



### Overview of Greek Philosophy 3

#### Greek Philosophy from the Death of Aristotle to the Rise of the Neo-Platonic School.

(From the end of the fourth century B.C. to the third century A.D.)

**Maurice de Wulf**

The fundamental characteristic of philosophy after the death of Aristotle was the *predominance of moral speculations*. External causes were not without their influence in developing this new tendency. The battle of Chaeronea (B.C. 338) put an end to the political independence of Greece. Henceforth her destinies were bound up with those of Macedonia, and later on with those of the Roman Republic. National troubles weakened the synthetic power of the Greek mind; and the thinkers of the period, shrinking back within themselves, became solicitous chiefly for personal security. They likewise felt all the more keenly the pressing need of seeking the secret of happiness in philosophy, now that religious scepticism was gaining ground steadily every day.

A theory of *personal morality* was most in demand. Happiness was considered by every one to consist in tranquillity of soul, but all were not agreed as to the best means of attaining this. Social and political morality was scarcely studied.

*Theoretical speculations were made subordinate to ethics*. All felt inclined rather to borrow their doctrines ready-made from the past, than to take the trouble of thinking out anything new for themselves.

Grecian philosophy, like Grecian civilization, became cosmopolitan, and shook off all sentiment of nationality. The Macedonian conquest scattered the Greeks; the cities of the mother-country were forsaken and the emigrants directed their steps towards other important centres: Alexandria, Rome, Rhodes, and Tarsus soon became rivals of Athens.

#### Division of this Period.

(1) The opening years of the third century saw four great schools of philosophy in existence: the Peripatetic, the Stoic, the Epicurean, and the New Academy which perpetuated the Platonic tradition. For a century and a half those different schools flourished side by side, each pursuing its own ideal with absolute independence.

(2) But from the second half of the second century B.C. the disciples began to deviate from the absolute purity of doctrine professed by the founders of their respective schools. In general, we may give them the title of *Eclectics*.

(3) Eclecticism was more especially the fruit of the scepticism of the New Academy. And it in turn gave rise during the last years of the first century B.C. to a new form of scepticism, which for two centuries onward developed on lines parallel to those of eclecticism itself. The phases of this historical and logical evolution will form the subject-matter of the following three sections.

## § 1. THE PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS OF THE THIRD AND SECOND CENTURIES B.C.

### A. *The Peripatetic School.*

This school, sprung from the teaching of Aristotle, gave its attention for two centuries to logic, ethics, and physics. It gravitated steadily towards naturalism, so much so that STRATO OF LAMPSACUS (fl. 270) identifies God with *phusis* and denies finality. The development which this school underwent from the first century B.C. is of greater historical importance.

### B. *The Stoic School.*

The Stoics unanimously inculcated the supreme importance of *Ethics*. Some of them even went so far as to forbid all other study. That, however, was not the attitude of the leading representatives of stoicism. ZENO OF CITIUM (about 342-270), the founder of the school, CLEANTHUS, his immediate successor (about 331-251), CHRYSIPPUS (about 281-208), the popular exponent and systematizer of the Stoic doctrines, — all three expressly recommend the study of *Physics* in its relation to morals. They also recognized the necessity of Logic among the philosophical sciences; for it teaches us how to discern truth from falsehood, and it is all-important that our conduct be based upon certain knowledge. We shall outline the principal doctrines of the Stoics on physics and ethics.

#### **The Stoic System of Physics.**

The Stoic physics may be summed up in four principal theses: Materialism, Dynamism, Pantheism, and Determinism.

(1) *Materialism.* — Corporeal things are the only real things. By the word *body* (*Corpus*) we must understand not only corporeal substances, but also their properties, — even the knowledge, feelings, and virtues which affect these substances. However, the Stoics elsewhere relax the rigour of this very extreme teaching, and, despite the contradiction involved, admit that certain incorporeal things exist, amongst which is the *lekton* or the object of our universal ideas. Since the properties of things can be reduced to matter, and are nevertheless distinct from the substance in which they appear, the Stoics admit the compenetration of material particles in the same place. This is the *krasis di holôn*.

(2) *Dynamism* — The principle of the internal force which energizes matter is warm air (*pneuma*), often identified with heat or fire. The different degrees of tension (*tonos*) of this *pneuma* explain the various properties and states of bodies (Heraclitus).

(3) *Pantheism.* — The *pneuma* is one. If we make an exhaustive analysis of the various forms of activity, we find that they all spring from one supreme and perfect cause whose unity of action can alone explain the beauty, harmony, and finality of the world. God is air, heat, fire; He is also intelligence, goodness, world-soul. Thus, combining physical and intellectual attributes, we might say that God is the intelligent-fire-soul of the world. And as force (*pneuma*) is an internal principle of matter (2), and is itself material (1), *God is both the primal matter and the dynamic principle of all things*. The things of nature are but overflowings of the Divine matter, breathings of the Divine spirit.

To signify this plastic force of the supreme *pneuma* the Stoics have called it the *logos spermatikos*, the generating idea, just as they have applied the title *logoi spermatikoi*, seminal reasons or principles, to the various natural forces in bodies, and especially to that which is inherent in the human soul.

(4) *Cosmic Determinism* follows as a corollary from dynamic pantheism. The world is a closed system of connected phenomena, each of which is representative of a certain stage of the Divine evolution. The Deity evolves itself naturally and of absolute necessity; and this absolute necessity of every phase of Divine evolution is called *fate* (*heimarmenê*). The foreknowledge of God extends to all this, but He has to undergo it. The Stoics attempted in vain to reconcile the existence of physical and moral evil with this theory.

### **Applications of Physics to Psychology.**

*Nature and Origin of Knowledge.* — Before the soul acquires actual knowledge it resembles a sheet of paper on which no letters have yet been traced. Sensation is the source of all knowledge. Sensation, by practice, gives rise to memory; from repeated acts of memory comes experience; from reasonings on experience arise the concepts by which we pass beyond the bounds of experience; the combination of these concepts is science. It seems, therefore, that thought is only an elaborated or collective sensation. The object of our universal ideas (*lekton*) comes between the real thing (*tugchanon*) and the word (*phônai, sêmeion*).

The Stoics believed in the possibility of certitude and defended it against the Sceptics. Neither party, however, place the question on its proper basis: the analysis of our cognoscitive activities. They reduce it to a corollary in ethics. Whilst the Sceptics deny the existence of certain knowledge, because they consider it superfluous in their system of ethics, the Stoics affirm it as indispensable for morality. Without certain knowledge, they say, it would be impossible for us to conform our conduct to true ideals. Practical necessity is thus made the decisive argument against all scepticism.

The criterion of certitude is purely subjective. It is the convincing force (*katalêptikon*) inherent in a representation, the power which knowledge possesses of winning our firm adherence. By a strange contradiction, they attribute this power to concepts (*lekta*) and not to sensations, though the general concept must be essentially false since it corresponds to nothing corporeal.

*The Will.* — Determinism in human acts is only a particular application of cosmic determinism. The Stoics try in vain to safeguard liberty by confounding free with voluntary acts.

*Nature of the Soul.* — The soul is an emanation from God or the world-soul: it is simply a little warm air, a *pneuma*. Grecian authorities on physiology and medicine had long sought an explanation of normal and abnormal vegetative functions in warm air (*pneuma*). The Stoics improved on this conception by confounding the *pneuma* with the soul itself, — activity with the principle of activity. We see traces of this confusion in their theories relative to the soul's *origin location, constituent parts, and future life*. The soul of the infant is a particle of matter separated from the soul of the parents. The soul has its *locus* in the breast where respiration produces warm air. From the breast also comes forth speech which is the immediate expression of the thinking soul. By means of the air which the heart sends through the organism the soul occupies and penetrates the whole body. (See above, the *krasis di' honôn*.) The Stoics seem to have multiplied the parts of the soul just as the whim seized them. Reason, however, was regarded by all as the directing part (*hegemonikon*), the principle of the Ego and of personality. At the end of time when the world will be consumed by fire, all human souls will be absorbed in the Divine *pneuma*. It follows then that the soul will for some time survive the body. Is this survival the privilege of the virtuous, or is it the common destiny of all? Their answers to this question are contradictory. The whole theory of survival is a concession to moral exigencies at the expense of their materialist principles.

## Moral System of the Stoics.

*Virtue and Happiness*. — Man is superior to all other things in this, that he has a knowledge of the cosmic laws to which fate compels him to submit himself. Conformity of our life with these cosmic laws, regulation of our conduct by our strictly intellectual nature, obedience to reason as the sole motive of action (*homologoumenôs te phusei zên*), such are the leading principles of Stoic *morality* and *virtue*. Furthermore, if we subordinate all our acts to the dictates of reason, we reach that *happiness* towards which our natural aspirations spontaneously lead us. It follows that virtue is the highest and only good.

Virtue considered on its positive side is a self-determination of the will to act in conformity with our knowledge of the true, abstracting altogether from every other motive. Virtue begins in knowledge and is consummated in action. It is not to be confounded with science (Socrates), which it surpasses; for speculation has no other *raison d'être* than to serve as a guide of conduct. The wise man retires within himself and professes an absolute indifference to every motive that does not come from reason. This apathetic sort of tranquillity which keeps the troubles of the external world shut out from the soul is the negative element of Stoic virtue. Just as virtue is the only good, so vice, or the act of volition contrary to reason, is the only evil. Between these two qualities there is an essential incompatibility which Stoicism exaggerates out of all due proportion. Good and bad have an absolute value, they either exist or they do not: they admit of no degrees. Since they are what they are of themselves, it follows that under no respect can one become the other. To this sharp distinction the Stoics add an equally absolute and radical difference between good and bad people; the change from bad to good is instantaneous.

Everything that is neither good in itself nor bad in itself has no connection with morals; *it is indifferent (adiaphoron)* to virtue and hence unworthy of the wise man. These austere moralists of the portico blamed Aristotle for making external goods an element in happiness but they reserved their most vehement attacks for the Epicureans. They regarded pleasure as morally indifferent; it can be a consequence, but not a motive of our actions.

*Virtue and Duty*. — Virtue is *obligatory* because it has a *cosmic* significance: it is the form of man's natural activity. But it is a necessity of fate that beings should be subject to the laws of the cosmos in their activity. The general tone of Stoic morality is, therefore, to diminish the value of human personality.

*Virtue and the Passions*. — As man is not pure intelligence, he bears within his breast not only a rational tendency but also irrational motions or passions (*pathê*). Passion is a disorderly movement of reason towards irrational things. It starts with a false representation of something, and ends in a consequent consent of the will. As such it depends on our will, and therefore on our liberty. All the passions are bad; they are psychical diseases (in opposition to Aristotle). The *sage* is master of himself, resists his passions and tries to extirpate them from his soul; he becomes apathetic, that is to say, passionless (*apatheia*).

The Stoic philosophy presents a close communion between the practical and the theoretical elements of life. It sought the triumph of virtue in a profound knowledge of cosmic order. It borrowed its chief moral theories from the Cynics, and from Heraclitus several of its physical theories; but while the Cynical school despised speculative research, and Ionian dynamism lost sight of the moral value of life, Stoicism completed the one by the other, whilst renewing both.

### C. The Epicurean School.

EPICURUS (342-270), who had been brought up in the philosophies of Democritus and of Plato, opened a school on his own account at Athens in 306. Soon his popularity attracted growing crowds of admiring and faithful followers. Never, in fact, did disciples cling more scrupulously to the teachings of a master. Though Epicureanism held its place for a period of six centuries,

it preserved unchanged the primitive form given it by its founder. Springing into favour in the second century B.C. its theories spread with equal popularity in both the Grecian and Roman worlds. The poet LUCRETIUS was a disciple of Epicurus. The third century A.D. saw it still flourishing, but during this century the popularity of the system began to wane, and finally in the following century it lapsed into obscurity. Some fragments, however, of its teaching survived the wreck and were brought to light again in the Middle Ages.

Epicurus emphasizes the exclusively practical side of philosophy: his essential aim is to assist us by means of language and thought in the realization of happiness. To this moral conception of philosophy he subordinates all the theoretical sciences, treating Grammar, History, and Mathematics with disdain. He attaches importance to the study of Nature merely because it frees the soul from the dejection arising from a superstitious belief in God and death.

### **Epicurean Physics.**

The physical theory of Epicurus was that everything in Nature is ruled by general natural forces, that there is no such thing as purpose or finality, and that consequently man may lay aside all fear of a Divine interference. He explains the sensible world after the mechanical principles of Democritus: that there exist only material, homogeneous atoms, infinite in number. Owing to their weight, these are set in motion in the infinite void of space. There is, however, this difference between the two systems. In that of Democritus, the atoms interfere with each other in their fall, thus producing eddying motions; while in that of Epicurus, all fall with the same speed Perpendicularly and without touching each other through the void which can offer them no resistance. Epicurus, however, influenced by moral considerations, attributes to the atoms a discretionary power of declination (the *clinamen* of Lucretius) by which they can deviate a little from the perpendicular. It is the natural play of these atomic movements, independent of gravity, that produces the shocks and eddies in them.

The accumulation of atoms, under the action of gravity, produces worlds separated from one another by vacant spaces. The different shapes of the atoms explain the appearance of the different elements, — especially of the earth, from which are generated plants, animals, and man.

### **Application to Psychology.**

*Knowledge, its Origin and Nature.* — All knowledge is sensation, and this latter owes its origin to atomic emanations. The repetition of sensations engenders the concept or general image (*prolēpsis*) which becomes fixed in the memory. We pass from the known to the unknown by opinion (*doxa*) which is merely a judgment or reasoning about sensations. *Certitude* exists: Epicurus proves this like the Stoics by appealing to moral considerations. What is the criterion of certitude? The very existence of the sensation. By the very fact that it exists, a sensation is true, in conformity with its object. For its object is not the exterior thing, but the image produced in us by that exterior thing. In Epicurus' system of criteriology, errors of the senses find no place. Error arises only when by judgment we attribute to the things themselves what is only true of their images in us. This theory leads logically to the subjectivism of Protagoras. In practice, however, Epicurus admitted that our perceptions attain not only to the things as represented, but also to the things in themselves. The concept has the same claim to certitude as the sensation. As for opinion, it is true or false according as it is confirmed or not by experience.

*The Will* is a mechanical movement of the soul; but Epicurus does not attempt to explain it. All his attention is concentrated on the problem of liberty. Just as the Stoics, who held that morality consists in man's submission to the cosmic laws, insisted on psychological determinism, so the Epicureans, who placed happiness in man's individualism and absolute independence,

based their belief on free will. It is just in order to safeguard the possibility of a free act in his exaggerated mechanical theory, that Epicurus attributed to the atoms a quasi-voluntary power to deviate from the perpendicular. Logic would oblige him to endow every atom of matter in the universe with liberty, the monopoly of which he reserves so jealously for the human being.

*Nature of the Soul.* — The soul is corporeal. The atoms which compose it are the lightest and most mobile: it results from a mixture of fire, air, *pneuma*, and another element infinitely mobile. It permeates the whole body, but the intellectual part rules supreme. The soul comes into the world with the body; at death it dissolves into the ether: a consoling thought seeing that death is thus the end of all painful sensations!

### **Epicurean Ethics.**

While the Stoics subordinated personal inclination to cosmic law, Epicureanism made individual, egoistic well-being the cardinal point of all morality. The pleasure of the individual is the supreme good, — but by this we must understand not the mere sum-total of his pleasures, and especially his sensible pleasures, as the Cyrenaic school taught, but the harmonious pleasure of his whole existence. This latter consists much more, according to Epicurus, in repose and the absence of pain (a negative enjoyment, if we may so call it), than in any positive satiation of the soul (Cyrenaic school). And as mental trouble is more destructive of quiet than physical pain, Epicurus makes the intellect the supreme judge of pleasure. It is by reason that we drive away the annoying suggestions of all sorts of prejudices. In the Epicurean idea of happiness, sensible pleasure is not ostracized as in the Stoic idea; it is regarded as the primordial pleasure, but reason tempers and moderates it. This weighing and controlling of pleasure by reason is the very essence of virtue.

Epicurean Physics was a renewal of the Physics of Democritus; Epicurean Ethics, an enlargement of the Cyrenaic Ethics. Physics and Ethics together constitute a specific philosophy in which we may easily detect the general orientation of the post-Aristotelian systems.

The Stoics and Epicureans differ in their principles but arrive at the same definition of happiness. Starting with doctrines widely opposed, Epicurus and Zeno manage to depict the *ataraxy* of the sage in practically the same colours. And, as this final issue alone is of importance, the conclusion soon followed that speculative knowledge is useless for happiness. This was the theory upheld by the Sceptics.

### ***D. Sceptical Schools; The Later Academies.***

The Sceptics of the third and second centuries assign as the only aim of philosophy the search for happiness; and happiness for them, as for the Stoics and Epicureans, consists in the soul's rest, — *ataraxy*. If they deny the possibility of certain knowledge, it is because in their view speculative certitude is not indispensable for happiness.

Three Sceptic Schools appeared during this period: (1) The *Pyrrhic School* founded by PYRRHO OF ELIS (about 360-270), which, however, was of short duration and little influence. (2) The *Second or Middle Academy*, established by ARCESILAUUS OF PITANE (315-240), who gave the ancient Platonic school an inclination towards scepticism and concluded like Pyrrho that, certitude being an illusion, *epochê* or the suspension of the exercise of the judicial faculty is the only legitimate attitude for the philosopher. (3) The *Third or New Academy*, founded a century later by CARNEADES OF CYRENE (213-129), who developed the scepticism of the Academy and amassed objections against Dogmatism in general and Stoicism in particular. Following Arcesilaus, Carneades endeavours to find in the probability of certain representations, a sufficient but indispensable motive of conduct.

## § 2. ECLECTICISM.

*(From the latter half of the second century B.C. to the third century A.D.)*

### **Causes of the Rise of Eclecticism.**

The philosophical systems studied in the preceding section were inspired by one underlying principle, the predominance of ethics. Developing on parallel lines, with Athens as their centre, it was but natural that they should influence one another. Eclecticism is, in a certain sense, the outcome of scepticism. The Sceptics, in reality, did not stop at negative doubt; they had been led by practical needs to a theory of probability bordering on dogmatism. But this probability, according to the Sceptics, belonged equally to the different systems then in vogue; any one of these was sufficient to engender a subjective conviction, and to serve as a basis of conduct. As a matter of fact, eclecticism made its first appearance among the disciples of Carneades. A political event facilitated its development: the conquest of Greece by the Romans (146). The vanquished imposed on the victors their philosophy, their science, and their education; but they had to respect the root tendencies of the Roman mind and thought. Now, in philosophy the Romans sought mainly for practical utility, for ethical precepts, for instruction in the arts of oratory and politics. To the speculative theories, with which these precepts were bound up, they paid little attention, adopting one or the other theory indifferently.

### **General Character and Division.**

The Eclecticism of this period chose its theories by submitting them to the test of *convergence towards the practical ends of life*, and the supreme criterion of this convergence is *our immediate consciousness of it, the instinctive conviction we have of it independently of all other considerations, such as the real objectivity of knowledge*. An interior voice makes itself heard, and its whisperings are accepted as dictates above dispute. This is subjectivism: here again the Eclectics are at one with the Sceptics.

Eclecticism occupied a century and a half before, and three centuries after Christ. The philosophical systems of this epoch may be divided according to the different schools with which each was most closely allied. For, notwithstanding the reciprocal infiltrations of the four post-Aristotelian systems, each of these latter preserved its individuality distinct, and traced for itself a well-marked furrow. Under the Empire even, the Platonic and Aristotelian schools might be seen affirming energetically each its original distinctive individuality, by a profound study of the works of their respective founders. In addition to this, public courses of philosophy were established, and Marcus Aurelius officially sanctioned the distinction between the four schools by assigning to each a special chair at Athens (176 A.D.). But it was not a matter of going back to the past; irresistible forces conspired to combine together those movements, which had issued from different starting-points. Passing over the eclecticism of the Epicurean school, where the master's doctrines were perpetuated almost intact, let us come to study the Stoic, Platonic, and Peripatetic forms of Eclecticism.

### **The Eclecticism of the Stoics: Seneca.**

From the first century B.C. Stoicism gave a ready welcome to foreign doctrines. Its preoccupations were confined more and more within the domain of ethics; but new theories, better suited to the real needs of life, took the place of the harsh and hollow doctrines of Zeno's earlier disciples. These tendencies, which had already appeared with PANAETIUS OF RHODES, the founder of Roman stoicism (about 185-111), and his disciple POSIDONIUS, became more marked in the theories of SENECA, of EPICETUS, and of MARCUS AURELIUS, the recognized

representatives of stoicism under the Roman Empire.

SENECA was born in the first years of the Christian era and was put to death in the year 65, by order of Nero whose counsellor he had long been. He does not think much of the Logic of the Stoics; and if he does not oppose the fundamental theses of their Physics, he prefers, at least, to confine his attention to the application of those principles to Ethics. Thus, while subscribing to their materialistic pantheism, he insists nevertheless on the providence of God and on the future life of the soul. Studying the nature of man, he dwells with pleasure now on the materiality and divinity of the soul — the emanation of the divine *pneuma*, — and again on the opposition between the moral and the physical side of man's nature. In the end, it is anthropological dualism that wins the adherence of the Roman moralist: he sees in man a compound of two heterogeneous elements, soul and body, whose struggle is incessant and implacable. Seneca's psychology is a mixture of Stoicism and Platonism; and his doubts on the inner nature and destiny of the soul give his teachings a tinge of scepticism.

His *Ethics* bear the stamp of a most rigorous puritanism. But he was too well aware of human imperfection not to accommodate the impracticable precepts of the earlier Stoicism to the needs of his time. Thus, while he boasts of the *autarchy* of the wise man, he yet allows him the enjoyment of external goods, and this in deference to those lower inclinations whose tyrannical sway is an index of the merely natural man. Seneca also glories in the cosmopolitanism of human sentiments; he extols the love of neighbour; and he speaks in moving language of the miseries of life and the necessity of an hereafter.

### **The Eclecticism of the Academy: Cicero.**

The Academy became the focus of a full and complete fusion of all the prevalent philosophical systems. To this it lent itself admirably, for its scepticism had a peculiar affinity with the eclectic philosophy of the time.

The eclecticism of the Academy in the first century B.C. assumed its specific form in the philosophy of PHILO OF LARISSA (died about 80 B.C.), the founder of the Fourth Academy, and of ANTIOCHUS (died 68 B.C.). The former contended that the Academic scepticism was only a weapon against the Stoic criterium and did not exclude an innate certitude about things. The latter achieved the complete return of the Platonic school to dogmatism, turned his back on Carneades, professed his adherence all at once to Plato, Aristotle, and Zeno, and held that all the dogmatic systems of his predecessors did nothing more than express the same truths in different ways: this is the most complete form of eclecticism, such as we find it in CICERO (106-43), the celebrated disciple of Philo and Antiochus.

Although he displays a preference for the New Academy, Cicero is in touch with all the systems of his time, and all find a welcome in his assimilative mind. Amongst the many works through which his philosophical ideas are scattered, we may mention the *De Officiis*, *De Republica*, *De Legibus*, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, *De Natura Deorum*. He shines less by originality of ideas than by a remarkable aptitude for accommodating Grecian ideas to the Roman civilization. Cicero sets out from a *theoretical scepticism*, which he bases on the want of agreement between the various philosophies in the solution of the most important problems. This theoretical, neo-academic scepticism runs hand in hand with a *practical dogmatism*. In all moral questions — and they are the main object of philosophy — as well as in all those which have a bearing on ethics, we act on a positive conviction which, though not indeed an absolute certitude, far surpasses the probability of Carneades. And where are we to find this assurance which is to be the mainspring of our actions? In the *consciousness*, the intimate and immediate feeling, that some things are, that others are not: the first truths of the moral order are *innate*.

As soon, however, as Cicero comes down to the details of the problems raised by ethics, his eclectic wavering reasserts itself. He believes in the identity of the Platonic and Aristotelian



doctrines on the sovereign good, but he has some difficulty in reconciling them with the theory of the Stoics. With Zeno he admits the autarchy of wisdom, but he cannot bring himself to exclude corporeal enjoyments from his concept of the good (peripateticism). Epicureanism alone is rigorously excluded from his theory of happiness.

#### **74. The Eclecticism of the Peripatetics. Aristotle's Interpreters and Commentators.**

To arrange, annotate, and popularize the great philosophical work of Aristotle, was from the first century B.C. the great preoccupation of the peripatetic school. ANDRONICUS OF RHODES, head of the Athenian School from 60 to 40 B.C., gave a powerful impetus to this work of exegesis by publishing, in conjunction with the grammarian TYRANNIO, a complete, annotated edition of the master's works. BOETHUS OF SIDON and ARISTO are two other commentators of note. Not that these men followed scrupulously on the lines of Aristotle in their own philosophy: no less than the others, the peripatetic school was susceptible to infiltrations from foreign sources. Under the Empire, the peripatetics continued to gravitate towards eclecticism while clinging more than ever to the works of Aristotle, whose Logic they took a special delight in commentating. The most celebrated among them was ALEXANDER OF APHRODISIAS (about 200 A.D.), the great commentator whom posterity has called the second Aristotle. Yet he also deviates in some capital points from Aristotelian philosophy. He emphasizes the individuality of substances so far as to reduce the universal to a pure concept without objective worth. He teaches that the passive intellect (*nous hulikos kai phusikos*) becomes an acting faculty (*nous epiktêtos*, rendered later on by *intellectus acquisitus*) through an extrinsic illumination (*cf. the thurathen* of Aristotle) which it receives from the "active intellect" or Divine being (*nous poiêtikos*). Our soul is wholly perishable; the potential intellect born with the body disappears with it: this is a denial of the immortality of the soul. Alexander thus decides, in the materialistic sense, a point of doctrine left in doubt by Aristotle. Whole schools of philosophy in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, accepted his interpretation. We may add that the Aristotelian commentator is a convinced defender of human liberty: in the name of liberty, he denies Providence. From the second half of the third century Aristotle found numerous commentators and admirers in the Neo-Platonic School. The latter, however, had not at any time a monopoly of the commentaries on the Stagirite.

### **§ 3. THE SCEPTICISM OF THE NEO-PYRRHONIC SCHOOL.**

#### **Reappearance of Scepticism.**

The eclecticism which, in the New Academy, had taken the place of scepticism early in the first century B.C., contained within it the very germs of the theory it wished to supersede. The instability of the mind that goes foraging into all systems, is an index of the doubt that troubles it. The new converts to scepticism were, for the most part, medical doctors. In the name of medical empiricism, they confined themselves to the observation of phenomena, and attaching no importance to speculative knowledge they contented themselves in the domain of practical maxims. Scepticism was but one step farther.

The scepticism of this period claims to follow Pyrrho, but it owes much more to Arcesilaus and Carneades. Its influence was neither great nor lasting. Through exhaustion of thought there arose a thirst for dogmatism — indeed, it may be said that Neo-Pyrrhonic scepticism was an approach towards the ideas that inspired Neo-Platonism.

## Aenesidemus.

In his *purrrôneioi logoi*, Aenesidemus (end of first century B.C.) professes in absolute terms a real and universal doubt. He not only rejects the dogmatism of the later academicians, but he even rejects the theory of opinion or probability. Neither sense knowledge nor intellectual knowledge can give us any certitude. Aenesidemus drew up his proofs under ten heads, which constitute the classic code of ancient scepticism. Sextus Empiricus subdivides these according as they pertain to the nature of the knowing subject, to the nature of the known object, or to the relation between subject and object. All the objections of Aenesidemus are centred in this fundamental idea: *our representations being relative, we can have no criterion of truth*. Consequently, we should *abstain* from all judgment. He himself does not pretend to *prove* the correctness of his thesis — that would have been a contradiction — but merely to give information on our internal condition of mind. His philosophy is not a doctrine (*hairesis*), but a principle of conduct, a tendency (*agôge*)....

In *practical* life, this attitude of mind is held to produce calmness of soul, happiness. Like the other sceptics, Aenesidemus admits that sensations can serve as a guide for conduct.

## Sextus Empiricus.

At the close of the second century A.D., SEXTUS EMPIRICUS recapitulated, in lengthy treatises (especially the *Pyrrhonic Hypotyposes*), the extensive work of the sceptical school: these form a repertory, rich in documents, but not very orderly, of arguments against all forms of dogmatism.

Sextus attacks both the formal methods of science and its real contents. Its methods are powerless, for there is neither an infallible criterion of truth, nor any legitimate means of demonstration. Its contents are hollow and useless, for the concept of cause can give no information about any external reality. Even Ethics itself is not a science: the contradictory views of philosophers on the nature of the good, are enough to show that nothing is good in itself. All these theses are supported by prolix commentaries, of unequal value, in which Sextus very often merely repeats the views of Aenesidemus and of the New Academy. Since every enunciation may be met by another based on arguments of equal force (*isostheneia tôn logôn*), we must only remain in doubt and suspend our judgment (*epochê*).

Although our knowledge, being relative, cannot tell us *what external things are*, it is capable of guiding our practical life and leading us to happiness.

This scepticism, like the eclecticism which enjoyed a parallel development, plainly confined itself to repetitions of the past: an evidence of the philosophic bankruptcy of the epoch. Still, Grecian genius was yet to take one last flight, by changing for a fourth time the general orientation of its intellectual activity.

---

Maurice de Wulf. *History of Medieval Philosophy*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1909.

© SophiaOmni, 2013. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.