

Iamblichus of Chalcis
Exhortation to Philosophy

Chapter VIII

Reminders from the common conceptions that reassure us that philosophy is primarily desirable and in itself valuable, and manifestly lead on to the exhortation from things familiar to them all [4.5-8]¹

Still, it is no bad idea also to be reminded of what was proposed, from the common conceptions, from what manifestly seems to everyone. [6] So then this, at least, is quite clear to everyone, that nobody would choose to live having the greatest property and power over people if they were nevertheless deprived of their intelligence and were insane, not even if they were going to live enjoying the wildest pleasures, in the way that some people carry on who are out of their right minds. [11] Thus everybody, it seems, avoids being stupid most of all. [12] Now intelligence is the opposite of being stupid, and of these opposites the one is to be avoided, the other is valuable. [13] So, just as being sick is to be avoided, so is being healthy valuable for us. [45.4-15]²

Intelligence, it seems, according to this argument too, is the most valuable thing of all, and not for the sake of anything else that occurs from it, as the common conceptions give witness. [18] **For even if someone had everything, but has some disease ruining his intelligence, that way of life would not be valuable, for none of his other goods would be beneficial.** [20] **Hence everybody, insofar as they have some sense of being intelligent and are capable of having a taste of this thing, think other things to be nothing; and this is the reason why not a single one of us would put up with being either drunk or infantile up to the end of his life.** [45.15-25]³

So on account of this, too, **though sleeping is extremely pleasant, it is not valuable, even if we were to hypothesize that all of the pleasures were present to the sleeper, because the images during sleep are false, while those of the waking are true.** [46.4] **For sleep and waking are no different from each other except that the soul of the person who is awake often has the truth, but the soul of the person when sleeping is always thoroughly deceived, for what appears in dreams is a phantom and a complete falsehood.** [45.25-46.7]⁴

And the fact that most people avoid death also shows the soul's love of learning; for it avoids what it does not recognize, what is dark and not clear, and in nature it pursues what is evident and cognizable. [11] **This is why we say we should honor exceedingly those who cause us to see the sun and the light, and revere our fathers and mothers as causes of the greatest goods; and causes they are, it seems, of our having any intelligence and seeing anything.** [15] **It is for the same reason that we also enjoy what we are accustomed to, both things and people, and call 'friends' those with whom we are familiar.** [18] *These things, then, might show distinctly that what's recognizable and evident and clear is appreciated; and if what's recognizable and what's distinct is appreciated, it is clear that recognizing is appreciated, and so is being intelligent, similarly.* [46.8-21]⁵

In addition to these, **just as with property, where it is not the same possession that is for the sake of living and of living successfully in humans, so too with intelligence: we do not, I think, need the same intelligence for merely living and for living beautifully.** [26] Now then, much allowance is made for the many who do this (they pray to be successful, but appreciate it if they can just stay alive), but anyone who thinks that there is no need to endure living in every way already thinks it's ridiculous not to endure every labor and exert every effort so as to possess this intelligence that will have a cognition of the truth. [46.22-47.4]⁶

One might recognize the same thing from the following as well, if one observed the human way of life in the clear light of day. [6] For one will discover that all the things that seem great to people are an optical illusion. [8] From this too, it is rightly said that the human creature is nothing and that nothing is stable in human affairs. [10] For force, size, and beauty are ridiculous and of no worth, and beauty seems to be like that because nothing is seen with precision. [12] For if someone were able to see as sharply as they say Lynceus did, who saw through walls and trees, how could he consider such a sight bearable, seeing what bad things he is composed of? [15] And honors and reputations, objects of more striving than the rest, are full of indescribable nonsense; for to those who behold anything eternal it is silly to take those things seriously. [18] What lasts long, what is enduring over time, in human affairs? [19] It is actually owing to our weakness, I think, and the shortness of our life, that these appear to be much of anything. [47.5-21]⁷

So who could consider himself successful and happy, looking at these things for which we have been composed right from the beginning by nature, as if for punishment—all of us—as they say the mystery rites relate? [24] For the ancients express this in an inspired way by saying the soul 'pays a punishment' and we live for the atonement of certain great failings. [48.2] For the conjunction of the soul with the body looks very much like a thing of this sort; for as they say the Tyrrhenians often torture those they capture by chaining corpses right against their living bodies, face to face, fastening each limb to a limb, similarly the soul seems to be stretched out and stuck onto all the sensitive members of the body. [47.21-48.9]⁸

So nothing divine or happy belongs to humans apart from just that one thing worth effort, as much intellect and intelligence as is in us, for, of what's ours, this alone seems to be immortal, and this alone divine. [13] And by being able to share in such a capacity, our way of life, although by nature miserable and difficult, is yet so gracefully managed that, in comparison with the other animals, a human seems to be a god. [16] For 'intellect is the god in us' – whether it was Hermodotimus or Anaxagoras who said so – and 'the mortal phase has a portion of some god'. [18] One ought therefore either to do philosophy, or say goodbye to living and depart hence, since everything else at least seems to be in a way highly nonsensical and foolish. [21] *In this way one may provide a needed summary of the approaches drawing on the common conceptions for an exhortation to the need to do philosophy in a theoretical way, and to live as much as possible the way of life in accordance with knowledge and the intellect.* [48.9-25]⁹

¹ Chapter 8 seems to consist of two large excerpts, divided by Iamblichus' transitional remark at 47.4-5. While the second half seems unaltered up to the Iamblichean closing remarks at 48.21-25 (which Rose already recognized was not present in the source text), it is unclear how much compressed quotation or paraphrase has been inflicted on the first half. Rose, followed by Ross, divided the chapter into four fragments: 45.4-47.4 = Rose 55 / Ross 9; 47.5-21 = Rose 59 / Ross 10a; 47.21-48.9 = Rose 60 / Ross 10b; 48.9-21 = Rose 61 / Ross 10c. Rose's reordering of most of this material to the end of his fragment collection seems to embody the view that the end of chapter 8 was the climax and end of the whole work, a view embraced by Düring, who divided the chapter into 13 fragments which he kept in order but relocated en bloc to the end of his reconstruction (B97-110).

² 45.4-6 (= Düring B97) contains a formulaic Iamblichean opening, and it is not clear whether the rest of the paragraph consists of compressed quotation or paraphrase. 45.6-13 = Düring B98. Düring B99 begins at 45.14.

³ This paragraph is divided into two fragments by Düring: 45.14-20 = B99; 45.21-25 = B100.

⁴ 45.25-46.7 = Düring B101.

⁵ 46.8-21 = Düring B102.

⁶ 46.22-47.4 = Düring B103.

⁷ Düring divides this paragraph into two fragments: 47.5-12 = B104; 47.12-47.21 = B105.

⁸ Düring divides this paragraph into two fragments: 47.21-48.2 = B106; 48.2-48.9 = B107.

⁹ 48.21-25 is a formulaic Iamblichean conclusion that no editor has included in fragment collections or reconstructions. Düring divides the rest of the paragraph into three fragments: 48.9-13 = B108; 48.13-16 = B109; 48.16-21 = B110.