

The Commentaries of Proclus on the First
Book of Euclid's Elements of Geometry
Translated by Thomas Taylor
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Book I, Chapter 7

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CHAP. VII.

What the Employments and Powers are of the Mathematical Science, and how far they extend themselves in their Energies.

BUT, after contemplating the essence of mathematical forms, it is necessary we should recur to that one master-science of these, which we have shewn is prior to multitude of others, and that we should contemplate what its employment is, what are its powers, and how far it advances its energies. The employment, therefore, of the whole mathematical science, possessing, as we have before said, the power of cogitation, must not be placed so high as that of intelligence; which is firmly seated in its own stable essence, is perfect, is contained by itself, and in itself continually verges. Nor must it be situated so low as that of opinion and sense, since these cognitions dwell upon external concerns, energize upon them, and do not possess the causes of the objects of their knowledge. But the mathematical science, receives its commencement, indeed, extrinsically from¹² recollection, but ends in the

¹²Plato frequently, in both the Meno and elsewhere, shews that science is Reminiscence; and I think not without the strongest reason. For since the soul is immaterial, as we have demonstrated in the dissertation to this work, she must be truly immortal, i. e., both *a parte ante* & *a parte post*. That she must be eternal, indeed, with respect to futurity, if immaterial, is admitted by all; and we may prove, with Aristotle, in his first book de Cælo, that she is immortal, likewise *a parte ante*, as follows. Every thing without generation, is incorruptible, and every thing incorruptible, is without generation: for that which is without generation, has a necessity of existing infinitely *a parte ante* (from the hypothesis); and therefore, if it possesses a capacity of being destroyed, since there is no greater reason why it should be corrupted now, rather than in some former period, it is endued with a capacity of being destroyed and ceasing to be, in every instant of infinite time, in which is necessarily is. In like manner, that which is incorruptible, has a necessity of existing infinitely *a parte post*; therefore, if it possesses a capacity of being generated, since there is no greater reason why it should be generated now rather than afterwards, it possess a capacity of being generated, in every instant of time, in which it necessarily is. If then the soul is essentially immortal, with respect to the past and future circulations of time: and if she is replete with forms or ideas of every kind, as we have proved in the dissertation, she must, from her circulating nature, have been for ever conversant in alternately possessing and losing the knowledge of these. Now, the recovery of this knowledge by science, is called by Plato, reminiscence; and it is nothing more than a renewed contemplation of those divine forms, so familiar to the soul, before she became involved in the dark vestment of an earthly body. So that we may say, with the elegant Maximum Tyrus (Disser. 28.) “Reminiscence is similar to that which happens

most intimate reasons, residing in the depths of the soul; and is excited, indeed, from things posterior, but arrives by gradual advances at the principal essence of forms. Nor is its energy immoveable, like that of intelligence, nor is it affected with local motion and alteration, like sense, but it revolves with a vital energy, and runs through the ornament of incorporeal reasons, sometimes advancing from principles to such things as are perfected by principles, but at other times yielding in a retrograde progression from conclusions to their forming principles; and sometimes proceeding from things previously known, to such as are the subject of investigation: but at other times, from things placed in the question, to such as precede in cognition. Besides, it does not excel all inquisition, as if it were perfect from itself, like intellect, nor is it perfected from others, like sense, but it proceeds by enquiry to invention, and ascends from the imperfect to perfection. But it likewise possesses twofold powers, one kind of these deducing principles into multitude, and generating the different paths of contemplation: but the other endued with a power of collecting many transitions into proper suppositions. For since it proposes to itself as principles, as well unity, and multitude, as bound and infinite, and such things as are subject to its comprehension, are allotted a middle order, between forms indivisible and every way divisible; with great propriety (I think) the gnostic powers of the whole science of these are essentially two-fold. One species indeed, hastens to union, and contracts the expansion of multitude: but the other possesses a power of distinguishing things simple into such as are various, more universals into more particulars, and

to the corporeal eye, which, though always endued with a power of vision, yet darkness sometimes obstructs its passage, and averts it from the perception of things. Art therefore, approaches, which though it does not give to the eye the power of vision, yet removes its impediments, and affords a free egress to its rays. Conceive now, that our rational soul is such a power of perceiving, which sees and knows the nature of beings. To this the common calamity of bodies happens, that darkness spreading round it, hurries away to its aspect, blunts its sharpness, and extinguishes its proper light. Afterwards, the art of reason approaches, which, like a physician, does not bring or afford it a new science, but rouses that which it possesses, though very slender, confused, and unsteady." Hence, since the soul, by her immersion in body, is in a dormant state, until she is roused by science to an exertion of her latent energies; and yet even previous to this awakening, since she contains the vivid sparks, as it were, of all knowledge, which only require to be ventilated by the winds of learning, in order to rekindle the light of ideas, she may be said in this case to know all things as in a dream, and to be ignorant of them with respect to vigilant perceptions. Hence too, we may infer that time does not antecede our essential knowledge of forms, because we possess it from eternity: but it precedes our knowledge with respect to a production of these reasons into perfect energy. I only add, that I would recommend the liberal English reader, to Mr. Sydenham's excellent translation of Plato's *Meno*, where he will find a familiar and elegant demonstration of the doctrine of Reminiscence.

reasons digested in their principle, into things secondary and multifariously multiplied from their principles. For rising higher from its commencement it penetrates even to such things as are the perfections of sensible concerns, is joined with nature, and demonstrates many things together with natural science. Since ascending from inferiors, it accedes in a certain respect proximate to intellectual knowledge, and touches the contemplation of things primary and divine. And hence, in the limits which flow from its essence, it produces the whole mechanic, optic, and catoptric speculation, together with many other sciences which are inwoven and entangled with sensible concerns, and which operate through their assistance. Besides, in its ascensions from corporeal natures, it derives intelligences indivisible and destitute of matter: and with these it perfects its divisible apprehensions, those cognitions which subsist in progressions, and its own genera and forms: it likewise indicates the truth respecting the gods themselves, and in its peculiar treatises exhibits a contemplation of the things which *are*. And thus much concerning the employment and powers of the Mathematical Science.