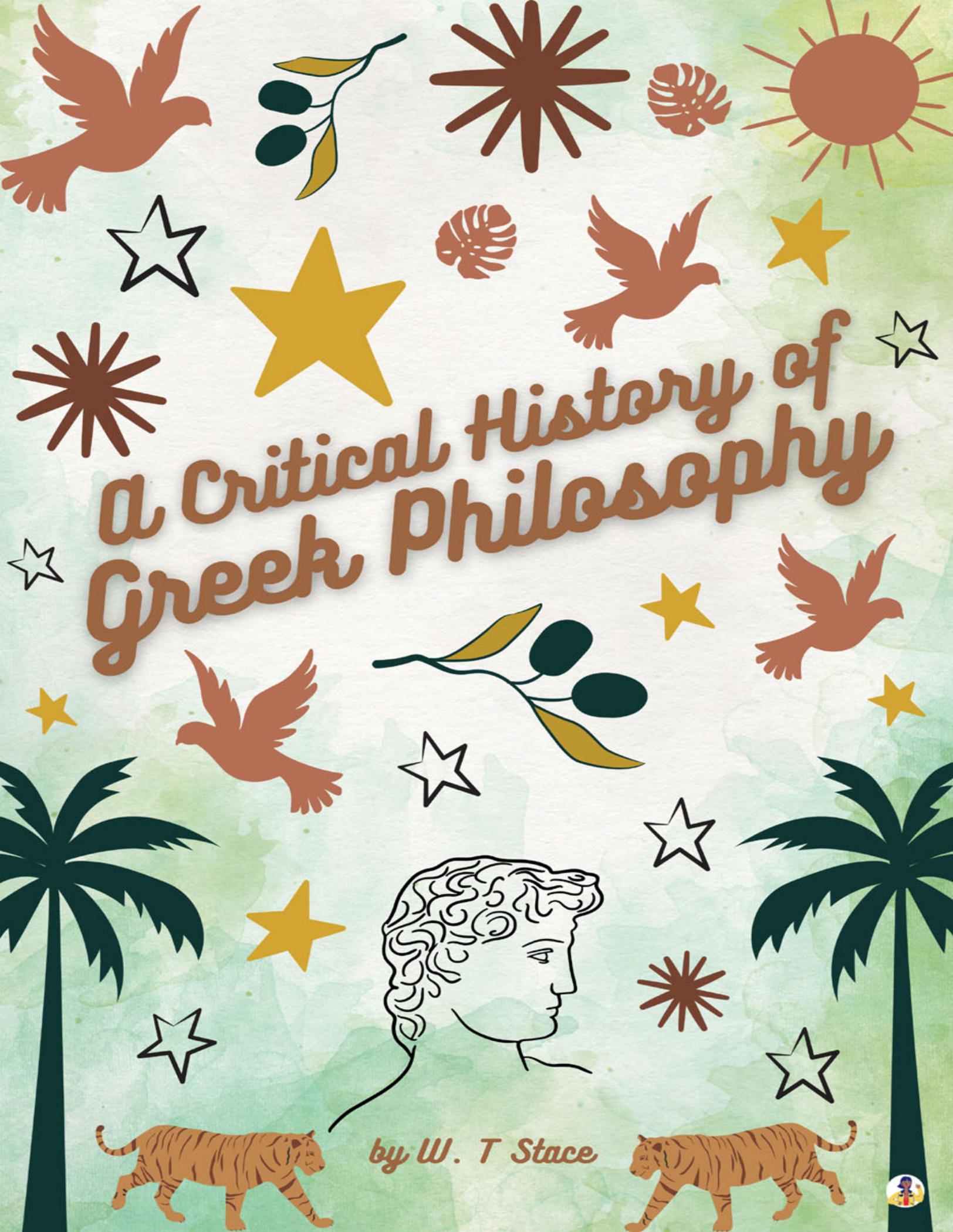


*a Critical History of
Greek Philosophy*

by W. T. Stace



Copyright © 2023 by W. T. Stace.

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Contents

Preface

1. The Origins and Development of Greek Philosophy
2. The Ionics
3. The Pythagoreans
4. The Eleatics
5. Heracleitus
6. Empedocles
7. The Atomists
8. Anaxagoras
9. The Sophists
10. Socrates
11. The Semi-Socratics
12. Plato
13. Aristotle

14. The General Character of Post-Aristotelian Philosophy

15. The Stoics

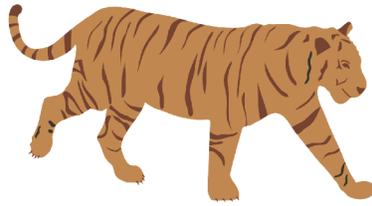
16. The Epicureans

17. The Sceptics

18. Transition of Neo-Platonism

19. The Neo-Platonists

About Author



Preface

This book contains the substance, and for the most part the words, of a course of public lectures delivered during the first three months of 1919. The original division into lectures has been dropped, the matter being more conveniently redivided into chapters.

The audience to whom the lectures were delivered was composed of members of the general public, and not only of students. For the most part they possessed no previous knowledge of philosophy. Hence this book, like the original lectures, assumes no previous special knowledge, though it assumes, of course, a state of general education in the reader. Technical philosophical terms are carefully explained when first introduced; and a special effort has been made to put philosophical ideas in the clearest way possible. But it must be remembered that many of the profoundest as well as the most difficult of human conceptions are to be found in Greek philosophy. Such ideas are difficult in themselves, however clearly expressed. No amount of explanation can ever render them anything but difficult

to the unsophisticated mind, and anything in the nature of “philosophy made easy” is only to be expected from quacks and charlatans.

Greek philosophy is not, even now, antiquated. It is not from the point of view of an antiquary or historian that its treasures are valuable. We are dealing here with living things, and not with mere dead things—not with the dry bones and debris of a bygone age. And I have tried to lecture and write for living people, and not for mere fossil-grubbers. If I did not believe that there is to be found here, in Greek philosophy, at least a measure of the truth, the truth that does not grow old, I would not waste five minutes of my life upon it.

“We do not,” says a popular modern writer,¹ “bring the young mind up against the few broad elemental questions that are the *questions of metaphysics* We do not make it discuss, correct it, elucidate it. That was the way of the Greeks, and we worship that divine people far too much to adopt their way. No, we lecture to our young people about not philosophy but philosophers, we put them through book after book, telling how other people have discussed these questions. We avoid the questions of metaphysics, but we deliver semi-digested half views of the discussions of, and answers to these questions made by men of all sorts and qualities, in various remote languages and under conditions quite different from our own. . . . It is as if we began teaching arithmetic by long lectures upon the origin of the Roman numerals, and then went on to the lives and motives of the Arab mathematicians in Spain, or started with Roger Bacon in chemistry, or Sir Richard Owen in comparative anatomy It is time

the educational powers began to realise that the questions of metaphysics, the elements of philosophy, are, here and now to be done afresh in each mind What is wanted is philosophy, and not a shallow smattering of the history of philosophy. . . The proper way to discuss metaphysics, like the proper way to discuss mathematics or chemistry, is to discuss the accumulated and digested product of human thought in such matters.”

Plausible words these, certain to seem conclusive to the mob, notwithstanding that for one element of truth they contain nine of untruth! The elements of truth are that our educational system unwarrantably leaves unused the powerful weapon of oral discussion—so forcibly wielded by the Greeks—and develops book knowledge at the expense of original thought. Though even here it must be remembered, as regards the Greeks, (1) that if they studied the history of philosophy but little, it was because there was then but little history of philosophy to study, and (2) that if anyone imagines that the great Greek thinkers did not fully master the thought of their predecessors before constructing their own systems, he is grievously mistaken, and (3) that in some cases the over-reliance on oral discussion—the opposite fault to ours—led to intellectual dishonesty, quibbling, ostentation, disregard of truth, shallowness, and absence of all principle; this was the case with the Sophists.

As to the comparisons between arithmetic and philosophy, chemistry and philosophy, etc., they rest wholly upon a false parallel, and involve a total failure to comprehend the nature of philosophic truth, and its fundamental difference from arithmetical, chemical, or physical truth. If Eratosthenes thought the circumference of the earth

to be so much, whereas it has now been discovered to be so much, then the later correct view simply cancels and renders nugatory the older view. The one is correct, the other incorrect. We can ignore and forget the incorrect view altogether. But the development of philosophy proceeds on quite other principles. Philosophical truth is no sum in arithmetic to be totted up so that the answer is thus formally and finally correct or incorrect. Rather, the philosophical truth unfolds itself, factor by factor, in time, in the successive systems of philosophy, and it is only in the complete series that the complete truth is to be found. The system of Aristotle does not simply cancel and refute that of Plato. Spinoza does not simply abolish Descartes. Aristotle completes Plato, as his necessary complement. Spinoza does the same for Descartes. And so it is always. The calculation of Eratosthenes is simply wrong, and so we can afford to forget it. But the systems of Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Leibniz, etc., are all alike factors of the truth. They are as true now as they were in their own times, though they are not, and never were, the whole truth. And therefore it is that they are not simply wrong, done with, finished, ended, and that we cannot afford to forget them. Whether it is not possible to bring the many lights to a single focus, to weld the various factors of the truth into a single organic whole or system, which should thus be the total result to date, is another question. Only one such attempt has ever been made, but no one will pretend that it is possible to understand it without a thorough knowledge of all previous systems, a knowledge, in fact, of the separate factors of the truth before they are thus

combined into a total result. Besides, that attempt, too, is now part of the history of philosophy!

Hence any philosophical thinking which is not founded upon a thorough study of the systems of the past will necessarily be shallow and worthless. And the notions that we can dispense with this study, and do everything out of our own heads, that everyone is to be his own philosopher, and is competent to construct his own system in his own way—such ideas are utterly empty and hollow. Of these truths, indeed, we see a notable example in what the writer just quoted styles his “metaphysic.” This so-called metaphysic is wholly based upon the assumption that knowledge and its object exist, each on its own account, external to one another, the one here, the other there over against it, and that knowledge is an “instrument” which in this external manner takes hold of its object and makes it its own. The very moment the word “instrument” is used here, all the rest, including the invalidity of knowledge, follows as a matter of course. Such assumption then—that knowledge is an “instrument”—our writer makes, wholly uncritically, and without a shadow of right. He gives no sign that it has ever even occurred to him that this is an assumption, that it needs any enquiry, or that it is possible for anyone to think otherwise. Yet anyone who will take the trouble, not merely superficially to dip into the history of philosophy, but thoroughly to submit himself to its discipline, will at least learn that this is an assumption, a very doubtful assumption, too, which no one now has the right to foist upon the public without discussion as if it were an axiomatic truth. He might even learn that it is a false assumption. And he will note, as an ominous sign, that the

subjectivism which permeates and directs the whole course of Mr. Wells's thinking is identical in character with that subjectivism which was the essential feature of the decay and *downfall* of the Greek philosophic spirit, and was the cause of its final *ruin* and *dissolution*.

I would counsel the young, therefore, to pay no attention to plausible and shallow words such as those quoted, but, before forming their own philosophic opinions, most thoroughly and earnestly to study and master the history of past philosophies, first the Greek and then the modern. That this cannot be done merely by reading a modern resume of that history, but only by studying the great thinkers in their own works, is true. But philosophical education must begin, and the function of such books as this, is, not to complete it, but to begin it; and to obtain first of all a general view of what must afterwards be studied in detail is no bad way of beginning. Moreover, the study of the development and historical connexions of the various philosophies, which is not found in the original writings themselves, will always provide a work for histories of philosophy to do.

Two omissions in this book require, perhaps, a word of explanation.

Firstly, in dealing with Plato's politics I have relied on the "Republic," and said nothing of the "Laws." This would not be permissible in a history of political theories, nor even in a history of philosophy which laid any special emphasis on politics. But, from my point of view, politics lie on the extreme outer margin of philosophy, so that a more slender treatment of the subject is permissible. Moreover, the "Republic," whether written early or late, expresses, in

my opinion, the views of Plato, and not those of Socrates, and it still remains the outstanding, typical, and characteristic expression of the Platonic political ideal, however much that ideal had afterwards to be modified by practical considerations.

Secondly, I have not even mentioned the view, now held by some, that the theory of Ideas is really the work of Socrates, and not of Plato, and that Plato's own philosophy consisted in some sort of esoteric number-theory, combined with theistic and other doctrines. I can only say that this theory, as expounded for example by Professor Burnet, does not commend itself to me, that, in fact, I do not believe it, but that, it being impossible to discuss it adequately in a book of this kind, I have thought that, rather than discuss it inadequately, it were better to leave it alone altogether. Moreover, it stands on a totally different footing from, say, Professor Burnet's interpretation of Parmenides, which I have discussed. That concerned the interpretation of the true meaning of a philosophy. This merely concerns the question who was the author of a philosophy. That was a question of principle, this merely of personalities. That was of importance to the philosopher, this merely to the historian and antiquary. It is like the Bacon-Shakespeare question, which no lover of drama, as such, need concern himself with at all. No doubt the Plato-Socrates question is of interest to antiquarians, but after all, fundamentally, it does not matter who is to have the credit of the theory of Ideas, the only essential thing for us being to understand that theory, and rightly to apprehend its value as a factor of the truth. This book is primarily concerned with philosophical ideas, their truth, meaning, and significance, and not

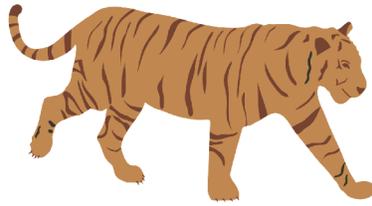
with the rights and wrongs of antiquarian disputes. It does indeed purport to be a *history*, as well as a discussion of philosophic conceptions. But this only means that it takes up philosophical ideas in their historical sequence and connexions, and it does this only because the conceptions of evolution in philosophy, of the onward march of thought to a determined goal; of its gradual and steady rise to the supreme heights of idealism, its subsequent decline, and ultimate collapse, are not only profoundly impressive as historical phenomena, but are of vital importance to a true conception of philosophy itself. Were it not for this, Mr. Wells would, I think, be right, and I for one should abandon treatment in historical order altogether. Lastly, I may remark that the description of this book as a *critical* history means that it is, or attempts to be critical, not of dates, texts, readings, and the like, but of philosophical conceptions.

I owe a debt of thanks to Mr. F. L. Woodward, M.A., late principal of Mahinda College, Galle, Ceylon, for assisting me in the compilation of the index of names, and in sundry other matters.

W.T.S.

January, 1920.

1. H. G. Wells in "First and Last Things."



1

The Origins and Development of Greek Philosophy

It is natural that, at the commencement of any study, one should be expected to say what the subject-matter of that study is. Botany is the knowledge of plants, astronomy of the heavenly bodies, geology of the rocks of the earth's crust. What, then, is the special sphere of philosophy? What is philosophy about? Now it is not as easy to give a concise definition of philosophy, as it is of the other sciences. In the first place, the content of philosophy has differed considerably in different periods of history. In general the tendency has been to narrow down the scope of the subject as knowledge advanced, to exclude from philosophy what was formerly included in it. Thus in the time of Plato, physics and astronomy were included as parts of philosophy, whereas now they constitute separate sciences. This, however, is not an insurmountable difficulty. What chiefly militates against the effort to frame a definition is that

the precise content of philosophy is differently viewed by different schools of thought. Thus a definition of philosophy which a follower of Herbert Spencer might frame would be unacceptable to an Hegelian, and the Hegelian definition would be rejected by the Spencerian. If we were to include in our definition some such phrase as "the knowledge of the Absolute," while this might suit some philosophers, others would deny that there is any Absolute at all. Another school would say that there may be an Absolute, but that it is unknowable, so that philosophy cannot be the knowledge of it. Yet another school would tell us that, whether there is or is not an Absolute, whether it is or is not knowable, the knowledge of it is in any case useless, and ought not to be sought. Hence no definition of philosophy can be appreciated without some knowledge of the special tenets of the various schools. In a word, the proper place to give a definition is not at the beginning of the study of philosophy, but at the end of it. Then, with all views before us, we might be able to decide the question.

I shall make no attempt, therefore, to place before you a precise definition. But perhaps the same purpose will be served, if I pick out some of the leading traits of philosophy, which serve to distinguish it from other branches of knowledge, and illustrate them by enumerating—but without any attempt at completeness—some of the chief problems which philosophers have usually attempted to solve. And firstly, philosophy is distinguished from other branches of knowledge by the fact that, whereas these each take some particular portion of the universe for their study, philosophy does not specialize in this way, but deals with the universe as a whole. The universe is

one, and ideal knowledge of it would be one; but the principles of specialization and division of labour apply here as elsewhere, and so astronomy takes for its subject that portion of the universe which we call the heavenly bodies, botany specializes in plant life, psychology in the facts of the mind, and so on. But philosophy does not deal with this or that particular sphere of being, but with being as such. It seeks to see the universe as a single coordinated system of things. It might be described as the science of things in general. The world in its most universal aspects is its subject. All sciences tend to generalize, to reduce multitudes of particular facts to single general laws. Philosophy carries this process to its highest limit. It generalizes to the utmost. It seeks to view the entire universe in the light of the fewest possible general principles, in the light, if possible, of a single ultimate principle.

It is a consequence of this that the special sciences take their subject matter, and much of their contents, for granted, whereas philosophy seeks to trace everything back to its ultimate grounds. It may be thought that this description of the sciences is incorrect. Is not the essential maxim of modern science to assume nothing, to take nothing for granted, to assert nothing without demonstration, to prove all? This is no doubt true within certain limits, but beyond those limits it does not hold good. All the sciences take quite for granted certain principles and facts which are, for them, ultimate. To investigate these is the portion of the philosopher, and philosophy thus takes up the thread of knowledge where the sciences drop it. It begins where they end. It investigates what they take as a matter of course.

Let us consider some examples of this. The science of geometry deals with the laws of space. But it takes space just as it finds it in common experience. It takes space for granted. No geometrician asks what space is. This, then, will be a problem for philosophy. Moreover, geometry is founded upon certain fundamental propositions which, it asserts, being self-evident, require no investigation. These are called "axioms." That two straight lines cannot enclose a space, and that equals being added to equals the results are equal, are common examples. Into the ground of these axioms the geometrician does not enquire. That is the business of philosophy. Not that philosophers affect to doubt the truth of these axioms. But surely it is a very strange thing, and a fact quite worthy of study, that there are some statements of which we feel that we must give the most laborious proofs, and others in the case of which we feel no such necessity. How is it that some propositions can be self-evident and others must be proved? What is the ground of this distinction? And when one comes to think of it, it is a very extraordinary property of mind that it should be able to make the most universal and unconditional statements about things, without a jot of evidence or proof. When we say that two straight lines cannot enclose a space, we do not mean merely that this has been found true in regard to all the particular pairs of straight lines with which we have tried the experiment. We mean that it never can be and never has been otherwise. We mean that a million million years ago two straight lines did not enclose a space, and that it will be the same a million million years hence, and that it is just as true on those stars, if there are any, which are invisible even to the greatest telescopes.

But we have no experience of what will happen a million million years hence, or of what can take place among those remote stars. And yet we assert, with absolute confidence, that our axiom is and must be equally true everywhere and at all times. Moreover, we do not found this on probabilities gathered from experience. Nobody would make experiments or use telescopes to prove such axioms. How is it that they are thus self-evident, that the mind can make these definite and far-reaching assertions without any evidence at all? Geometricians do not consider these questions. They take the facts for granted. To solve these problems is for philosophy.

Again, the physical sciences take the existence of matter for granted. But philosophy asks what matter is. At first sight it might appear that this question is one for the physicist and not the philosopher. For the problem of “the constitution of matter” is a well-known physical problem. But a little consideration will show that this is quite a different question from the one the philosopher propounds. For even if it be shown that all matter is ether, or electricity, or vortex-atoms, or other such, this does not help us in our special problem. For these theories, even if proved, only teach us that the different kinds of matter are forms of some one physical existence. But what we want to know is what physical existence itself is. To prove that one kind of matter is really another kind of matter does not tell us what is the essential nature of matter. That, therefore, is a problem, not of science, but of philosophy.

In the same way, all the sciences take the existence of the universe for granted. But philosophy seeks to know why it is that there is a universe at all. Is it true, for example, that there is some

single ultimate reality which produces all things? And if so, what sort of a reality is it? Is it matter, or mind, or something different from both? Is it good or evil? And if it is good, how is it that there is evil in the world?

Moreover every science, except the purely mathematical sciences, assumes the truth of the law of causation. Every student of logic knows that this is the ultimate canon of the sciences, the foundation of them all. If we did not believe in the truth of the law of causation, namely, that everything which has a beginning has a cause, and that in the same circumstances the same things invariably happen, all the sciences would at once crumble to dust. In every scientific investigation, this truth is assumed. If we ask the zoologist how he knows that all camels are herbivorous, he will no doubt point in the first instance to experience. The habits of many thousands of camels have been observed. But this only proves that those particular camels are herbivorous. How about the millions that have never been observed at all? He can only appeal to the law of causation. The camel's structure is such that it cannot digest meat. It is a case of cause and effect. How do we know that water always freezes at 0° centigrade (neglecting questions of pressure, etc.)? How do we know that this is true at those regions of the earth where no one has ever been to see? Only because we believe that in the same circumstances the same thing always happens, that like causes always produce like effects. But how do we know the truth of this law of causation itself? Science does not consider the question. It traces its assertions back to this law, but goes no further. Its fundamental

canon it takes for granted. The grounds of causation, why it is true, and how we know it is true, are, therefore, philosophical questions.

One may be tempted to enquire whether many of these questions, especially those connected with the ultimate reality, do not transcend human faculties altogether, and whether we had not better confine our enquiries to matters that are not "too high for us." One may question whether it is possible for finite minds to comprehend the infinite. Now it is very right that such questions should be asked, and it is essential that a correct answer should be found. But, for the present, there is nothing to say about the matter, except that these questions themselves constitute one of the most important problems of philosophy, though it is one which, as a matter of fact, has scarcely been considered in full until modern times. The Greeks did not raise the question.¹ And as this is itself one of the problems of philosophy, it will be well to start with an open mind. The question cannot be decided offhand, but must be thoroughly investigated. That the finite mind of man cannot understand the infinite is one of those popular dogmatic assertions, which are bruited about from mouth to mouth, as if they were self-evident, and so come to tyrannize over men's minds. But for the most part those who make this statement have never thoroughly sifted the grounds of it, but simply take it as something universally admitted, and trouble no further about it. But at the very least we should first know exactly what we mean by such terms as "mind," "finite," and "infinite." And we shall not find that our difficulties end even there.

Philosophy, then, deals with the universe as a whole; and it seeks to take nothing for granted. A third characteristic may be noted as

especially important, though here no doubt we are trenching upon matters upon which there is no such universal agreement. Philosophy is essentially an attempt to rise from sensuous to pure, that is, non-sensuous, thought. This requires some explanation.

We are conscious, so to speak, of two different worlds, the external physical world and the internal mental world. If we look outwards we are aware of the former, if we turn our gaze inwards upon our own minds we become aware of the latter. It may appear incorrect to say that the external world is purely physical, for it includes other minds. I am aware of your mind, and this is, to me, part of the world which is external to me. But I am not now speaking of what we know by inference, but only of what we directly perceive. I cannot directly perceive your mind, but only your physical body. In the last resort it will be found that I am aware of the existence of your mind only by inference from perceived physical facts, such as the movements of your body and the sounds that issue from your lips. The only mind which I can immediately perceive is my own. There is then a physical world external to us, and an internal mental world.

Which of these will naturally be regarded as the most real? Men will regard as the most real that which is the most familiar, that which they came first into contact with, and have most experience of. And this is unquestionably the external material world. When a child is born, it turns its eyes to the light, which is an external physical thing. Gradually it gets to know different objects in the room. It comes to know its mother, but its mother is, in the first instance, a physical object, a body. It is only long afterwards that its mother becomes for the child a mind or a soul. In general, all our earliest experiences are

of the material world. We come to know of the mental world only by introspection, and the habit of introspection comes in youth or manhood only, and to many people it hardly comes at all. In all those early impressionable years, therefore, when our most durable ideas of the universe are formed, we are concerned almost exclusively with the material world. The mental world with which we are much less familiar consequently tends to appear to all of us something comparatively unreal, a world of shadows. The bent of our minds becomes materialistic.

What I have said of the individual is equally true of the race. Primitive man does not brood over the facts of his own mind. Necessity compels him to devote most of his life to the acquisition of food, and to warding off the dangers which continually threaten him from other physical objects. And even among ourselves, the majority of men have to spend most of their time upon considering various aspects of things external to them. By the individual training of each man, and by long hereditary habit, then, it comes about that men tend to regard the physical world as more real than the mental.

Abundant evidences of this are to be found in the structure of human language. We seek to explain what is strange by means of what is well-known. We try to express the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. We shall find that language always seeks to express the mental by the analogy of the physical. We speak of a man as a "clear" thinker. "Clear" is an attribute of physical objects. Water is clear if it has no extraneous matter in it. We say that a man's ideas are "luminous," thus taking a metaphor from physical light. We talk of having an idea "at the back of the mind." "At the back of"? Has the

mind got a front and a back? We are thinking of it as if it were a physical thing in space. We speak of mental habits of "attention." "Attention" means stretching or turning the mind in a special direction. We "reflect." "Reflection" means bending our thoughts back upon themselves. But, literally speaking, only physical objects can be stretched, turned, and bent. Whenever we wish to express something mental we do it by a physical analogy. We talk of it in terms of physical things. This shows how deep-rooted our materialism is. If the mental world were more familiar and real to us than the material, language would have been constructed on the opposite principle. The earliest words of language would have expressed mental facts, and we should afterwards have tried to express physical things by means of mental analogies.

In the East one commonly hears Oriental idealism contrasted with Western materialism. Such phrases may possess a certain relative truth. But if they mean that there is in the East, or anywhere else in the world, a race of men who are naturally idealists, they are nonsense. Materialism is ingrained in all men. We, Easterns or Westerns, are born materialists. Hence when we try to think of objects which are commonly regarded as non-material, such as God or the soul, it requires continual effort, a tremendous struggle, to avoid picturing them as material things. It goes utterly against the grain. Perhaps hundreds of thousands of years of hereditary materialism are against us. The popular idea of ghosts will illustrate this. Those who believe in ghosts, I suppose, regard them as some sort of disembodied souls. The pictures of ghosts in magazines show them as if composed of matter, but matter of some *thin* kind, such as

vapour. Certain Indian systems of thought, which are by way of regarding themselves as idealistic, nevertheless teach that thought or mind is an extremely subtle kind of matter, far subtler than any ever dealt with by the physicist and chemist. This is very interesting, because it shows that the authors of such ideas feel vaguely that it is wrong to think of thought as if it were matter, but being unable to think of it in any other way, owing to man's ingrained materialism, they seek to palliate their sin by making it thin matter. Of course this is just as absurd as the excuse made by the mother of an illegitimate child, that it was a very small one. This thin matter is just as material as lead or brass. And such systems are purely materialistic. But they illustrate the extraordinary difficulty that the ordinary mind experiences in attempting to rise from sensuous to non-sensuous thinking. They illustrate the ingrained materialism of man.

This natural human materialism is also the cause of mysticism and symbolism. A symbolic thought necessarily contains two terms, the symbol and the reality which it symbolizes. The symbol is always a sensuous or material object, or the mental image of such an object, and the reality is always something non-sensuous. Because the human mind finds it such an incredible struggle to think non-sensuously, it seeks to help itself by symbols. It takes a material thing and makes it stand for the non-material thing which it is too weak to grasp. Thus we talk of God as the "light of lights." No doubt this is a very natural expression of the religious consciousness, and it has its meaning. But it is not the naked truth. Light is a physical existence, and God is no more light than he is heat or electricity. People talk of symbolism as if it were a very high and exalted thing.

They say, "What a wonderful piece of symbolism!" But, in truth symbolism is the mark of an infirm mind. It is the measure of our weakness and not of our strength. Its root is in materialism, and it is produced and propagated by those who are unable to rise above a materialistic level.

Now philosophy is essentially the attempt to get beyond this sort of symbolic and mystical thinking, to get at the naked truth, to grasp what lies behind the symbol as it is in itself. These inferior modes of thought are a help to those who are themselves below their level, but are a hindrance to those who seek to reach the highest level of truth.

It is often said that philosophy is a very difficult and abstruse subject. Its difficulty lies almost wholly in the struggle to think non-sensuously. Whenever we come to anything in philosophy that seems beyond us, we shall generally find that the root of the trouble is that we are trying to think non-sensuous objects in a sensuous way, that is, we are trying to form mental pictures and images of them, for all mental pictures are composed of sensuous materials, and hence no such picture is adequate for a pure thought. It is impossible to exaggerate this difficulty. Even the greatest philosophers have succumbed to it. We shall constantly have to point out that when a great thinker, such as Parmenides or Plato, fails, and begins to flounder in difficulties, the reason usually is that, though for a time he has attained to pure thought, he has sunk back exhausted into sensuous thinking, and has attempted to form mental pictures of what is beyond the power of any such picture to represent, and so has fallen into contradictions. We must keep this constantly in mind in the study of philosophy.

In modern times philosophy is variously divided, as into metaphysics, which is the theory of reality, ethics, the theory of the good, and aesthetics, the theory of the beautiful. Modern divisions do not, however, altogether fit in with Greek philosophy, and it is better to let the natural divisions develop themselves as we go on, than to attempt to force our material into these moulds.

If, now, we look round the world and ask; in what countries and what ages the kind of thought we have described has attained a high degree of development, we shall find such a development only in ancient Greece and in modern Europe. There were great civilizations in Egypt, China, Assyria, and so on. They produced art and religion, but no philosophy to speak of. Even ancient Rome added nothing to the world's philosophical knowledge. Its so-called philosophers, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Epictetus, Lucretius, produced no essentially new principle. They were merely disciples of Greek Schools, whose writings may be full of interest and of noble feeling, but whose essential thoughts contained nothing not already developed by the Greeks.

The case of India is more doubtful. Opinions may differ as to whether India ever had any philosophy. The Upanishads contain religio-philosophical thinking of a kind. And later we have the six so-called schools of philosophy. The reasons why this Indian thought is not usually included in histories of philosophy are as follows. Firstly, philosophy in India has never separated itself from religious and practical needs. The ideal of knowledge for its own sake is rarely to be found. Knowledge is desired merely as a means towards salvation. Philosophy and science, said Aristotle, have their roots in

wonder,—the desire to know and understand for the sole sake of knowing and understanding. But the roots of Indian thought lie in the anxiety of the individual to escape from the ills and calamities of existence. This is not the scientific, but the practical spirit. It gives birth to religions, but not to philosophies. Of course it is a mistake to imagine that philosophy and religion are totally separate and have no community. They are in fact fundamentally akin. But they are also distinct. Perhaps the truest view is that they are identical in substance, but different in form. The substance of both is the absolute reality and the relation of all things, including men, to that reality. But whereas philosophy presents this subject-matter scientifically, in the form of pure thought, religion gives it in the form of sensuous pictures, myths, images, and symbols.

And this gives us the second reason why Indian thought is more properly classed as religious than philosophical. It seldom or never rises from sensuous to pure thought. It is poetical rather than scientific. It is content with symbols and metaphors in place of rational explanations, and all this is a mark of the religious, rather than the philosophical, presentation of the truth. For example, the main thought of the Upanishads is that the entire universe is derived from a single, changeless, eternal, infinite, being, called Brahman or Paramatman. When we come to the crucial question how the universe arises out of this being, we find such passages as this: —“As the colours in the flame or the red-hot iron proceed therefrom a thousand-fold, so do all beings proceed from the Unchangeable, and return again to it.” Or again, “As the web issues from the spider, as little sparks proceed from fire, so from the one soul proceed all

living animals, all worlds, all the gods and all beings.” There are thousands of such passages in the Upanishads. But obviously these neither explain nor attempt to explain anything. They are nothing but hollow metaphors. They are poetic rather than scientific. They may satisfy the imagination and the religious feelings, but not the rational understanding. Or when again Krishna, in the Bhagavat-Gita, describes himself as the moon among the lunar mansions, the sun among the stars, Meru among the high-peaked mountains, it is clear that we are merely piling sensuous image upon sensuous image without any further understanding of what the nature of the absolute being in its own self is. The moon, the sun, Meru, are physical sense-objects. And this is totally sensuous thinking, whereas the aim of philosophy is to rise to pure thought. In such passages we are still on the level of symbolism, and philosophy only begins when symbolism has been surpassed. No doubt it is possible to take the line that man’s thought is not capable of grasping the infinite as it is in itself, and can only fall back upon symbols. But that is another question, and at any rate, whether it is or is not possible to rise from sensuous to pure thought, philosophy is essentially the attempt to do so.

Lastly, Indian thought is usually excluded from the history of philosophy because, whatever its character, it lies outside the main stream of human development. It has been cut off by geographical and other barriers. Consequently, whatever its value in itself, it has exerted little influence upon philosophy in general.

The claim is sometimes put forward by Orientals themselves that Greek philosophy came from India, and if this were true, it would

greatly affect the statement made in the last paragraph. But it is not true. It used to be believed that Greek philosophy came from “the East,” but this meant Egypt. And even this theory is now abandoned. Greek culture, especially mathematics and astronomy, owed much to Egypt. But Greece did not owe its philosophy to that source. The view that it did was propagated by Alexandrian priests and others, whose sole motive was, that to represent the triumphs of Greek philosophy as borrowed from Egypt, flattered their national vanity. It was a great thing, wherever they found anything good, to say, “this must have come from us.” A precisely similar motive lies behind the Oriental claim that Greek philosophy came from India. There is not a scrap of evidence for it, and it rests entirely upon the supposed resemblance between the two. But this resemblance is in fact mythical. The whole character of Greek philosophy is European and unoriental to the back-bone. The doctrine of re-incarnation is usually appealed to. This characteristically Indian doctrine was held by the Pythagoreans, from whom it passed to Empedocles and Plato. The Pythagoreans got it from the Orphic sect, to whom quite possibly it came indirectly from India, although even this is by no means certain, and is in fact highly doubtful. But even if this be true, it proves nothing. Re-incarnation is of little importance in Greek philosophy. Even in Plato, who makes much of it, it is quite unessential to the fundamental ideas of his philosophy, and is only artificially connected with them. And the influence of this doctrine upon Plato’s philosophy was thoroughly bad. It was largely responsible for leading him into the main error of his philosophy,

which it required an Aristotle to correct. All this will be evident when we come to consider the systems of Plato and Aristotle.

The origin of Greek philosophy is not to be found in India, or Egypt, or in any country outside Greece. The Greeks themselves were solely responsible for it. It is not as if history traces back their thought only to a point at which it was already highly developed, and cannot explain its beginnings. We know its history from the time, so to speak, when it was in the cradle. In the next two chapters we shall see that the first Greek attempts at philosophising were so much the beginnings of a beginner, were so very crude and unformed, that it is mere perversity to suppose that they could not make these simple efforts for themselves. From those crude beginnings we can trace the whole development in detail up to its culmination in Aristotle, and beyond. So there is no need to assume foreign influence at any point.

Greek philosophy begins in the sixth century before Christ. It begins when men for the first time attempted to give a scientific reply to the question, "what is the explanation of the world?" Before this era we have, of course, the mythologies, cosmogonies, and theologies of the poets. But they contain no attempt at a naturalistic explanation of things. They belong to the spheres of poetry and religion, not to philosophy.

It must not be supposed, when we speak of the philosophy of Greece, that we refer only to the mainland of what is now called Greece. Very early in history, Greeks of the mainland migrated to the islands of the Aegean, to Sicily, to the South of Italy, to the coast of Asia Minor, and elsewhere, and founded flourishing colonies. The

Greece of philosophy includes all these places. It is to be thought of rather racially than territorially. It is the philosophy of the men of Greek race, wherever they happened to be situated. And in fact the first period of Greek philosophy deals exclusively with the thoughts of these colonial Greeks. It was not till just before the time of Socrates that philosophy was transplanted to the mainland.

Greek philosophy falls naturally into three periods. The first may be roughly described as pre-Socratic philosophy, though it does not include the Sophists who were both the contemporaries and the predecessors of Socrates. This period is the rise of Greek philosophy. Secondly, the period from the Sophists to Aristotle, which includes Socrates and Plato, is the maturity of Greek philosophy, the actual zenith and culmination of which is undoubtedly the system of Aristotle. Lastly, the period of post-Aristotelian philosophy constitutes the decline and fall of the national thought. These are not merely arbitrary divisions. Each period has its own special characters, which will be described in the sequel.

A few words must be said of the sources of our knowledge of pre-Socratic philosophy. If we want to know what Plato and Aristotle thought about any matter, we have only to consult their works. But the works of the earlier philosophers have not come down to us, except in fragments, and several of them never committed their opinions to writing. Our knowledge of their doctrines is the result of the laborious sifting by scholars of such materials as are available. Luckily the material has been plentiful. It may be divided into three classes. First come the fragments of the original writings of the philosophers themselves. These are in many cases long and

important, in other cases scanty. Secondly, there are the references in Plato and Aristotle. Of these by far the most important are to be found in the first book of Aristotle's "Metaphysics," which is a history of philosophy up to his own time, and is the first attempt on record to write a history of philosophy. Thirdly, there is an enormous mass of references, some valuable, some worthless, contained in the works of later, but still ancient, writers.

1. The reasoning of the Sceptics and others no doubt involved this question. But they did not consider it in its peculiar modern form.

You've Just Finished your Free Sample

Enjoyed the preview?

Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>