

Iamblichus, *Protrepticus* chapter IX  
tr. DSH & MRJ 2013 August 26

*from the intention of nature, an approach to exhortation according to the answer Pythagoras gave to the Phliasians, when they asked him who he was and for the sake of what he was born; by following this answer we draw the whole protreptic conclusion*  
[4.9-13]

*Starting on a higher level, from the intention of nature, we proceed to the same exhortation in the following way.* [3] **Some of the things that come to be come to be from a certain kind of thought and skill, e.g. a house or a ship (for a certain skill and thought is a cause of both of these), while others come to be not by means of any skill but through nature; for nature is the cause of animals and plants, and all such things come to be by nature.** [8] **But then some other things come to be by luck as well; we say, at least of those things that come to be neither through skill nor through nature nor by necessity, that most of them come into being through luck.** [49.1-11]

Now then, of the things that come to be from luck, none comes to be for the sake of anything, nor do they have any end; but the things that come into being by skill have present in them both the end and what they are for the sake of (for the man who has the skill will always provide you with the reason on account of which he wrote, i.e. for the sake of what), and this is something better than what comes to be on account of it. [16 | 17] (I mean all such things as skill is naturally a cause of, in virtue of itself and not coincidentally, for strictly speaking we should assume medicine to be the cause of health rather than of disease, and architecture to be the cause of houses, not of their demolition). [20] Therefore everything done in accordance with skill comes to be for the sake of something, and this end result is its best one, whereas what is lucky does not come about for the sake of anything; for something good might occur by luck as well, but of course it is not good by being in accordance with luck and to the degree that it is lucky, and what comes to be in accordance with luck is always indeterminate. [49.11-25]

But yet what is in accordance with nature does come to be for the sake of something, and is always constructed for the sake of something better than what comes to be through skill; for nature does not imitate the skill, but it imitates nature, and it exists to help nature and to fill in what nature leaves out. [50.2] For some things nature itself seems capable of completing by itself without actually needing any help, but others it completes with difficulty or is completely incapable. [5] For example, to begin with, even with reproduction, some seeds presumably germinate without protection, whatever kind of land they may fall onto, but others also need the skill of farming; and, in a similar way, some animals also attain their full nature by themselves, but humans need many skills for their security, both at first in respect of their birth, and again later, in respect of their nurturing. [49.26-50.12]

Further, if skill imitates nature, from this it follows for the skills as well that everything that comes to be comes to be for the sake of something. [14] For we should take the position that everything that comes into being correctly comes into being for the sake of something. [15] And surely if beautifully, then correctly; and everything that comes to be (or has come to be) in accordance

with nature at any rate comes to be (or has come to be) beautifully, since what is unnatural is ugly, and a natural coming into being comes to be for the sake of something. [50.12-19]

And someone could see this also from each of our parts; if, for example, you were to inspect the eyelid, you would see that it has come to be not in vain but in order to help the eyes, so as to provide them with rest and prevent things from falling into the eye. [23 | 24] Thus it is the same thing, both that for the sake of which something has come to be and that for the sake of which it needs to have come to be; for example, if a ship needed to come to be to provide transport by sea, that's why it actually has come to be. [26 | 27] Moreover the animals are surely things that have come to be by nature, either absolutely all of them or the best and most honorable of them; for it makes no difference if someone thinks that most of them have come into being unnaturally because of some corruption or wickedness. [51.4] But certainly a human is the most honorable of the animals down here; hence it's clear that we have come to be both by nature and according to nature. [50.19-51.6]

This is the thing for the sake of which nature and the god have brought us into being. [7] So what is this thing? [8] When Pythagoras was asked, he said, 'to observe the heavens,' and he used to claim that he himself was an observer of nature, and it was for the sake of this that he had passed over into life. [10 | 11] And they say that when somebody asked Anaxagoras for what reason anyone might choose to come to be and be alive, he replied to the question by saying, 'To observe the heavens and the stars in it, as well as moon and sun,' since everything else at any rate is worth nothing. [51.6-15]

Further, if in everything the end is always better (for everything that comes to be comes to be for the sake of the end result, and what is for the sake of something is better, indeed best of all), and the natural end result is the one that in the order of development is naturally last to be achieved when the development is completed without interruption, surely the first parts of a human being to reach their end are the bodily ones, and later on the parts of the soul, and somehow the end of the better part always comes later than its coming to be. [23 | 24] Surely the soul is posterior to the body, and intelligence is the final stage of the soul, for we see that it is the last thing to come to be by nature in humans, and that is why old age lays claim to this alone of good things; therefore, some form of intelligence is by nature our end, and being intelligent is the ultimate thing for the sake of which we have come to be. [52.4] Now surely if we have come to be, it's also clear that we exist for the sake of some kind of intelligence and learning. [5] Therefore Pythagoras was right, according to this argument anyway, in saying it's for the sake of cognition and observation that every human person has been constructed by the god. [8] But whether the object of this cognition is the cosmos or some other nature is a question for us perhaps to consider later; what we have said is enough for us for now as a preliminary. [11] For if intelligence is an end in accordance with nature, then to be intelligent would be best of all. [12] Hence, one should do the other things for the sake of the goods that come about in oneself and, of these goods, one should have the ones in the body for the sake of those in the soul, and virtue for the sake of intelligence; for this is the highest of all. [51.16-52.16]

To seek from every kind of knowledge something other than itself and to require that it must be useful is the demand of someone utterly ignorant of

how far apart in principle good things are from the necessities; they are totally different. [20] For among the things without which living is impossible, the ones which are appreciated on account of something else should be called necessities and joint causes, while all those that are appreciated for themselves, even if nothing else results from them, should be called goods in the strict sense; for this is not valuable because of that, and that for the sake of something else, and this goes on proceeding to infinity – rather, this comes to a stop somewhere. [25] So it is absolutely ridiculous, then, to seek from everything a benefit beyond from the thing itself, and to ask ‘So, what’s the benefit for us?’ and ‘What’s the use?’. [28] For it’s true what we say: such a fellow doesn’t seem like someone who knows noble goodness, or who distinguishes between a cause and a joint cause. [52.16-53.2]

One might see that what we say is all the more true if someone conveyed us in thought, as it were, to the Isles of the Blessed, for in that place no need for anything would occur, nor would there be benefit in anything else, and only thinking and observation remains, which we say even now is an independent way of life. [7|8] If what we say is true, would not any of us be rightly ashamed if when the right was granted us to settle in the Isles of the Blessed, we were by our own fault unable to do so? [10] Thus the payment that knowledge brings is not to be despised by humans, nor is the good that comes from it a slight good. [12] For just as the poets who are wise say that we reap the rewards of justice in Hades, in the same way, it seems, we reap the rewards of wisdom in the Isles of the Blessed. [53.2-15]

It is not weird at all, then, if it does not seem to be useful or beneficial; for we don’t claim that it’s beneficial but that it is itself good, and it makes sense to choose it not for the sake of something else but for itself. [18|19] For just as we travel to Olympia for the sake of the spectacle itself, even if nothing more is going to accrue from it (for the observing itself is better than lots of money), and as we observe the Dionysia not in order to take something away from the actors (rather, we actually spend on them), and as there are many other spectacles we would choose instead of lots of money, so the observation of the universe, too, is to be honored above all things that are thought to be useful. [53.26|54.1] For surely it is not right to travel with great effort for the sake of observing other humans imitating women and slaves, or fighting and running, and not to think it right to observe the nature of things, i.e. the truth, without payment. [54.5] *Now then, this is how, proceeding from the intention of nature, we made an exhortation to wisdom as being inherently good and in its own right honorable, even if nothing useful for the human way of life comes about from it.* [53.15-54.9]