

The Commentaries of Proclus on the First
Book of Euclid's Elements of Geometry
Translated by Thomas Taylor
(London, 1792)
Book I, Chapter 15

Transcribed by David R. Wilkins

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CHAP. XV.

From Whence the Name Mathematics originated.

AGAIN, from whence shall we say this name of mathematics, and mathematical disciplines, was assigned by the ancients, and what apt reason can we render of its position? Indeed, it appears to me, that such an appellation of a science which respects cogitative reasons, was not, like most names, invented by indifferent persons, but (as the truth of the case is, and according to report) by the Pythagoreans alone. And this, when they perceived, that whatever is called mathesis or discipline, is nothing more than reminiscence; which does not approach the soul extrinsically, like the images which rising from sensible objects are formed in the phantasy: nor is adventitious and foreign, like the knowledge consisting in opinion, but it is excited, indeed, from apparent objects, and is perfected within, by thought intimately converted to itself. And when they likewise perceived that though reminiscence might be shewn from many particulars, yet it was evinced in a more eminent manner (as Plato also says²⁷) from the mathematical disciplines. For if any one, says he, is led into the descriptions, he will there easily prove that discipline is reminiscence. From whence Socrates also, in the *Meno*, shews by this method of arguing, that learning is nothing else than the soul's recollection of her inherent reasons. And thus, because that which recollects, is alone the cogitative part of the soul; but this perfects her essence in the reasons of the mathematical disciplines, the sciences of which she previously received into herself, though she does not always energize on their fair variety. Indeed, she contains them all essentially and occultly; but she produces each of them when she is freed from the impediments originating from sense. For sense unites her with divisible objects: the phantasy fills her with forming motions, and appetite bends her to an indulgent and luxurious life. But every thing divisible is an obstacle to our self-conversion. And whatever invests with form, disturbs and offends that knowledge which is destitute of form. And whatever is obnoxious to perturbations is an impediment to that energy which is unimpaired by affections. When, therefore, we have removed all these from the cogitative power, then shall we be able to understand by thought itself, the reasons which thought contains: then shall we become scientific in energy; and unfold our essential knowledge. But whilst we are captive and

²⁷In the *Meno*.

bound, and winking with the eye of the soul, we cannot by any means attain to a perfection convenient to our nature. Such then is mathesis or discipline: a reminiscence of the eternal reasons contained in the soul. And the mathematical or disciplinative science, is on this account particularly denominated that knowledge which especially confers to our reminiscence of these essential reasons. Hence, the business and office of this science²⁸, is apparent from its name. For its duty is to move the inherent knowledge of the soul; to awaken its intelligence; to purify its cogitation; to call forth its essential forms from their dormant retreats; to remove that oblivion and ignorance, which are congenial with our birth; and to dissolve the bonds arising from our union with an irrational nature. It plainly leads us to a similitude of that divinity who presides over this science, who manifests intellectual gifts, and fills the universe with divine reasons; who elevates souls to intellect, wakens them as from a profound sleep, converts them by enquiry to themselves; and by a certain obstetric art, and invention of pure intellect, brings them to a blessed life. To whom indeed, dedicating the present work, we here conclude our contemplation of the mathematical science.

²⁸This is certainly the true or philosophical employment of the mathematical science; for by this means we shall be enabled to ascend from sense to intellect, and rekindle in the soul that divine light of truth, which, previous to such an energy, was buried in the obscurity of a corporeal nature. But by a contrary process, I mean, by applying mathematical speculations, to experimental purposes, we shall blind the liberal eye of the soul, and leave nothing in its stead but the darkness of corporeal vision, and the phantoms of a degraded imagination.