



The Cyrenaics Albert Stöckl

The founder of the Cyrenaic or Hedonist School was Aristippus (the Elder), described by Aristotle as a Sophist. He was a native of Cyrene (whence the name Cyrenaic given to his philosophy). The fame of Socrates attracted him to Athens, where he joined the circle of the philosopher's disciples. He would seem to have been acquainted, previously, with the philosophy of Protagoras, traces of which appear in his own teaching. The manners which prevailed in the wealthy and luxurious city where he was born, were not without influence in determining his love for pleasure. He is said to have been a frequent guest at the courts of the elder and younger Dionysii of Sicily, and to have made there the acquaintance of Plato.

Aristippus gave special prominence to the theory of Happiness propounded by Socrates, but he interpreted it in a fashion which accorded with the peculiarities of his own disposition, and his own tendencies. He makes Happiness the supreme good of man, and the supreme end of human life. But Happiness, according to Aristippus, consists in the pleasure of the moment, and this pleasure is the sensation of gentle motion. The motion of which we have sensation is of three kinds: feeble motion, to which we remain indifferent; violent motion, which is in disaccord with nature, and which we describe as pain or suffering; and lastly, motion of the easy and gentle kind, which is congenial to nature, and which we describe as a movement of pleasure. Pleasure is, therefore, not merely the absence of pain, it consists in an active movement; it is the pleasure that passes — the pleasure of the moment. This alone can make us happy; it is the highest good of man. Our true duty is to enjoy the present, for that alone is in our power.

The details of this theory are in accord with these fundamental principles. The primary form of pleasure, according to Aristippus, is bodily pleasure, and every pleasure is accompanied by an affection of the bodily organism. Pleasure, as such, is never bad, though some pleasures are derived from causes which are evil. One pleasure does not differ from another in quality, nor is one superior to another, their intensity and their duration alone determine their worth. The difference between good and evil pleasures is therefore a question of custom; there is no intrinsic distinction in the things themselves.

But to enjoy aright the pleasure of the moment, we require Intelligence and Virtue. Intelligence must subdue the passions and prejudices which disturb enjoyment, and prevent men from giving themselves to pleasure at every moment, and at the same time it must enable the individual so to take advantage of passing circumstances, and so to direct them, that he shall be able to derive enjoyment from every situation in life. Virtue, on the other hand, being the same thing as Self-Control, must enable man to enjoy pleasure without becoming a slave to it, must enable him to give himself to pleasure in such a way as not to bring upon himself suffering, sickness, or disease. Control of pleasure, in the midst of pleasure, must be secured by Virtue. Intelligence and Virtue are, therefore, valuable as means to pleasure. The man who possesses them for this end is truly wise.

In keeping with the Hedonistic ethics of Aristippus is his theory of cognition, which restricts all our knowledge to sensation. The Cyrenaics distinguish between subjective affection (*to pathos*) and the external object which produces this affection. The former belongs to the sphere

of our own consciousness; the latter exists, but more than this we do not know regarding it. Whether the sensations of other men correspond with our own we have no means of knowing; the application of the same names to the same objects proves nothing. This, it is clear, is no more than a further development of the subjectivism propounded in the Protagorean theory of cognition.

6. To the Cyrenaic School belong Arete, daughter of Aristippus, and her son Aristippus the Younger, surnamed “the mother-taught” (*mêtrodidaktos*), who was probably the first to give systematic form to the hedonistic doctrines, and to whom we owe the comparison of the three conditions of sensation — trouble, pleasure, indifference, to the tempest, the gentle wind, and the tranquil sea; Theodorus, who was surnamed “the Atheist” because of his denying the existence of the gods and of moral law, and who held that a particular momentary pleasure was indifferent, that enduring joy (Cheerfulness) was the end to be sought by the truly wise; the pupils of Theodorus, Bio and Evemerus, who explained the belief in the gods to have arisen out of the custom of honouring men; Hegesias, surnamed the “death-adviser,” who, despairing of positive happiness, taught that true wisdom consisted in indifference to pleasure and pain, and even to life itself, which he held to be valueless; finally, Anniceris (the younger) who endeavoured to give a higher interpretation to the theory of pleasure by making friendship, gratitude, love of parents and country, social intercourse, and the pursuit of honour, means to happiness; he is, however, careful to remark that every effort on behalf of others has its cause, and its purpose in the pleasure procured to ourselves by this benevolence; he thus continues to maintain the egoistic principles of Hedonism.

Albert Stöckl. *Handbook of the History of Philosophy. (Part 1: Pre-Scholastic Philosophy)*. Trans. T.A. Finlay. Dublin: M.H. Gill and Son, 1887.

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