

Plato: In Praise of Dialectic

From *Republic*, Book VII

SOCRATES: Education is not what some people boastfully declare it to be. They presumably say they can put knowledge into souls that lack it, as if they could put sight into blind eyes... [Rather,] the power to learn that is present in everyone's soul... Just as an eye cannot be turned around from darkness to light except by turning the whole body, so the instrument of knowledge cannot be turned around from what comes into being without turning the whole soul, until it can look at what is and at the brightest thing that is—the one we call the Good. Isn't that right?

GLAUCON: Yes.

SOCRATES: Of this very thing, then, there would be a craft—namely, of this turning around—concerned with how this instrument can be most easily and effectively turned around, not of putting sight into it. On the contrary, it takes for granted that sight is there, though not turned in the right way or looking where it should look, and contrives to redirect it appropriately... It is our task..., then, to compel the best natures to learn what was said before to be the most important thing: namely, to see the Good; to ascend that ascent....

[A proper education, Socrates continues, will include various subjects such as geometry and astronomy. But then he adds:]

Don't you know that all these subjects are merely preludes to the song itself that must also be learned? I mean, you surely do not think that people who are clever in these matters are dialecticians.

GLAUCON: No, by Zeus, I do not. Although, I have met a few exceptions.

SOCRATES: But did it ever seem to you that those who can neither give an account nor approve one know what any of the things are that we say they must know?

GLAUCON: Again, the answer is no.

SOCRATES: Then isn't this at last, Glaucon, the song that *dialectic* sings? It itself is intelligible. But the power of sight imitates it. We said that sight tries at last to look at the animals themselves, the stars themselves, and, in the end, at the sun itself. In the same way, whenever someone tries, by means of dialectical discussion and without the aid of any sense-perceptions, to arrive through reason at the being of each thing itself, and does not give up until he grasps what Good itself is with understanding itself, he reaches the end of the intelligible realm, just as the other reached the end of the visible one.

GLAUCON: Absolutely.

SOCRATES: Well, then, don't you call this journey dialectic?

GLAUCON: I do.

SOCRATES: Then the release from bonds and the turning around from shadows to statues and the light; and then the ascent out of the cave to the sun; and there the continuing inability to look directly at the animals, the plants, and the light of the sun, but instead at divine reflections in water and shadows of the things that are, and not, as before, merely at shadows of statues thrown by another source of light that, when judged in relation to the sun, is as shadowy as they—all this practice of the crafts we mentioned has the power to lead the best part of the soul upward until it sees the best among the things that are, just as before the clearest thing in the body was led to the brightest thing in the bodily and visible world...At the very least, no one will dispute our claim by arguing that there is another road of inquiry that tries to acquire a systematic and wholly general grasp of what each thing itself is. By contrast, all the other crafts are concerned with human beliefs and appetites, with growing or construction, or with the care of growing or constructed things. As for the rest, we described them as to some extent grasping what is—I mean, geometry and the subjects that follow it. For we saw that while they do dream about what is, they cannot see it while wide awake as long as they make use of hypotheses that they leave undisturbed, and for which they cannot give any argument. After all, when the first principle is unknown, and the conclusion and the steps in between are put together out of what is unknown, what mechanism could possibly turn any agreement reached in such cases into knowledge?

GLAUCON: None.

SOCRATES: Therefore, *dialectic* is the only investigation that, doing away with hypotheses, journeys to the first principle itself in order to be made secure. And when the eye of the soul is really buried in a sort of barbaric bog, dialectic gently pulls it out and leads it upward, using the crafts we described to help it and cooperate with it in turning the soul around...

SOCRATES: So don't you, too, call someone a dialectician when he is able to grasp an account of the being of each thing? And when he cannot do so, won't you, too, say that to the extent that he cannot give an account of something either to himself or to another, to that extent he does not understand it?

GLAUCON: How could I not?

SOCRATES: Then the same applies to the Good. Unless someone can give an account of the Form of the Good, distinguishing it from everything else, and can survive all examination as if in a battle, striving to examine things not in accordance with belief, but in accordance with being; and can journey through all that with his account still intact, you will say that he does not know the Good itself or any other good whatsoever. And if he does manage to grasp some image of it, you will say that it is through belief, not knowledge, that he grasps it; that he is dreaming and asleep throughout his present life; and that, before he wakes up here, he will arrive in Hades and go to sleep forever.

GLAUCON: Yes, by Zeus, I will certainly say all that.

SOCRATES: Then as for those children of yours, the ones you are rearing and educating in your discussion, if you ever reared them in fact... Won't you prescribe...that they are to give the most attention to the education that will enable them to ask and answer questions most knowledgeably?

GLAUCON: I will prescribe it—together with you.

SOCRATES: Doesn't it seem to you, then, that *dialectic* is just like a capstone we have placed on top of the subjects, and that no other subject can rightly be placed above it, but that our account of the subjects has now come to an end?

GLAUCON: It does.