

Albinus

Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato

Translated by George Burges in *The Works of Plato: a new and literal version* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1865), volume VI, pp. 315-322. The translator's notes have been omitted and there are some changes to the text to facilitate easier reading. This document is in the public domain.

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1. That for a person about to enter upon the Dialogues of Plato, it is fitting that he should know previously what a Dialogue is. For neither without some art and power have dialogues been written, nor is it easy for a person, unskilled in contemplation, to know them artistically. It is agreeable then for a philosopher, who is making for himself an insight into every matter of whatever kind, to examine, (first,) the essence of the thing, and afterwards, what power it has, and not with reference to what is naturally useful and what is not. Now (Plato) says thus - "On every matter, boy, there is one commencement to those about to consult properly. It is needful to know, about what is the consultation; or else there must needs be an erring in this matter. Now it lies hid from the majority, that they do not know the essence of each thing; (but), as if they did know, they do not, at the commencement of the inquiry, agree (amongst themselves), but as they proceed, they pay the reasonable (penalty); for they agree neither with themselves nor with others." In order then that we may not suffer this, while entering upon the Dialogues of Plato, let us consider this very thing, which I have spoken of, what is a dialogue. [For neither without some art and power have dialogues been written.] It is then nothing else than a discourse composed of question and answer upon some political or philosophical matter, combined with a becoming delineation of the manners of the characters introduced, and the arrangement as regards their diction.

2. Now a dialogue is called a discourse, as a man (is called) an animal. But since of a discourse there is one kind arranged (in the mind) and another pronounced (by the mouth), let us hear about the one pronounced (by the mouth). And since of the latter there is one kind spoken, as a continued narration, and another by question and answer, questions and answers are the peculiar mark of a dialogue; from whence it is said to be a discourse by interrogation; and moreover it is applied to some political and philosophical matter; because it is meet for the subject matter to be related to the dialogue. Now the matter is that relating to politics and philosophy. For as the matter of fables is laid down as adapted to

tragedy and poetry in general, so is to dialogue philosophy, that is (to say), what relates to philosophy. But as regards that, which is combined with a becoming delineation of the manners of the characters introduced, (and) their being different in their discourses through life, some as philosophers, and others as sophists, it is requisite to assign to each their peculiar manners; to the philosopher that, which is noble, and simple, and truth-loving ; but to the sophist that, which is of many hues, and tricky, and reputation-loving; but to an individual what is peculiar to him. Added to this, (the definition) speaks likewise of the arrangement, as regards their diction; and reasonably so. For as the measure ought to be adapted to tragedy and comedy, and the fiction (of the subject) to the bruited story, so ought the diction and composition, adapted to the dialogue, possess what belongs to the grace of an Attic style, and is neither superfluous nor deficient.

3. But if a so-called discourse, not being made in the form, as I have laid down, but deficient on these points, is said to be a dialogue, it will not be said so correctly. Thus that, which is said in the case of Thucydides to belong to the power to represent the peculiarity of dialogues, but rather two public speeches composed on set purpose against each other. – Since then we have ascertained what is a dialogue, let us look into the different kinds of the Platonic dialogue, that is, into their characteristics, how many are the topmost, and how many of them exist subdivided into the uncut.

4. As regards their characteristics, which are two, one explanatory and the other exploratory, the explanatory is suited to the teaching and practice of truth, but the exploratory to an exercise and conflict, and the confutation of falsehood; and while the explanatory directs its aim to things, the exploratory does so to persons.

5. Of the dialogues of Plato there are drawn out in the class of Physics, the Timaeus; in that of Morals, the Apology; in that of Logic, the Theages, Cratylus, Lysis, Sophist, Laches, (and) Statesman; in that of confutation, the Parmenides (and) Protagoras; in that of statesmanship, the Crito, Phaedo, Minos, Banquet, Laws, Epistles, Epinomis, Menexenus, Cleitophon, (and) Philebus; in the tentative (class are) the Euthyphro, Meno, Ion, (and) Charmides; in the obstetrical, the Alcibiades; and in the Overthrowing, the Hippias, Euthydemus, (and) Gorgias.

6. Since then we have seen their differences, how they exist naturally, and their characteristics, let us state, in addition, from what dialogues persons must begin their entrance upon a discourse of Plato. For opinions are different. For some begin with the Epistles; and some with the Theages. And there are those, who divide the dialogues into tetralogies; and rank as the first tetralogy that, which contains the Euthyphron, Apology, Criton, and Phaedo; the Euthyphro, as in it the charge against Socrates is brought forward; the Apology, since it was necessary for him to defend himself; the Crito, on account of his staying in prison; and afterwards the Phaedo, since in it Socrates meets with the end of life. And of this opinion are Derkyllides and Thrasyllus. But they seem to me to have wished to assign an order to the persons (of the dialogues) and the circumstances of their lives – a matter which is perhaps useful for something else, but not however for that, which we are wishing now; for we wish to discover the commencement and arrangement of instruction that is according to wisdom. We say then that the

commencement of a discourse of Plato is not one and defined; for that, being perfect, it is similar to the perfect figure of a circle. For as the commencement of a circle is not one and defined, so neither is it of a discourse.

7. We will not however on this account enter upon it in any manner soever, nor accidentally. For if it is requisite to describe a circle, a person does not describe it, beginning from any point, but [from that which is nearest at hand;] in whatever state each of us may be with regard to the discourse, beginning from that he will enter upon the dialogues of Plato. For there is a state according to nature, for instance, good or bad; and that according to age, where a person, for instance, is in the season for philosophizing or has passed it; and that, according to a predilection, as, for instance, in favour of philosophy or history; and that, according to a habit, as in being, for example, previously initiated (in instruction), or without instruction, and that, according to the matter, as being engaged, for example, in philosophy, or dragged around by (political) circumstances.

8. He then, who is, according to nature, well born, and according to age is in the season for philosophizing, and according to a predilection, for the sake of exercising himself, is proceeding to reasoning, and he, who, according to a habit, has been previously initiated in instruction, and has been drawn aside from political circumstances, will begin from the Alcibiades to be well-turned by the inclination of intellect, and to know of what thing it is needful to make for himself a care, and, as it were by a beautiful pattern, to see who is the philosopher and what is his pursuit, and upon what suppositions his discourse is carried on. (Such a person) must enter upon the Phaedo next in order; for in it (Plato) states who is the philosopher, and what is his pursuit; and upon the supposition of the soul being immortal he goes through the discourse relating to it. After this it would be requisite to enter upon the Republic. For, commencing with the earliest instruction, he delineates the whole of education, by making use of which a person would arrive at the possession of virtue. But since it is requisite for us to be versed in the knowledge of things divine, so as to be able, by possessing virtue, to be assimilated to them, we shall enter upon the Timaeus; for by entering upon this account relating to Nature, and on the so-called theology, and the arrangement of the Universe, we shall clearly have a recollection of things divine.

9. But if any one, to speak summarily, is able to survey correctly the arrangement of the dialogues, suited to the teaching according to Plato, to him who chooses the doctrines of Plato [...] For as it is necessary to become a spectator of his own soul and of things divine, and of the gods themselves, and to obtain the most beautiful mind, he must cleanse out the false opinions of his conceptions. For not even have physicians deemed the body capable of enjoying the food brought to it, unless a person shall have previously cast out what was in it in the way of an obstacle. But after the cleansing out, it is requisite to excite and call forth the sentiments, imparted by nature, and to cleanse out these too, and to exhibit them pure, as principles. In addition to this, through the soul being thus previously prepared, it is necessary to introduce into it its peculiar doctrines, according to which it may be perfected; now these relate to physics, and theology, and morality, and statesmanship. And that the doctrines may remain in

the soul and not be chased away, it will be necessary for it to be delivered to the reasoning relating to causation, in order that a person may lay hold firmly of the proposed aim. In addition to these it is meet that, what is not contrary to reason, should be furnished, in order that we may not be carried aside by some sophist, and turn our thoughts into a worse direction. That we may therefore cast out false opinions, it will be necessary to enter upon the dialogues of the tentative character, and which possess the confuting and the so-called cleansing power. And that a person may call forth into light the notions relating to physics, it will be necessary to enter upon the dialogues of the obstetrical character, for this is peculiar to them; since in those there are doctrines relating to physics, and to morals, and to statesmanship, and to the regulation of a household; of which some have a reference to contemplation and a contemplative life; but others to action and an active life; but both of them relate to the being assimilated to god. And that these, after being imparted, may be not escaping from us, it will be necessary to enter upon the dialogues of a logical character, which is also of the exploratory kind. For they possess both the distinguishing and defining methods, and, moreover, the analytical and syllogistical, through which truths are shown and falsehoods confuted. Moreover, since it is requisite for us to be not led aside contrary to reason by sophists, we shall enter upon the dialogues of a demonstrative character; in which it is in our power to learn thoroughly how it is meet to listen to sophists, and in what manner to carry ourselves towards those, who act wrongly in matters relating to reason.