

Maximus of Tyre

What God is According to Plato

Translated by Thomas Taylor the “Platonist” in *The Dissertations of Maximus Tyrius* (1805). Taylor’s notes have been omitted, and there have been some changes to the wording and punctuation to make the reading somewhat easier. This document is in the public domain.

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In disputing concerning dæmons, I can bear the opposition of arguments, I can endure the contention, and do not think that the conduct of him who doubts with himself, or with another, concerning the existence, essence, and magnitude of a dæmoniacal nature, is in any respect dire, erroneous, and absurd. For here indeed the name is uncertain; the essence of that which is investigated is unapparent, and its power is the subject of doubt. But now, in speaking of divinity, how shall I act? By what beauty of words, by what light from the clearest appellations, or by what harmony of composition, shall I be able to exhibit to myself and others that which is now investigated? For if Plato, who was the most eloquent of all men, even though compared with Homer himself, is not, in what he says respecting divinity, sufficiently understood by every one, and indeed there are those who enquire of others what the opinion of Plato was on this subject – if this be the case, he who is endued but with a small portion of intellect, will scarcely dare to engage in this investigation; unless we wish to imitate the conduct of him who should procure necessary drink for one thirsty, not from a pure and abundant fountain though present – a fountain to the sight most pleasant, to the taste most sweet, and for nutrition most prolific – but from a fountain debile and in no respect to be compared with the former. Just as they say the owl is affected, whose eyes are darkened by the sun, but who searches for the light proceeding from fire in the night. For he who, on perusing the writings of Plato requires another mode of diction, or to whom the light proceeding from thence appears to be obscure, and cannot participate in the smallest degree of clear splendour, such a one will never see the sun when it rises, nor the mild radiance of the moon, nor Hesperus when it sets, nor Lucifer anticipating the morning light.

But let us stop a little: for I now nearly perceive what the peculiarity is of the present discourse, since it resembles that which is found in the diggers of metallic mines. For these, when they perforate the earth and dig up gold, have no accurate knowledge of the nature of gold; but this is the province of those

who examine it by fire. I indeed assimilate the first acquaintance with the writings of Plato to the discovery of crude gold. That which is consequent to this requires another art, which, examining what is received and purifying it by reason as by fire, is now able to use the pure and tried gold. If, therefore, the vein of truth is manifest to us, and this magnificent and abundant, but we require another art for the purpose of examining what is received, let us invoke the assistance of this art in the present inquiry, what divinity is according to Plato.

Suppose this art, being gifted with speech, should ask whether we, not believing that there is any thing divine in nature and not having any conception whatever of divinity, engage in this investigation; or whether we accord with Plato; or possessing certain peculiar opinions of our own, we conceive that he thought differently on this subject. And let us suppose, on confessing the latter to be the case, that this art should think fit to ask us what we assert the nature of divinity to be. What then shall we say God is, in reply? Shall we say that he has round shoulders, a dark complexion, and curled hair? The answer would be ridiculous; even though you should characterize Zeus in a sublimer manner, by ascribing to him dark eye-brows, and golden hair, through which he shakes the heavens. For painters and statuaries, poets and philosophers, prophetically deliver everything of this kind through penury of vision, imbecility of explication, and darkness of judgment, in consequence of being elevated by imagination, as much as possible, to that which appears to be most beautiful. But if you should call an assembly of the arts, and command all of them collectively, by one decree, to give an answer respecting divinity, do you think that the painter would say one thing, and the statuary another, and that the poet would speak differently from the philosopher? So far from it, that by Zeus, the Scythian and Grecian, the Persian and Hyperborean, would not in this respect dissent from each other. But in everything else, you will see men disagreeing in their opinions. For neither good nor evil, neither the deformed nor the beautiful, are the same to all, since law and justice are divulsed and lacerated through extreme dissonance of opinion. For not only family dissents from family in these particulars, but city with city, and house with house, man with man, and even man with himself. For

Such is the mind of all the earthly race,
As parent Jove diurnally imparts.¹

In such a mighty contest, sedition and discord, you will see one according law and assertion in all the earth, that there is one God, the king and father of all things, and many gods, sons of God, ruling together with him. This the Greek says, and the barbarian says, the inhabitant of the continent, and he who dwells near the sea, the wise and the unwise. And if you proceed as far as to the utmost shores of the ocean, there also there are gods, rising very near to some, and setting very near to others. Do you think that Plato opposes or prescribes laws contrary to these, and that he does not accord with this most beautiful assertion, and most true affection of the human mind? What is this? The eye says it is the sun. What is that? The ear says it is thunder. What are these things thus flourishing and beautiful, these

1 *Odyssey* xviii 135.

revolutions and mutations, the various temperament of the air, the generations of animals, and the nature of fruits? The soul says that all these are the works of divinity; it desires the artificer and predicts his art. And if through the whole of time, there have been two or three atheists, grovelling and insensate men, whose eyes wander, whose ears are deceived, whose souls are mutilated, a race of irrational, barren, and useless, resembling a timid lion, an ox without horns, a bird without wings, yet even from such a race as this you will be persuaded that there is something divine. For this they unwillingly know, and unwillingly assert, although you deprive divinity of good with Leucippus, though you subject him to human passions with Democritus, though you change his nature with Strato, though you ascribe to him pleasure with Epicurus, though you deny his existence with Diagoras, though you acknowledge that you are ignorant what his is with Protagoras. Let us, however, dismiss those who were unable to arrive at truth entire and whole, but sought it in obscure and winding paths. But with respect to ourselves, what shall we do, or what shall we say, since we obliquely behold the footsteps of deity but do not meet with his image? Odysseus, indeed, when he landed on a foreign coast, ascended a lofty hill, from whence he could perceive the vestiges of the inhabitants, and learn,

If rustic, insolent, unjust the race,
Or friends to strangers, and of pious mind.²

Shall not we also, ascending by reasoning into a certain elevated part of the soul, dare to survey the footsteps of deity, that we may discover where he resides, and what is his nature? We must, however, be satisfied with an obscure vision. I wish indeed that I had an oracle from Zeus or Apollo, and which would answer neither obliquely nor dubiously, for then I would interrogate that god, not concerning the kettle of Croesus, the most stupid of kings and the most unfortunate of cooks, nor concerning the measures of the sea, or the number of the sands. I should also neglect inquiries more weighty than these, such as, the Medes are making an irruption, how shall I defend myself? For without the advice of the god, I should have three-oared galleys. Nor should I ask, how shall I take Sicily, which I design to invade? For though the god should not impede, Sicily is large. But let the Delphic Apollo clearly answer my inquiries respecting Zeus, or let Zeus himself answer for himself, or some interpreter of the god from the academy, an attic and prophetic man. He will answer therefore as follows:

Since the human soul has two instruments of perception, the one simple, which we call intellect, the other various, manifold, and mutable, which we call the senses; these two are conjoined in operation, but separated in essence. But as is the relation of these to each other, such also is that of the objects of which these are instruments; and that which is intelligible differs from that which is sensible, as much as intellect from sense. Of these, the sensible essence from our daily converse with it is more known, but intelligibles are indeed unknown to the multitude, but are naturally more known than sensibles. For animals and plants, stones and voices, vapours and odours, figures and colours, being collected by custom, and mingled with our daily associations, suborn the soul, and persuade it to think that nothing

2 Odyssey vi 120.

else besides these has any substance. But the intelligible being liberated from the contact and adhesion of these, is itself by itself the natural object of intellectual vision. Intellect, however, though implanted in the whole soul, is dilacerated, disturbed, and prevented from energizing in quiet by the senses, so that it cannot perceive its proper spectacles. To which we may add, that it is so persuaded by popular allurements, as to accord with the informations of the senses, and believe that there is nothing besides things visible and audible and the objects of the smell, the taste, and the touch. As, therefore, at a banquet full of agreeable odours, where the wine is poured in abundance, accompanied with the sound of flutes and pipes, with singing and incense, he must be a man of great temperament who is able to collect, contract, and turn his senses from the alluring scene to sobriety and moderation; in like manner, in this garrulity of the senses, it is difficult to find an intellect sober and able to look to the proper objects of its vision. Besides, since the nature of the senses is multiform and in a perpetual flux and reflux, the soul suffers, in conjunction with it, all various mutations; so that as often as she betakes herself to an intelligible essence, which is firm and stable, she is unable to perceive it with security in consequence of being agitated by tempest and tumult. Just as it happens to those who on leaving a ship tread on firm land; for they are scarcely able to stand, through the disorderly motion and agitation to which they have been accustomed, by the fluctuation of the waves.

In which, therefore, of these natures shall we place divinity? Must it not be in that which is stable and firm, and which is liberated from this flux and mutation? For how can any thing be established, unless divinity supports its nature? But if you require to be led as it were by the hand, to the whole of this knowledge, follow reason, who will instruct you, by giving a two-fold division to natures which are more known, and by always dividing the more honourable of these, till you arrive at that which is now investigated. Of these, therefore, some are inanimate, and others are animated. And the inanimate are stones, wood, and such like particulars; but the animated are plants and animals. The animated, likewise, is more excellent than the inanimate division. But on that which is animated, one part is plantal and the other sensitive. And again, the sensitive is more excellent than the plantal part. But of the sensitive, one part is rational and the other irrational; and of rational excels the irrational. In the rational soul also, because the whole is as it were a certain aggregate, consisting of the nutritive, the sensitive, the motive, and the passive, the intellectual part excels the rest. As that which is animated, therefore, is to that which is inanimate, so is the intellectual soul to the whole soul; and hence it is evident that the intellectual soul is more excellent than that which is collected from all these. Where, therefore, among these, shall we rank divinity? Shall we place him in the aggregate? Let us predict better things. It remains, therefore, that ascending as it were into a lofty tower by reasoning, we should establish divinity in ruling intellect itself. But here I see a twofold intellect; one naturally adapted to energize intellectually, though it does not thus energize; the other naturally adapted, and which does energize intellectually. This last, however, is not yet perfect, unless you assign to it perpetual intellection, and assert that it understands all things at once, and not different things at different times: so that the intellect will be most complete which understands always, and all things, and at once.

If you are willing, let us illustrate what has been said by comparing the divine intellect to sight, and the human to discourse. For the emission of the visual rays is most rapid, immediately attracting the sense of the visible object; but the energy of discourse is similar to leisurely walking. Or rather let us assimilate the divine intellect to the sight of the sun, which with comprehensive view sees every part of the earth at once, but the human, to the progression of the sun, at different times occupying different parts of the universe. Such an intellect the angel of the academy [*i.e.* Plato] assigns to the generator and father of all things. His name, indeed, he does not tell, for he knew it not; nor his colour, for he saw it not; nor his magnitude, for he reached it not. These natures are objects of perception to flesh and the eyes; but the divinity is itself invisible to the eyes, ineffable to the voice, intangible to flesh, inaudible to the hearing, and is alone visible through similitude, and audible through alliance, to the most beautiful, pure, intellectual, elevated, and ancient part of the soul; through collected vision being seen a collected whole. As, therefore, he who desires to see the sun, does not endeavour to obtain this vision by hearing, and as he who delights in the harmony of voice, does not pursue it with his eyes; but the sight indeed loves colours, and the hearing audibles, in like manner intellect sees and hears intelligibles.

And this is indeed the ænigma of the Syracusan poet [Epicharmus],

'Tis mind alone that sees and hears.

How, therefore, does intellect see, and how does it hear? If with an erect and robust soul it surveys that incorruptible light, and is not involved in darkness, nor depressed to earth, but closing the ears, and turning from the sight and the other senses, converts itself to itself. If forgetting terrene lamentations and sighs, pleasure and glory, honour and dishonour, it commits the guidance of itself to true reason and robust love, reason pointing out the road, and presiding love, by persuasion and bland allurements, alleviating the labours of the journey. But to intellect approaching thither and departing from things below, whatever presents itself is clear, and perfectly splendid, and is a prelude to the nature of divinity; and in its progression indeed, it hears the nature of God, but having arrived thither, it sees him. The end, however, of this journey it not heaven, nor the bodies it contains (though these indeed are beautiful and divine, as being the accurate and genuine progeny of divinity, and harmonizing with that which is most beautiful) but it is requisite to pass even beyond these, till we arrive at the supercelestial place, the plain of truth, and the serenity which is there;

Nor clouds, nor rain, nor winter, there are found,
But a white splendour spreads its radiance round,³

where no corporeal passion disturbs the vision, such as here disturbs the miserable soul, and hurls her from contemplation, by its uproar and tumult. For who can perceive divinity amidst the perturbation arising from such a multitude of desires, and monstrous cares? It is no more possible than in a noisy and discordant democracy to understand the law and the words of the archon.

The man who speaks in uproar, who can hear?

3 Odyssey iv 566, vi 43 seq.

For the soul, falling into this tumult, and giving herself to be borne along by its immense waves, swims in a scarcely navigable sea, till she is succoured by philosophy, who casts her reasonings under her, as Leucothea her fillet under Odysseus.⁴ How then is it possible to emerge and perceive divinity? You will indeed perceive him wholly when you are called to him. But you will be called at no very distant period. Expect the call. Age will come conducting you thither, and Death, which he who is timid deplures, and when it approaches, dreads, but which the lover of divinity joyfully expects, and boldly receives. But if even now you desire to learn his nature, how can any one relate it? For divinity is indeed beautiful, and the most splendid of all beautiful things. Yet he is not a beautiful body, but that whence beauty flows into body; nor a beautiful meadow, but that whence the meadow is beautiful. The beauty of a river and the sea, of heaven and the gods it contains, all this beauty flows from thence, as from a perpetual and incorruptible fountain. So far as everything participates of this, it is beautiful, stable, and safe; and so far as it falls off from this, it is base, dissipated, and corrupted. If these things are sufficient, you have seen God. If not, after what manner may he be enigmatically described? Do not attribute to him either magnitude, or colour, or figure, or any other property of matter, but act like the lover, who should denudate a beautiful body, which is concealed from the view by many and various garments, that it may be clearly seen. Let this also be now done by you; and by the reasoning energy, take away this surrounding scene, and thus busy employment of the eyes, and then behold that which remains; for it is that very thing which you desire.

But if you are imbecile with respect to the vision of the father and demiurgus of all things, it may suffice you at present to survey his works, and adore his offspring, which are many and all various, and not those only which the Bœotian poet [Hesiod] enumerates. For there are not only thirty thousand gods, the sons and friends of God, but the multitude of divine essences is innumerable; partly consisting of the natures of the stars in the heavens, and partly of dæmoniacal essences in æther. But I wish to indicate to you what I have said, by a more perspicuous image. Conceive a mighty empire, and powerful kingdom, in which all things voluntarily assent to the best and most honourable of kings. But let the boundary of this empire be, not the river Halys, nor the Hellespont, nor the Mœotis, nor the shores of the ocean, but heaven and earth; that above, and this beneath: heaven, like a circular infrangible wall of brass, comprehending everything in its embrace; and earth like a prison in which noxious bodies are bound; while the mighty king himself, stably seated, as if he were law, imparts to the obedient the safety which he contains in himself. The associates of this empire are many visible, and many invisible gods, some of them encircling the vestibules themselves, as messengers of a nature most allied to the king, his domestics and the associates of his table; but others being subservient to these, and again others possessing a still more subordinate nature. You see a succession and an order of dominion descending from divinity to the earth.

4 Odyssey v 346.