.¹¹

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Taylor continues: For the sake of the truly philosophic reader who may not have my translation of Plato in his possession, the following additional observations on that master science, dialectic, are extracted from the 3rd volume of that translation, and principally from the notes on the *Parmenides* [ITS Vol. XI p. 27f. – 173 ff – extracts from Proclus' Comm. Parmenides, 1001 – 1017].

The method of reasoning employed by the dialectic of Plato, was invented by the Eleatic Zeno the disciple of Parmenides, and is as follows:

[V.1001] Two hypotheses being laid down, viz. *if a thing is*, and *if it is not*, each of these may be tripled, by considering in each *what happens, what does not happen, what*

⁶ To *analyze* is to find the simplicity of an object: in the material world this breaks things down into component parts, but in the intelligible world this is to find its unifying principle.

⁷ Those eternal realities which are perceived by intellect.

⁸ Because as profound as real being is, in Platonic metaphysics above real being is the inexpressible First Principle which is superior to being, and, indeed is that which gives being to the universe.

⁹ 254b

¹⁰ i.e. When a person is ignorant that he is ignorant; and this is the disease of the multitude. See Plato's *First Alcibiades*, 132c, ff.

¹¹ At 231a.

happens and at the same time does not happen; so that six cases will be the result. But since, if a thing is, we may consider (1) itself either with respect to itself, or

(2) itself with respect to others; or

(3) we may consider others themselves with respect to themselves, or

(4) others with respect to that thing itself,

and so likewise if a thing is not: hence the whole of this process will consist of eight triads, which are the following:

1. [V.1002] If a thing is, what happens to itself with respect to itself, what does not happen, what happens and at the same time does not happen.

2. If a thing is, what happens to itself with respect to others, what does not happen, what happens and at the same time does not happen.

3. If a thing is, what happens to others with respect to themselves, what does not happen, what happens and at the same time does not happen, and

4. If a thing is, what happens to others with respect to that thing, what does not happen, what happens and at the same time does not happen.

And the other four, which are founded on the hypothesis that a thing is not, are to be distributed in exactly the same manner as those we have just enumerated. Such is the whole form of the dialectic method, which is both intellectual and scientific; and under which those four powers the definitive and divisive, the demonstrative and analytic, receive their consummate perfection.

The *Parmenides* of Plato gives a specimen of this method logically and synoptically,¹² comprehending in eight the above-mentioned four and twenty modes. Plato also adds, that the end of this exercise is the perception of truth. "We must not, therefore," says Proclus, "consider him as simply speaking of scientific truth, but of that which is intelligible, or which, in other words, subsists according to a super-essential characteristic."¹³ For the whole of our life is an exercise to the vision of this; and the wandering through dialectic hastens to that as its port. Hence Plato in a wonderful manner uses the word *διωψεσθαι*, *to look through*: for souls obtain the vision of intelligibles through many media."

¹² i.e. Forming a synopsis.

¹³ To speak scientifically is, for the writers of the Platonic tradition, to speak of the truth which emerges when the mind stand apart and looks towards ideas; but beyond this state of knowledge is a more intimate understanding when knower and known are united – and here the characteristics which transcend even real being (i.e. the super-essential) become present.