

PLUTARCH'S PLATONIC QUESTIONS.

QUESTION I.

WHAT IS THE REASON THAT GOD BADE SOCRATES TO ACT THE MIDWIFE'S PART TO OTHERS, BUT CHARGED HIMSELF NOT TO GENERATE; AS HE SAYS IN THEAETETUS? *

1. FOR he would never have used the name of God in such a merry, jesting manner, though Plato in that book makes Socrates several times to talk with great boasting and arrogance, as he does now. "There are many, dear friend, so affected towards me, that they are ready even to bite me, when I offer to cure them of the least madness. For they will not be persuaded that I do it out of goodwill, because they are ignorant that no God bears ill-will to man, and that therefore I wish ill to no man; but I cannot allow myself either to stand in a lie or to stifle the truth." † Whether therefore did he style his own nature, which was of a very strong and pregnant wit, by the name of God, — as Menander says, "For our mind is God," and as Heraclitus, "Man's genius is a Deity"? Or did some divine cause or some Daemon or other impart this way of philosophizing to Socrates, whereby always interrogating others, he cleared them of pride, error, and ignorance, and of being troublesome both to themselves and to others? For about that time there happened to be in Greece several sophisters; to these some young men paid great sums of money, for which they purchased a strong

* See Plato, Theaet. p. 149 B.

† Theaet. p. 151 C.

opinion of learning and wisdom, and of being stout disputants; but this sort of disputation spent much time in trifling squabbings, which were of no credit or profit. Now Socrates, using an argumentative discourse by way of a purgative remedy, procured belief and authority to what he said, because in refuting others he himself affirmed nothing; and he the sooner gained upon people, because he seemed rather to be inquisitive after the truth as well as they, than to maintain his own opinion.

2. Now, however useful a thing judgment is, it is mightily impeached by the begetting of a man's own fancies. For the lover is blinded with the thing loved; and nothing of a man's own is so beloved as is the opinion and discourse which he has begotten. And the distribution of children, said to be the justest, in respect of discourses is the unjustest; for there a man must take his own, but here a man must choose the best, though it be another man's. Therefore he that has children of his own, is a worse judge of other men's; it being true, as the sophister said well, "The Eleans would be the most proper judges of the Olympic games, were no Eleans gamesters." So he that would judge of disputations cannot be just, if he either seeks the bays for himself, or is himself antagonist to either of the antagonists. For as the Grecian captains, when they were to decide by their suffrages who had behaved himself the best, every man of them voted for himself; so there is not a philosopher of them all but would do the like; besides those that acknowledge, like Socrates, that they can say nothing that is their own; and these only are the pure uncorrupt judges of the truth. For as the air in the ears, unless it be still and void of noise in itself, without any sound or buzzing, does not exactly take sounds; so the philosophical judgment in disputations, if it be disturbed and obstreperous within, is hardly comprehensive of what is said without. For our familiar and inbred

opinion will not admit that which is at variance with itself, as the number of sects and parties proves, of which philosophy—if she deals with them in the best manner—must hold one to be right, and all the others to be at war with the truth in their opinions.

3. Furthermore, if men can comprehend and know nothing, God did justly interdict Socrates the procreation of false and unstable discourses, which are like wind-eggs, and bid him convince others who were of any other opinion. And reasoning, which rids us of the greatest of evils, error and vanity of mind, is none of the least benefit to us; “For God has not granted this to the Esculapians.”* Nor did Socrates give physic to the body; indeed he purged the mind of secret corruption. But if there be any knowledge of the truth, and if the truth be one, he has as much that learns it of him that invented it, as the inventor himself. Now he the most easily attains the truth, that is persuaded he has it not; and he chooses best, just as he that has no children of his own adopts the best. Mark this well, that poetry, mathematics, oratory, and sophistry, which are the things the Deity forbade Socrates to generate, are of no value; and that of the sole wisdom about what is divine and intelligible (which Socrates called amiable and eligible for itself), there is neither generation nor invention by man, but reminiscence. Wherefore Socrates taught nothing, but suggesting principles of doubt, as birth-pains, to young men, he excited and at the same time confirmed the innate notions. This he called his Art of Midwifery, which did not (as others professed) extrinsically confer intelligence upon his auditors; but demonstrated it to be innate, yet imperfect and confused, and in want of a nurse to feed and strengthen it.

* Theognis, vs. 432.

QUESTION II.

WHY DOES HE CALL THE SUPREME GOD FATHER AND MAKER OF ALL THINGS?*

1. Is it because he is (as Homer calls him) of created Gods and men the Father, and of brutes and things that have no soul the maker? If Chrysippus may be credited, he is not properly styled the father of the afterbirth who supplied the seed, although it springs from the seed. Or has he figuratively called the maker of the world the father of it? In his *Convivium* he calls Phaedrus the father of the amatorious discourse which he had introduced; and so in his *Phaedrus* † he calls him “father of noble children,” when he had been the occasion of many excellent discourses about philosophical matters. Or is there any difference between a father and a maker? Or between procreation and making? For as what is procreated is also made, but not the contrary; so he that procreated did also make, for the procreation of an animal is the making of it. Now the work of a maker — as of a builder, a weaver, a musical-instrument maker, or a statuary — is altogether distinct and separate from its author; but the principle and power of the procreator is implanted in the progeny, and contains his nature, the progeny being a piece pulled off the procreator. Since therefore the world is neither like a piece of potter’s work nor joiner’s work, but there is a great share of life and divinity in it, which God from himself communicated to and mixed with matter, God may properly be called Father of the world — since it has life in it — and also the maker of it.

2. And since these things come very near to Plato’s opinion, consider, I pray, whether there may not be some

* Plato, *Timaëus*, p. 28 C.

† *Phaedrus*, p. 261 A.

probability in them. Whereas the world consists of two parts, body and soul, God indeed made not the body; but matter being provided, he formed and fitted it, binding up and confining what was infinite within proper limits and figures. But the soul, partaking of mind, reason, and harmony, was not only the work of God, but part of him; not only made by him, but begot by him.

QUESTION III.

In the Republic,* he supposes the universe, as one line, to be cut into two unequal sections; again he cuts each of these sections in two after the same proportion, and supposes the two sections first made to constitute the two genera of things sensible and things intelligible in the universe. The first represents the genus of intelligibles, comprehending in the first subdivision the primitive forms or ideas, in the second the mathematics. Of sensibles, the first subdivision comprehends solid bodies, the second comprehends the images and representations of them. Moreover, to every one of these four he has assigned its proper judicatory faculty;—to the first, reason; to the mathematics, the understanding; to sensibles, belief; to images and likenesses, conjecture.

BUT WHAT DOES HE MEAN BY DIVIDING THE UNIVERSE INTO UNEQUAL PARTS? AND WHICH OF THE SECTIONS, THE INTELLIGIBLE OR THE SENSIBLE, IS THE GREATER? FOR IN THIS HE HAS NOT EXPLAINED HIMSELF.

1. At first sight it will appear that the sensible is the greater portion. For the essence of intelligibles being indivisible, and in the same respect ever the same, is contracted into a little, and pure; but an essence divisible and pervading bodies constitutes the sensible part. Now what

* Republic, VI. pp. 509 D—511 E.

is immaterial is limited ; but body in respect of matter is infinite and unlimited, and it becomes sensible only when it is defined by partaking of the intelligible. Besides, as every sensible has many images, shadows, and representations, and from one and the same original several copies may be taken both by nature and art ; so the latter must needs exceed the former in number, according to Plato, who makes things intelligible to be patterns or ideas of things sensible, like the originals of images and reflections. Further, Plato derives the knowledge of ideas from body by abstraction and cutting away, leading us by various steps in mathematical discipline from arithmetic to geometry, thence to astronomy, and setting harmony above them all. For things become geometrical by the accession of magnitude to quantity ; solid, by the accession of profundity to magnitude ; astronomical, by the accession of motion to solidity ; harmonical, by the accession of sound to motion. Abstract then sound from moving bodies, motion from solids, profundity from superficies, magnitude from quantity, we are then come to pure intelligible ideas, which have no distinction among themselves in respect of the one single intelligible essence. For unity makes no number, unless joined by the infinite binary ; then it makes a number. And thence we proceed to points, thence to lines, from them to superficies, and profundities, and bodies, and to the qualities of the bodies so and so qualified. Now the reason is the only judicatory faculty of intelligibles ; and the understanding is the reason in the mathematics, where intelligibles appear as by reflection in mirrors. But as to the knowledge of bodies, because of their multitude, Nature has given us five powers or distinctions of senses ; nor are all bodies discerned by them, many escaping sense by reason of their smallness. And though every one of us consists of a body and soul, yet the hegemonic and intellectual faculty is small, being hid

in the huge mass of flesh. And the case is the same in the universe, as to sensible and intelligible. For intelligibles are the principles of bodily things, but every thing is greater than the principle whence it came.

2. Yet, on the contrary, some will say that, by comparing sensibles with intelligibles, we match things mortal with divine, in some measure; for God is in intelligibles. Besides, the thing contained is ever less than the containing, and the nature of the universe contains the sensible in the intelligible. For God, having placed the soul in the middle, hath extended it through all, and hath covered it all round with bodies. The soul is invisible, and cannot be perceived by any of the senses, as Plato says in his Book of Laws; therefore every man must die, but the world shall never die. For mortality and dissolution surround every one of our vital faculties. The case is quite otherwise in the world; for the corporeal part, contained in the middle by the more noble and unalterable principle, is ever preserved. And a body is said to be without parts and indivisible for its minuteness; but what is incorporeal and intelligible is so, as being simple and sincere, and void of all firmness and difference. Besides, it were folly to think to judge of incorporeal things by corporeal. The present, or *now*, is said to be without parts and indivisible, since it is everywhere and no part of the world is void of it. But all affections and actions, and all corruptions and generations in the world, are contained by this *now*. But the mind is judge only of what is intelligible, as the sight is of light, by reason of its simplicity and similitude. But bodies, having several differences and diversities, are comprehended, some by one judicatory faculty, others by another, as by several organs. Yet they do not well who despise the intelligible and intelligent faculty in us; for being great, it comprehends all sensibles, and attains to things divine. The most important thing he himself

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