

INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHY AND WRITINGS OF PLATO

By

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"Philosophy," says Hierocles, "is the purification and perfection of human life. It is the purification, indeed, from material irrationality, and the mortal body; but the perfection, in consequence of being the resumption of our proper felicity, and a reascent to the divine likeness. To effect these two is the province of Virtue and Truth; the former exterminating the immoderation of the passions; and the latter introducing the divine form to those who are naturally adapted to its reception."

Of philosophy thus defined, which may be compared to a luminous pyramid, terminating in Deity, and having for its basis the rational soul of man and its spontaneous unperverted conceptions,--of this philosophy, August, magnificent, and divine, Plato may be justly called the primary leader and hierophant, through whom, like the mystic light in the inmost recesses of some sacred temple, it first shone forth with occult and venerable splendour.[1] It may indeed be truly said of the whole of this philosophy, that it is the greatest good which man can participate: for if it purifies us from the defilements of the passions and assimilates us to Divinity, it confers on us the proper felicity of our

nature. Hence it
is easy to collect its pre-eminence to all other
philosophies; to show
that where they oppose it, they are erroneous; that so
far as they
contain any thing scientific they are allied to it; and
that at best they
are but rivulets derived from this vast ocean of truth.

[1] In the mysteries a light of this kind shone forth
from the adytum of
the temple in which they were exhibited.

To evince that the philosophy of Plato possesses this
preeminence; that
its dignity and sublimity are unrivaled; that it is the
parent of all
that ennobles man; and, that it is founded on
principles, which neither
time can obliterate, nor sophistry subvert, is the
principal design of
this Introduction.

To effect this design, I shall in the first place
present the reader with
the outlines of the principal dogmas of Plato's
philosophy. The undertaking
is indeed no less novel than arduous, since the author
of it has to tread
in paths which have been untrodden for upwards of a
thousand years, and
to bring to light truths which for that extended period
have been
concealed in Greek. Let not the reader, therefore, be
surprised at the
solitariness of the paths through which I shall attempt
to conduct him,
or at the novelty of the objects which will present
themselves in the
journey: for perhaps he may fortunately recollect that
he has traveled
the same road before, that the scenes were once familiar
to him, and that

the country through which he is passing is his native land. At, least, if his sight should be dim, and his memory oblivious, (for the objects which he will meet with can only be seen by the most piercing eyes,) and his absence from them has been lamentably long, let him implore the power of wisdom,

From mortal mists to purify his eyes,
That God and man he may distinctly see.

Let us also, imploring the assistance of the same illuminating power, begin the solitary journey.

Of all the dogmas of Plato, that concerning the first principle of things as far transcends in sublimity the doctrine of other philosophers of a different sect, on this subject, as this supreme cause of all transcends other causes. For, according to Plato, the highest God, whom in the Republic he calls the good, and in the Parmenides the one, is not only above soul and intellect, but is even superior to being itself. Hence, since every thing which can in any respect be known, or of which any thing can be asserted, must be connected with the universality of things, but the first cause is above all things, it is very properly said by Plato to be perfectly ineffable. The first hypothesis therefore of his, Parmenides, in which all things are denied of this immense principle, concludes as follows: "The one therefore is in no respect. So it seems. Hence it is not in such a manner as to be one, for thus it would be being, and participate of essence; but as it appears, the one neither is

one, nor is, if it be proper to believe in reasoning of this kind. It appears so. But can any thing either belong to, or be affirmed of that, which is not? How can it? Neither therefore does any name belong to it, nor discourse, nor any science, nor sense, nor opinion. It does not appear that there can. Hence it can neither be named, nor spoken of, nor conceived by opinion, nor be known, nor perceived by any being. So it seems." And here it must be observed that this conclusion respecting the highest principle of things, that he is perfectly ineffable and inconceivable, is the result of a most scientific series of negations, in which not only all sensible and intellectual beings are denied of him, but even natures the most transcendently allied to him, his first and most divine progeny. For that which so eminently distinguishes the philosophy of Plato from others is this, that every part of it is stamped with the character of science. The vulgar indeed proclaim the Deity to be ineffable; but as they have no scientific knowledge that he is so, this is nothing more than a confused and indistinct perception of the most sublime of all truths, like that of a thing seen between sleeping and waking, like Phaeacia to Ulysses when sailing to his native land,

That lay before him indistinct and vast,
Like a broad shield amid the watr'y waste.

In short, an unscientific perception of the ineffable nature of the Divinity resembles that of a man, who on surveying the heavens, should assert of the altitude of its highest part, that it

surpasses that of
the loftiest tree, and is therefore immeasurable. But to
see this
scientifically, is like a survey of this highest part of
the heavens by
the astronomer; for he by knowing the height of the
media between us and
it, knows also scientifically that it transcends in
altitude not only the
loftiest tree; but the summits of air and aether, the
moon, and even the
sun itself.

Let us therefore investigate what is the ascent to the
ineffably, and
after what manner it is accomplished, according to
Plato, from the last
of things, following the profound and most inquisitive
Damascius as our
leader in this arduous investigation. Let our discourse
also be common
to other principles, and to things proceeding from them
to that which is
last, and let us, beginning from that which is perfectly
effable and
known to sense, ascend too the ineffable, and establish
in silence, as in
a port, the parturitions of truth concerning it. Let us
then assume the
following axiom, in which as in a secure vehicle we may
safely pass from
hence thither. I say, therefore, that the unindigent is
naturally prior
to the indigent. For that which is in want of another is
naturally
adapted from necessity to be subservient to that of
which it is indigent.
But if they are mutually in want of each other, each
being indigent of
the other in a different respect, neither of them will
be the principle.
For the unindigent is most adapted to that which is
truly the principle.
And if it is in want of any thing, according to this it
will not be the

principle. It is however necessary that the principles should be this very thing, the principle alone. The undigent therefore pertains to this, nor must it by any means be acknowledged that there is any thing prior to it. This however, would be acknowledged if it had any connection with the indigent.

Let us then consider body, (that is, a triply extended substance,) endued with quality; for this is the first thing effable by us, and is, sensible. Is this then the principle of things? But it is two things, body, and quality which is in body as a subject. Which of these therefore is by nature prior? For both are indigent of their proper parts; and that also which is in a subject is indigent of the subject. Shall we say then that body itself is the principle of the first essence? But this is impossible. For, in the first place, the principle will not receive any thing from that which is posterior to itself. But body, we say is the recipient of quality. Hence quality, and a subsistence in conjunction with it, are not derived from body, since quality is present with body as something different. And, in the second place, body is every way, divisible; its several parts are indigent of each other, and the whole is indigent of all the parts. As it is indigent, therefore, and receives its completion from things which are indigent, it will not be entirely undigent.

Further still, if it is not one but united, it will require, as Plato says, the connecting one. It is likewise something common and formless, being as it were a certain matter. It requires,

therefore, ornament and
the possession of form, that it may not be merely body,
but a body with a
certain particular quality; as for instance, a fiery, or
earthly, body,
and, in short, body adorned and invested with a
particular quality. Hence
the things which accede to it, finish and adorn it. Is
then that which
accedes the principle? But this is impossible. For it
does not abide in
itself, nor does it subsist alone, but is in a subject
of which also it
is indigent. If, however, some one should assert that
body is not a
subject, but one of the elements in each, as for
instance, animal in
horses and man, thus also each will be indigent of the
other, viz. this
subject, and that which is in the subject; or rather the
common element,
animal, and the peculiarities, as the rational and
irrational, will be
indigent. For elements are always, indigent of each
other, and that which
is composed from elements is indigent of the elements.
In short, this
sensible nature, and which is so manifest to us, is
neither body, for
this does not of itself move the senses, nor quality;
for this does not
possess an interval commensurate with sense. Hence, that
which is the
object of sight, is neither body nor color; but colored
body, or color
corporalized, is that which is motive of the sight. And
universally, that
which is sensible, which is body with a particular
quality, is motive of
sense. From hence it is evident that the thing which
excites the sense is
something incorporeal. For if it was body, it would not
yet be the object
of sense. Body therefore requires that which is
incorporeal, and that

which is incorporeal, body. For an incorporeal nature, is not of itself sensible. It is, however, different from body, because these two possess prerogatives different from each other, and neither of these subsists prior to the other; but being elements of one sensible thing, they are present with each other; the one imparting interval to that which is void of interval, but the other introducing to that which is formless, sensible variety invested with form. In the third place, neither are both these together the principles; since they are not unindigent. For they stand in need of their proper elements, and of that which conducts them to the generation of one form. For body cannot effect this, since it is of itself impotent; nor quality, since it is not able to subsist separate from the body in which it is, or together with which it has its being. The composite therefore either produces itself, which is impossible, for it does not converge to itself, but the whole of it is multifariously dispersed, or it is not produced by itself, and there is some other principle prior to it.

Let it then be supposed to be that which is called nature, being a principle of motion and rest, in that which is moved and at rest, essentially and not according to accident. For this is something more simple, and is fabricative of composite forms. If, however, it is in the things fabricated, and does not subsist separate from nor prior to them, but stands in need of them for its being, it will not be unindigent; though it possesses something transcendent with respect

to them, viz.
the power of fashioning and fabricating them. For it has
its being
together with them, and has in them an inseparable
subsistence; so
that, when they are it is, and is not when they are not,
and this in
consequence of perfectly verging to them, and not being
able to sustain
that which is appropriate. For the power of increasing,
nourishing, and
generating similars, and the one prior to these three,
viz. nature, is
not wholly incorporeal, but is nearly a certain quality
of body, from
which it alone differs, in that it imparts to the
composite to be
inwardly moved and at rest. For the quality of that
which is sensible
imparts that which is apparent in matter, and that which
falls on sense.
But body imparts interval every way extended; and
nature, an inwardly
proceeding natural energy, whether according to place
only, or according
to nourishing, increasing, and generating things
similar. Nature,
however, is inseparable from a subject, and is indigent,
so that it will
not be in short the principle, since it is indigent of
that which is
subordinate. For it will not be wonderful, if being a
certain principle,
it is indigent of the principle above it; but it would
be wonderful if it
were indigent of things posterior to itself, and of
which it is supposed
to be the principle.

By the like arguments we may show that the principle
cannot be irrational
soul, whether sensitive, or orectic. For if it appears
that it has
something separate, together with impulsive and Gnostic
enemies, yet at

the same time it is bound in body, and has something inseparable from it; since it is notable to convert itself to itself, but its enemy is mingled with its subject. For it is evident that its essence is something of this kind; since if it were liberated and in itself free, it would also evince a certain independent enemy, and would not always be converted to body; but sometimes it would be converted to itself; or though it were always converted to body, yet it would judge and explore itself. The energies, therefore, of the multitude of mankind, (though they are conversant with externals,) yet, at the same time they exhibit that which is separate about them. For they consult how they should engage in them, and observe that deliberation is necessary, in order to effect or be passive to apparent good, or to decline something of the contrary. But the impulses of other animals are uniform and spontaneous, are moved together with the sensible organs, and require the senses alone that they may obtain from sensibles the pleasurable, and avoid the painful. If, therefore, the body communicates in pleasure and pain, and is affected in a certain respect by them, it is evident that the psychical energies, (i.e. energies belonging to the soul) are exerted, mingled with bodies, and are not purely psychical, but are also corporeal; for perception is of the animated body, or of the soul corporalized, though in such perception the psychical idiom predominates over the corporeal; just as in bodies, the corporeal idiom has dominion according to interval and subsistence. As the irrational soul, therefore, has its being in

something different from
itself, so far it is indigent of the subordinate: but a
thing of this
kind will not be the principle.

Prior them to this essence, we see a certain form
separate from a
subject, and converted to itself, such as is the
rational nature. Our
soul, therefore, presides over its proper energies and
corrects itself.
This, however, would not be the case, unless it was
converted to itself;
and it would not be converted, to itself unless it had a
separate
essence. It is not therefore indigent of the
subordinate. Shall we then
say that it is the most perfect principle? But, it does
not at once exert
all its energies, but is always indigent of the greater
part. The
principle, however, wishes to have nothing indigent: but
the rational
nature is an essence in want of its own energies. Some
one, however, may
say that it is an eternal essence, and has never-failing
essential
energies, always concurring with its essence, according
to the self-moved
and ever vital, and that it is therefore unindigent; but
the principle is
perfectly unindigent. Soul therefore, and which exerts
mutable energies,
will not be the most proper principle. Hence it is
necessary that there
should be something prior to this, which is in every
respect immutable,
according to nature, life, and knowledge, and according
to all powers and
energies, such as we assert an eternal and immutable
essence to be, and
such as is much honoured intellect, to which Aristotle
having ascended,
thought he had discovered the first principle. For what
can be wanting to

that which perfectly comprehends in itself its own plenitudes (pleromata), and of which neither addition nor ablation changes any thing belonging to it? Or is not this also, one and many, whole and parts, containing in itself, things first, middle, and last? The subordinate plenitudes also stand in need of the more excellent, and the more excellent of the subordinate, and the whole of the parts. For the things related are indigent of each other, and what are first of what are last, through the same cause; for it is not of itself that which is first. Besides, the one here is indigent of the many, because it has its subsistence in the many. Or it may be said, that this one is collective of the many, and this not by itself, but in conjunction with them. Hence there is much of the indigent in this principle. For since intellect generates in itself its proper plenitudes from which the whole at once receives its completion, it will be itself indigent of itself, not only that which is generated of that which generates, but also that which generates, of that which is generated, in order to the whole completion of that which wholly generates itself. Further still, intellect understands and is understood, is intellective of and intelligible to itself, and both these. Hence the intellectual is indigent of the intelligible, as of its proper object of desire; and the intelligible is in want of the intellectual, because it wishes to be the intelligible of it. Both also are indigent of either, since the possession is always accompanied with indigence, in the same manner as the world is always present with matter. Hence

a certain
indigence is naturally coessentialized with intellect,
so that it cannot
be the most proper principle. Shall we, therefore, in
the next place,
direct our attention to the most simple of beings, which
Plato calls the
one being, [Greek: en on]? For as there is no separation
there throughout
the Whole, nor any multitude, or order, or duplicity, or
conversion to
itself, what indigence will there appear to me, in the
perfectly united?
And especially what indigence will there be of that
which is subordinate?
Hence the great Parmenides ascended to this most safe
principle, as that
which is most unindigent. Is it not, however, here
necessary to attend to
the conception of Plato, that the united is not the one
itself, but that
which is passive[2] to it? And this being the case, it
is evident that it
ranks after the one; for it is supposed to be the united
and not the one
itself. If also being is composed from the elements
bound and infinity,
as appears from the Philebus of Plato, where he calls it
that which is
mixt, it will be indigent of its elements. Besides, if
the conception of
being is different from that of being united, and that
which is a whole
is both united and being, these will be indigent of each
other, and the
whole which is called one being is indigent of the two.
And though the
one in this is better than being, yet this is indigent
of being, in order
to the subsistence of one being. But if being here
supervenes the one, as
it were, form in that which is mixt and united, just as
the idiom of man
in that which is collectively rational-mortal-animal,
thus also the one

will be indigent of being. If, however, to speak more properly, the one is two-fold; this being the cause of the mixture, and subsisting prior to being, but that conferring rectitude, on being,--if this be the case, neither will the indigent perfectly desert this nature. After all these, it may be said that the one will be perfectly unindigent. For neither is it indigent of that which is posterior to itself for its subsistence, since the truly one is by itself separated from all things; nor is it indigent of that which is inferior or more excellent in itself; for there is nothing in it besides itself; nor is it in want of itself. But it is one, because neither has it any duplicity with respect to itself. For not even the relation of itself to itself must be asserted of the truly one; since it is perfectly simple. This, therefore, is the most unindigent of all things. Hence this is the principle and the cause of all; and this is at once the first of all things. If these qualities, however, are present with it, it will not be the one. Or may we not say that all things subsist in the one according to the one? And that both these subsist in it, and such other things as we predicate of it, as, for instance, the most simple, the most excellent, the most powerful, the preserver of all things, and the good itself? If these things, however, are thus true of the one, it will thus also be indigent of things posterior to itself, according to those very things which we add to it. For the principle is, and is said to be the principle of things proceeding from it, and the cause is the cause of things caused, and the first is

the first of things
arranged, posterior to it.[3]

[2] See the Sophista of Plato, where this is asserted.

[3] For a thing cannot be said to be a principle or
cause without the
subsistence of the things of which it is the principle
or cause. Hence,
so far as it is a principle or cause, it will be
indigent of the
subsistence of these.

Further still, the simple subsists according to a
transcendency of other
things, the most powerful according to power with
relation to the subjects
of it; and the good, the desirable, and the preserving,
are so called with
reference to things benefitted, preserved, and desiring.
And if it should
be said to be all things according to the preassumption
of all things in
itself, it will indeed be said to be so according to the
one alone, and
will at the same time be the one cause of all things
prior to all, and will
be thus, and no other according to the one. So far,
therefore, as it is the
one alone, it will be unindigent; but so far as
unindigent, it will be the
first principle, and stable root of all principles. So
far, however, as it
is the principle and the first cause of all things, and
is pre-established
as the object of desire to all things, so far it appears
to be in a certain
respect indigent of the things to which it is related.
It has therefore, if
it be lawful so to speak, an ultimate vestige of
indigence, just as on the
contrary matter has an ultimate echo of the unindigent,
or a most obscure

and debile impression of the one. And language indeed appears to be here subverted. For so far as it is the one, it is also unindigent, since the principle has appeared to subsist according to the most unindigent and the one. At the same time, however, so far as it is the one, it is also the principle; and so far as it is the one it is unindigent, but so far as the principle, indigent. Hence so far as it is unindigent, it is also indigent, though not according to the same; but with respect to being that which it is, it is undigent; but as producing and comprehending other things in itself, it is indigent. This, however, is the peculiarity of the one; so that it is both unindigent and indigent according to the one. Not indeed than it is each of these, in such a manner as we divide it in speaking of it, but it is one alone; and according to this is both other things, and that which is indigent. For how is it possible, it should not be indigent also so far as it is the one? Just as it is all other things which proceed from it. For the indigent also is, something belonging to all things. Something else, therefore, must be investigated which in no respect has any kind of indigence. But of a thing of this kind it cannot with truth be asserted that it is the principle, nor can it even be said of it that it is most unindigent, though this appears to be the most venerable of all assertions.[4]

[4] See the extracts from Damascius in the additional notes to the third volume, which contain an inestimable treasury of the most profound

conceptions concerning the ineffable.

For this signifies transcendency, and an exemption from the indigent. We do not, however, think it proper to call this even the perfectly exempt; but that which is in every respect incapable of being apprehended, and about which we must be perfectly silent, will be the most, just axiom of our conception in the present investigation; nor yet this as uttering any thing, but as rejoicing in not uttering, and by this venerating that immense unknown. This then is the mode of ascent to that which is called the first, or rather to that which is beyond every thing which can be conceived, or become the subject of hypothesis.

There is also another mode, which does not place the unindigent before the indigent, but considers that which is indigent of a more excellent nature, as subsisting secondary to that which is more excellent. Every where then, that which is in capacity is secondary to that which is in energy. For that it may proceed into energy, and that it may not remain in capacity in vain, it requires that which is in energy. For the more excellent never blossoms from the subordinate nature. Let this then be defined by us according to common unperverted conceptions. Matter therefore has prior to itself material form; because all matter is form in capacity, whether it be the first matter which is perfectly formless, or the second which subsists according to body void of quality, or in other words mere triple extension, to which it is likely those directed

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