HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

STOICS, EPICUREANS, SCEPTICS

A.A. Long

Second Edition

Copyrighted material

HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY

STOICS, EPICUREANS, SCEPTICS

A. A. Long

Second Edition

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles

Copyrighted material

Second edition 1986
University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles

© 1974, 1986 A. A. Long

All rights reserved
No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the copyright owner

ISBN 0-520-05807-0 cloth
ISBN 0-520-05808-9 paper

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 86-040066

Printed in Great Britain

Copyrighted material

Contents

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION vii

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION ix

ABBREVIATIONS x

1. INTRODUCTION 1

2. EPICURUS AND EPICUREANISM 14
(*i*) Life and works 14
(*ii*) The scope of Epicurus' philosophy 19
(*iii*) Theory of knowledge 21
(*iv*) The structure of things 30
(*v*) The motion of atoms and formation of compound bodies 35
(*vi*) The gods of Epicurus 41
(*vii*) The soul and mental processes 49
(*viii*) Freedom of action 56
(*ix*) Pleasure and happiness 61
(*x*) Justice and friendship 69

3. SCEPTICISM 75
(*i*) Pyrrho and Timon—early Pyrrhonism 75
(*ii*) Academic Scepticism—Arcesilaus 88
(*iii*) Academic Scepticism—Carneades 94

4. STOICISM 107
I The Stoa, personalities and sources 109
II Stoic philosophy: scope and presentation 118
III Stoic logic 121
(*i*) Theory of knowledge 123
(*ii*) Grammatical and linguistic theory 131
(*iii*) Statements, methods of inference and arguments 139
(*iv*) The Stoics and Heraclitus 145
IV The Stoic philosophy of Nature 147
(*i*) Historical background 150
(*ii*) The structure of things: body, *pneuma*, elements 152

Copyrighted material

(iii) Mixture 159
(iv) Categories 160
(v) Causation: determinism, human action, cosmic evil 163
(vi) The soul and human nature 170
(vii) Human rationality and the passions 175

v Stoic ethics 179
(i) The part and the whole 179
(ii) From primary impulse to virtue 184
(iii) The good and the preferable (natural advantages) 189
(iv) The content of virtue: perfect and intermediate actions 199
(v) The Stoic sage: tests of virtue 205

5. Later Developments in Hellenistic Philosophy 210
(i) Panaetius 211
(ii) Posidonius 216
(iii) Antiochus 222
(iv) Cicero 229

6. Hellenistic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition 232

Bibliography 249

Bibliographical Postscript 1985 257

Index 269

Copyrighted material

Preface to the First Edition

THE purpose of this book is to trace the main developments in Greek philosophy during the period which runs from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. to the end of the Roman Republic (31 B.C.). These three centuries, known to us as the Hellenistic Age, witnessed a vast expansion of Greek civilization eastwards, following Alexander's conquests; and later, Greek civilization penetrated deeply into the western Mediterranean world assisted by the political conquerors of Greece, the Romans. But philosophy throughout this time remained a predominantly Greek activity. The most influential thinkers in the Hellenistic world were Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics. In this book I have tried to give a concise critical analysis of their ideas and their methods of thought.

As far as I am aware, the last book in English to cover this ground was written sixty years ago. In the interval the subject has moved on, quite rapidly since the last war, but most of the best work is highly specialized. There is a clear need for a general appraisal of Hellenistic philosophy which can provide those who are not specialists with an up-to-date account of the subject. Hellenistic philosophy is often regarded as a dull product of second-rate thinkers who are unable to stand comparison with Plato and Aristotle. I hope that this book will help to remove such misconceptions and arouse wider interest in a field which is fascinating both historically and conceptually.

One reason for the misunderstanding from which Hellenistic philosophy has suffered is the scarcity of primary evidence. Nearly all the writings of the early Stoics have perished, and their theories must be reconstructed from quotations and summaries by later writers. The limitations of evidence are also a problem in dealing with Epicureans and Sceptics. In this book I have devoted little space to the evaluation of sources which technical work on Hellenistic philosophy requires. But the evidence is so scattered and so variable in quality that I have not hesitated to give references in the text for most theories which I attribute to particular philosophers. Many of the subjects which are discussed can be interpreted in different ways. I have not attempted to refer to more than a few divergent opinions, and some of my own

Copyrighted material

conclusions will prove controversial. My aim throughout has been to make the best philosophical sense of the evidence, and at the same time to indicate which theories are most vulnerable to criticism. I have been liberal with quotations and the discussion of details is based wherever possible upon the extracts which I have translated.

The subject which I have treated at greatest length is Stoicism. In giving the Stoics so much space I have been influenced by two considerations: they were, in my judgment, the most important philosophers of the Hellenistic period, and at the present time their thought is less accessible to the general reader than Epicureanism or Scepticism. I have tried to keep conceptual rather than historical issues before the reader's mind in much of the book. But historical background is the main theme of the first chapter, and I have concluded the book with a short survey of the later influence of Hellenistic philosophy, which was extensive. I have also discussed some characteristics of earlier Greek thought which help to explain concepts accepted and rejected by Hellenistic philosophers.

The work of Usener, von Arnim, Brochard, Bailey and Pohlenz is indispensable to anyone who studies Hellenistic philosophy, and I have also learnt much from contemporary scholars. My thanks are also due to my pupils, my colleagues and to those who have given me many opportunities to read papers on the subject at meetings in Britain and other countries. In particular, I have benefited greatly from my membership of University College London where I taught throughout the time this book was being prepared. To George Kerferd, who commented on Chapters 2 and 3, and to Alan Griffiths, who scrutinized the whole typescript, I am especially grateful. Lastly, I thank my wife, Kay, who helped me in more ways than I can indicate with any acknowledgment.

Liverpool, 1973 A.A.L.

Copyrighted material

Preface to the Second Edition

THIS book was first published in 1974. As I remarked in the original preface, Hellenistic philosophy seemed then to need not only a general appraisal but a substantial rehabilitation. Though well looked after by a few devoted specialists, this period of Greek philosophy, broadly speaking, was depreciated and neglected by comparison with the enormous interest taken in Plato, Aristotle and their predecessors. A decade later, the fortunes of Hellenistic philosophy have changed dramatically. Through publications, seminars and international colloquia, Stoics, Sceptics and Epicureans have been talking to a wider and more discerning audience than at any time since antiquity. Much of the best work in Greek philosophy during these years has been a critical examination of the concepts, arguments and dialectical strategies of the Hellenistic schools; there is every sign, as my Bibliographical Postscript indicates, that this process of recovery and discovery will continue at an intensified rate. The old prejudices seem to have been removed once and for all. New vistas have appeared, and it is already evident that they are altering the perspectives of ancient philosophy and stimulating philosophers in general.

It would be quite impossible to do any justice to all these developments in a book of this size and purpose. I conceived it originally as an introduction, and this is what it remains. The specialist literature has now become so extensive that the book may also, I hope, serve as a suitable orientation for readers who wish to pursue the subject in depth. Rather than attempting the impossible task of revising and amplifying odd pages here and there, it seems best to let the original text stand for the present. The most useful corrective and amplification I can offer at this stage is the Bibliographical Postscript.

Berkeley, California, 1985 A.A.L.

Copyrighted material

Abbreviations

Acad.	Cicero, *Academica*
Adv. math.	Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus mathematicos* (Against the dogmatic philosophers)
Comm. not.	Plutarch, *De communibus notitiis contra stoicos* (On universal conceptions against the Stoics)
DK	*Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz
D.L.	Diogenes Laertius
De an.	Aristotle, *De anima* (On the soul)
De div.	Cicero, *De divinatione* (On divination)
De nat.	Epicurus, *De natura* (On nature)
De off.	Cicero, *De officiis* (On duties)
E.N.	Aristotle, *Nicomachean ethics*
Ep.	Seneca, *Epistulae morales* (Moral letters)
Ep. Hdt.	Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*
Ep. Men.	Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus*
Ep. Pyth.	Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles*
Fin.	Cicero, *De finibus bonorum et malorum* (On the chief things which are good and bad)
K.D.	Epicurus, *Kuriai doxai* (Principal doctrines)
Met.	Aristotle, *Metaphysics*
N.D.	Cicero, *De natura deorum* (On the nature of the gods)
P.H.	Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrhoneioi hypotyposeis* (Outlines of Pyrrhonism)
Plac.	Galen, *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis* (On the opinions of Hippocrates and Plato)
R.E.	Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Enzyklopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*
Rep.	Cicero, *De republica* (On the state)
Sent. Vat.	Epicurus, *Sententiae Vaticanae* (Epicurean aphorisms from a Vatican manuscript)
Stoic. rep.	Plutarch, *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* (On the contradictions of the Stoics)
SVF	*Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (Fragments of the early Stoics, ed. H. von Arnim)
Tusc.	Cicero, *Tusculan disputations*
Us.	*Epicurea*, ed. H. Usener

Copyrighted material

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

SIGNIFICANT stages in the history of philosophy are seldom identifiable with the same precision as political events, but there are good reasons for bringing the new movements of thought which developed in the Greek world at the end of the fourth century B.C. under a single description. Hellenistic is a term which refers to Greek, and later, Graeco-Roman civilization in the period beginning with the death of Alexander the Great (323 B.C.) and ending, by convention, with the victory of Octavian over Mark Antony at the battle of Actium in 31 B.C. During these three centuries it is neither Platonism nor the Peripatetic tradition established by Aristotle which occupied the central place in ancient philosophy, but Stoicism, Scepticism and Epicureanism, all of which were post-Aristotelian developments. These are the movements of thought which define the main lines of philosophy in the Hellenistic world, and 'Hellenistic philosophy' is the expression I use in this book to refer to them collectively. Their influence continued into the Roman empire and later times, but in the first century B.C. Platonism began a long revival and an interest in Aristotle's technical writings was also re-awakened. The detailed treatment of Hellenistic philosophy in this book comes to an end with these developments. They are both a cause and a symptom of an eclectic stage in Greek and Roman thought, during which the Hellenistic systems become only of secondary importance to the historian of philosophy.

In this introductory chapter our interest is chiefly in the beginning of Hellenistic philosophy, and it is useful to glance initially at the social and political circumstances which provided the framework for intellectual life at this period. Alexander's eastern empire disintegrated in the wars and dynastic struggles which followed his early death. But it prepared the ground for an unparalleled extension of Greek culture. Alexandria in Egypt and Antioch in Syria were Greek foundations, capitals respectively of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kingdoms secured by two of Alexander's generals. The soldiers, civil servants and

Copyrighted material

businessmen who settled in Asia and Egypt transplanted the social institutions of the Greek mainland. A common culture, modified by different influences in different places, and above all, a common language (the *koinê*), gave them a sense of unity. Alexandria under the Ptolemys became a new centre of arts and sciences, which had such power to attract eminent men of letters and scholars that it outshone Athens in the diversity of its culture. Athens remained pre-eminent in philosophy. But Antioch, Pergamum and Smyrna were other flourishing cities whose rulers competed with one another as patrons of poets, philosophers, historians and scientists.

For about a hundred years it was an age of remarkable intellectual achievement. The extension of the social and political horizon of classical Greece was matched by a widening of interest in subjects such as history and geography. Great advances were made in philology, astronomy and physiology. Learning affected literature, and most of the notable literary figures were scholars. One of the consequences of this scholarly activity was a narrower definition of subject boundaries. Aristotle and his immediate followers took in a very wide range of subjects under 'philosophy', including studies that we would designate scientific or literary or historical. The scope of Hellenistic philosophy is much more limited on the whole. Strato of Lampsachus (died 270/68), one of Aristotle's successors, was a philosopher whose primary interests might be called scientific. Much later, the Stoic Posidonius (died 51/50) made staunch efforts to associate philosophy with history, geography, astronomy and mathematics. But these are exceptions. The special sciences were vigorously studied in our period, but not primarily by leading members of the Hellenistic philosophical schools. In their hands philosophy came to acquire something of its modern connotations, with a division drawn between logic, ethics and general investigation of 'nature'. This distinction between philosophy and science was underlined by place as well as time. The major figures of early Hellenistic philosophy—Epicurus, Zeno, Arcesilaus, and Chrysippus—all migrated to Athens from elsewhere. Those who are most noteworthy for their scientific achievements—Archimedes, Aristarchus, the astronomer, and the medical scientists, Herophilus and Erasistratus, had no strong association that we know of with Athens.

Without Alexander there would have been no Alexandria. Many of the characteristics of the Hellenistic world can undoubtedly be traced to his imperial ambitions and their subsequent effects. Philosophy, so

Copyrighted material

many have said, responded to the unsettled age of the Hellenistic monarchs by turning away from disinterested speculation to the provision of security for the individual. Stoicism has been described as 'a system put together hastily, violently, to meet a bewildered world'.[1] It would certainly be wrong to isolate Stoicism and Epicureanism from their milieu. Epicurus' renunciation of civic life and the Stoics' conception of the world itself as a kind of city may be viewed as two quite different attempts to come to terms with changing social and political circumstances. But many of the characteristics of Hellenistic philosophy were inherited from thinkers who were active before the death of Alexander. The needs of people in the Hellenistic world for a sense of identity and moral guidance can help to explain why Stoicism and Epicureanism rapidly gained adherents at Athens and elsewhere. But the Peloponnesian War a hundred years previously probably caused greater suffering to Greece than Alexander and his successors. Economically, Athens was a prosperous city at the end of the fourth century and new public works absorbed capital and energy. It is difficult to find anything in early Hellenistic philosophy which answers clearly to a *new* sense of bewilderment.

Alexander, it is true, helped to undermine the values which the declining city-states had once so proudly asserted, and Aristotle's ethics assumes as its social context a city-state like Athens. But Diogenes the Cynic was already challenging the basic conventions of classical Greek civic life many years before the death of Alexander. These three men, Alexander, Diogenes and Aristotle, all died within a year or two of each other (325–322), and this is worth mentioning because it emphasizes the need to take account of continuity as well as change in the interpretation of Hellenistic philosophy. The young Alexander was taught in Macedonia by Aristotle, and in later years Alexander, who knew the free-speaking Diogenes, is reputed to have said, 'If I had not been Alexander, I should like to have been Diogenes' (D.L. vi 32). Alexander set out to conquer the external world; Diogenes aimed to show men how to conquer their own fears and desires. Aristotle and Diogenes were contemporaries but they had little else in common. Moralist, iconoclast, preacher, these are descriptions which catch something of Diogenes' posture. He shared none of

[1] E. Bevan, *Stoics and Sceptics* (Oxford 1913) p. 32. Contrast with this kind of explanation L. Edelstein's reference to a 'new consciousness of man's power that arose in the fourth century, the belief in the deification of the human being', which he finds influential on Stoicism and Epicureanism, *The Meaning of Stoicism* (Cambridge, Mass. 1966) p. 13.

Copyrighted material

Aristotle's interest in logic or metaphysics, and attacked the city-state as an institution by advocating an ascetic life based upon 'human nature', the rationality of which was at variance, he argued, with the practice of Greek society. This repudiation of accepted customs was backed up by reference to the supposed habits of primitive men and animals.

Behind Diogenes' exhibitionism and deliberate affront to convention lay a profound concern with moral values which looks back to Socrates. The Stoics refined Diogenes' ideas, and there were men in the Hellenistic world and the Roman empire who called themselves Cynics, modelling their preaching and life on the uncompromising style of Diogenes. Unlike Socrates however he acknowledged no allegiance to any city, whether it was Sinope on the Black Sea, his native town, or Athens where he spent much of his later life. His ethical values took no account of social status and nationality, and this emphasizes the radical character of Diogenes' criticism of traditional attitudes. A study of Aristotle's painful defence of slavery in *Politics* Book I should make the point beyond doubt. What mattered to Diogenes was the individual human being and the well-being he might achieve purely by his natural endowments. This strong emphasis upon the individual and a 'nature' which he shares with humanity at large is one of the characteristics of Hellenistic philosophy. It becomes most prominent among Stoics, at the time of Rome's expansion from the second century B.C. onwards; but the early Stoics, Sceptics and Epicureans were supremely confident that a man's inner resources, his rationality, can provide the only firm basis for a happy and tranquil life. The city recedes into the background, and this is a sign of the times. But Diogenes had pointed the way before the dawn of the Hellenistic age.

When Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, and Epicurus began teaching at Athens in the last years of the fourth century the city already had two illustrious philosophical schools. A few years before 369, Plato had established the Academy, a society which seems to have had much less in common with a general centre of learning than later uses of the name might suggest.[1] Its senior members pursued a wide range of interests, but formal teaching may have been limited to mathematics and certainly is not likely to have gone beyond the curriculum, which includes dialectic for those over thirty, described in Book vii of the

[1] cf. Harold Cherniss, *The Riddle of the Early Academy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1945) pp. 61–72.

Copyrighted material

Republic. What the numbers of the Academy were at any one time is not known. The juniors in its early days must have been a small group of upper-class young men, not exclusively Athenians, for Aristotle who spent the years 367–347 as student and teacher in the Academy came from Macedonia. In founding the Academy Plato may have hoped among other things to educate men who could be expected to become prominent in public life. The published dialogues were his principal method of reaching a wider audience.

After Plato's death (347) the headship of the Academy passed first to his nephew, Speusippus, then to Xenocrates and thirdly to Polemo, a contemporary of Epicurus and Zeno. Aristotle remained formally a member for the rest of his life, but he left Athens for reasons which are open to conjecture on the appointment of Speusippus. He spent the next twelve years in various cities of Asia Minor and Macedonia, returning to Athens in 335. During his absence from Athens, Aristotle probably devoted much of his time to biological research, the fruits of which bulk so large in his writings. Following Alexander's accession to the Macedonian throne, Aristotle began his second prolonged stay in Athens, now teaching not in the Academy but in the Lyceum, a grove just outside the civic boundaries. Theophrastus and other Academicians, who had accompanied Aristotle on his travels, joined him there; and after Aristotle's death in 322, Theophrastus established the Lyceum (often called the Peripatos) as a school in its own right. He continued to direct its work until his death in 288/4.

The activities of the later Academy are not well documented. Aristotle often associates Speusippus with 'the Pythagoreans' (e.g. *Met.* 1072b30; *E.N.* 1096b5). The transmission of so-called Pythagoreanism is a complex and controversial subject. What seems to have happened, very briefly, is that Speusippus and Xenocrates developed certain metaphysical and mathematical principles which were not called Pythagorean by Plato. In their hands Plato's theory of Forms underwent considerable transformation.[1] They also wrote copiously on ethical subjects. Here again the details largely escape us, but it is certain that they accepted such basic Platonic notions as the necessary connexion between virtue and human well-being. Speusippus took up the extreme position of denying that pleasure in any sense or form can be something good (Aristotle, *E.N.* vii 14), and he attacked the hedonist philosopher, Aristippus, in two books. Several doctrines attributed to Xenocrates recur in Stoicism. One text is of particular

[1] cf. Cherniss, op. cit. p. 33.

Copyrighted material

interest: 'The reason for discovering philosophy is to allay that which causes disturbance in life' (fr. 4, Heinze). Xenocrates' name in this passage, which comes from Galen, depends on an emendation of the name 'Isocrates'. But the statement harmonizes well with the general aims of Hellenistic philosophy, especially Epicureanism and Pyrrhonism.

Xenocrates probably saw himself chiefly as a scholarly exponent of Plato's philosophy. Under his leadership the Academy professed Platonism, a systematic account of ideas which Plato himself, however positively he held them, may never have intended to be presented as a firm body of doctrine.

In the ancient biographical tradition Xenocrates is presented as a grave figure who had such an effect on Polemo, who eventually succeeded him, that the latter turned from a life of dissipation to philosophy. Polemo became head of the Academy in 314, three or four years before Zeno's arrival in Athens. With its fourth head the Academy seems to have moved away from mathematics, metaphysics and dialectic to concentrate upon ethics. Polemo is reported to have said that 'a man should train himself in practical matters and not in mere dialectical exercises' (D.L. iv 18). Plato regarded dialectic as the best moral training, on the grounds that it prepared its practitioners for an insight into the nature of goodness. But Hellenistic philosophy strove to make itself relevant to a wider social group than Plato or Aristotle had influenced. This is proved, to my mind convincingly, by the number of rival philosophers who were active at the end of the fourth century, all of them offering their own solution to the question already asked and answered by Plato and Aristotle: 'What is happiness or well-being and how does a man achieve it?' One answer, advanced by the first Sceptic, Pyrrho, was equanimity born of a refusal to make any definite judgments, but Epicureans and Stoics were the new philosophers who tackled the question most successfully. They succeeded not because they abandoned theory for practice, but because they offered a conception of the world and human nature which drew its support from empirical observations, reason and a recognition that all men have common needs. In saying this I do not mean to imply that they restricted the scope of philosophy to ethics. This is a frequent misconception about Hellenistic philosophy. Epicurus wrote thirty-seven books *On Nature*. The Stoics made contributions of great interest in logic, theory of language and natural philosophy. Both systems adopted the important assumption that happiness depends

Copyrighted material

upon an understanding of the universe and what it is to be a man.

There were a number of minor philosophical movements in the early Hellenistic period all claiming descent from Socrates. We know or think we know Socrates so well from Plato that it is easy to forget the other Socratics who went their own way in the first part of the fourth century. They are shadowy figures whose views are preserved only in occasional references by contemporary writers and the bald summaries compiled in late antiquity. But they established traditions which anticipate certain aspects of Hellenistic philosophy and which influenced or even competed briefly with the new schools.[1]

I have said a little about Diogenes the Cynic, and will return to him in Chapter 4. Ancient historians of philosophy liked to concoct tidy master-pupil relationships, and they make Diogenes a pupil of Antisthenes. This man was an Athenian associate of Socrates. It is difficult to say how far Diogenes was positively influenced by Antisthenes. Perhaps twenty years older then Plato, Antisthenes himself is attacked by Aristotle for his naïveté (*Met.* 1024b33) and his followers ('Antistheneans') are criticized for their lack of culture (ibid. 1043b23). Sniping at traditional education was part of Diogenes' platform; and if Diogenes Laertius is to be trusted, Antisthenes himself claimed that virtue (*aretê*) is something practical, needing neither copious words nor learning (D.L. vi 11). In fact, Antisthenes was a voluminous writer whose style was highly regarded by a number of ancient critics. The titles of his books show that he was interested in literature, problems of knowledge and belief, and especially dialectic (D.L. vi 15ff.). The later Cynic tradition has coloured Diogenes Laertius' biography. It is reasonable, however, to suppose that Antisthenes advocated Socratic strength of mind as much by personal example as by teaching and writing. The little that we know of his logic and theories of language suggests that he was strongly at variance with Plato. But it was not for contributions to theoretical philosophy that Antisthenes became famous. His importance in this book rests on certain moral propositions in which he certainly foreshadowed and may have directly influenced the Stoics. Especially striking are the following fragments: virtue can be taught and once acquired cannot be lost (Caizzi fr. 69; 71); virtue is the goal of life (22); the sage is self-sufficient, since he has (by being wise) the wealth of all

[1] For a detailed account of the minor Socratics cf. W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* vol. iii (Cambridge 1969).

Copyrighted material

men (80). Probably Antisthenes, like Diogenes, dispensed with any detailed theory which might support such statements. It was left to the Stoics to build them into a systematic treatment of ethics.

A second Socratic, whose followers were active in the early Hellenistic age, is Aristippus of Cyrene (*c.* 435–355). Xenophon records conversations between Socrates and Aristippus (e.g. *Mem.* 3.8, 1–7; 2.1) and Aristotle also mentions him (*Met.* 996a29). Aristippus' importance rests on his claim that pleasure is the goal of life. He advanced this thesis long before it was adopted by Epicurus, and Epicurean hedonism, though possibly influenced by Cyrenaic views, differs from them in significant respects. By pleasure Aristippus meant bodily gratification, which he conceived as a 'smooth movement', 'rough movements' producing pain (D.L. ii 86). Unlike the Epicureans the Cyrenaics denied absence of pain to be pleasure—it was an intermediate condition—and they rated pleasing bodily sensations above mental pleasures (ibid. 89–90). Our sources do not distinguish clearly between the theories of Aristippus himself and those of his followers, two of whom, Theodorus and Hegesias, flourished at the end of the fourth century. From Aristotle (*Met.* 996a29) we learn that Aristippus scorned mathematics because it took no account of good or bad; and it may be inferred from this that the main concern of his teaching was ethical. Here it is possible to see the influence of Socrates, and Socratic influence may also be evident in Aristippus' dismissal of speculation about the physical world (D.L. 92), which he perhaps developed into a sceptical attitude towards knowledge of external reality.

Eucleides of Megara was a third follower of Socrates whose adherents were still prominent in the early Hellenistic period. It is unfortunate that our knowledge of Eucleides is so slight, for he seems to have been a philosopher of greater significance than Antisthenes or Aristippus. The Megarian school was particularly interested in the kind of arguments first developed by Parmenides and Zeno of Elea in the fifth century. Parmenidean monism was also taken over by Eucleides who held that 'the good is one thing, called under many names' (D.L. ii 106). In the same context, Diogenes Laertius observes that Eucleides denied the existence of that which is contradictory to the good. In seeking to reduce everything to one thing, which is good, Eucleides may have been as much influenced by Socrates as by Parmenides. (Socrates' interest in teleological explanations for phenomena is well attested in Plato's *Phaedo* 97c). But we cannot say how Eucleides

Copyrighted material

worked out the implications of this proposition. Later Megarians were largely renowned for their skill at dialectic, and they had an important influence on Stoic logic. Zeno the Stoic studied with two eminent Megarian philosophers, Stilpo and Diodorus Cronus.

To later antiquity these minor Socratic schools were of only marginal interest. It would be a mistake to regard them as insignificant in their own day. We tend to think that Plato and Aristotle completely overshadowed rival contemporary philosophers because their work has not survived or proved influential. It is unlikely that an educated Greek at the end of the fourth century would have formed the same judgment. Stilpo is reputed to have won followers from Aristotle, Theophrastus and many others (D.L. ii 113f.). Platonists and Peripatetics never exercised a monopoly in Greek philosophy, and they were soon outdone in the extent of their influence by the new Stoic and Epicurean schools.

When these schools were founded, the Academy had ceased to be outstanding in mathematics and theoretical philosophy. Its intellectual vitality was restored about the year 265 in a very different form by Arcesilaus, who turned the Academy from dogmatism to scepticism. But the Lyceum remained a vigorous society down to the death of Strato in 270/68. Theophrastus was a scholar of great versatility who maintained the research tradition established by Aristotle. He refined and expounded Aristotelian doctrines, but was also quite prepared to challenge Aristotle, as may be seen in the work which has come down to us with the title, *Metaphysics*. There Theophrastus discusses a series of problems which arise out of Aristotle's metaphysics. He made important advances in logic, and was particularly interested in the collection and analysis of data in natural history and geology. The importance of empirical checking is frequently stressed in two of his surviving works, *Inquiry into plants* and *On the causes of plants*. His ethical theory seems to have been closely based on Aristotle. Theophrastus was no radical and can hardly have found Epicurean and Stoic views on man and society congenial. Epicurus wrote a book *Against Theophrastus*, the content of which is not known, and through the writings of Theophrastus and other Peripatetics the technical works of Aristotle, which he did not prepare for general circulation, must have become more widely known.

This last point is important. Some scholars have argued that Epicurus and Zeno could have read only Aristotle's 'published' literary works and not the technical treatises which form the bulk of

Copyrighted material

the work which survives today. Strabo, writing in the early Roman empire, relates that after Theophrastus' death Aristotle's manuscripts were dispatched to a man called Neleus, who lived at Skepsis, a town near Pergamum in Asia Minor (xiii 1, 54). When Neleus himself died the books were hidden in a cellar, for reasons of security, only to be recovered and edited in the early first century B.C. Too much has been based on this curious story. It has been held to show that Aristotle's technical treatises were completely unknown for about two centuries. But the conclusion does not follow. It is difficult to believe that only one version of these works was available in Athens at the time of Theophrastus. That Epicurus and the early Stoics had some knowledge of Aristotle's principal doctrines is both a reasonable and, I think, a necessary assumption. Nor is it only an assumption. We have one piece of evidence which connects Epicurus by name with Aristotle's *Analytics* and a work on Nature (see p. 29). But the decline of the Lyceum from the middle of the third century B.C. makes it unlikely that much of Aristotle's technical philosophy was known during the next hundred and fifty years.[1]

Ever since Eduard Zeller wrote his monumental *Philosophie der Griechen* over a hundred years ago, many scholars have contrasted Hellenistic philosophy unfavourably with Plato and Aristotle. But by any standards the achievement of Plato and Aristotle is virtually without parallel in the history of western thought. In assessing Hellenistic philosophy we need to remember that little of Epicurus and no complete work by an early Greek Stoic have survived. Moreover our knowledge of Carneades' sceptical methodology is also derived from secondary sources. We know the broad outlines of early Stoicism and Epicureanism. The details and the arguments are often missing. Plato and Aristotle have a head-start over the Hellenistic philosophers in terms of work which we can evaluate today.

Much of our evidence comes from hand-books written centuries after the time of the early Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics. The absence of so much first-hand evidence makes the study of these philosophers a very different enterprise from work on Plato and Aristotle. Considerable care must be taken over comparing and assessing different sources,

[1] Little is known about the Peripatetic philosophers at this time. Their activities seem to have centred largely upon rhetoric, biography and works of popular moralizing. Theophrastus himself wrote on such subjects as marriage, piety and drunkenness. For the ancient evidence see F. Wehrli, *Die Schule des Aristoteles* (Basel 1944–), a series of volumes on individual philosophers.

Copyrighted material

and this preparatory work, if it is allowed too much room in the presentation and analysis of the subject-matter, can easily make Hellenistic philosophy seem tedious, inaccessible and lacking in conceptual interest. This is a false impression. We can now see that Epicurus and Zeno were philosophers whose ideas evolved gradually as a considered reaction against theories in vogue at the end of the fourth century and earlier. It is also true that they felt passionately about the truth of their own theories and the implications of them for human well-being. The same might be said of Plato. But philosophy advances by criticism, and Epicurus and Zeno were critical of current dogmas concerning the structure of the physical world, the sources of knowledge, the nature of man and the grounds of his happiness. The Sceptics challenged the basis of all objective statements, and Carneades' criticism of the Stoics provides ample evidence of his sharp mind. We can argue about the merits of the alternative Stoic and Epicurean theories, but there is no justification for regarding them as a sudden impoverishment of Greek philosophy.

The Stoics and Epicureans however interpreted the scope of philosophy more narrowly and dogmatically than Aristotle, and by the middle of the first century B.C. onwards, which is the period of our earliest secondary sources, both schools had taken up entrenched positions. But two hundred and fifty years is a long time, and our loss of philosophical writing from this period is almost total. Possibly, as is often said, Epicurus' followers were largely content from early days to accept the teachings of their founder. They certainly revered him as the saviour of mankind, but we know of developments in Epicurean logic, to take only one example, which probably occurred long after his death. The Stoics, who have far more in common with Plato and Aristotle, were more self-critical than the Epicureans, and such leading figures as Chrysippus and Diogenes of Babylon elaborated logic and other subjects in great detail, turning Stoicism into a highly technical philosophy. Stoics and Epicureans criticized each other and were criticized in turn by the Academic Sceptics. But until the time of Panaetius and Posidonius, few very significant amendments to fundamental Stoic doctrines seem to have been made, and the extent of their modifications was less substantial than has sometimes been supposed. Perhaps the new Hellenistic systems were too successful in gaining popular support to channel the development of philosophy into new directions. The Academic Sceptics, who had no 'system' to defend, were very able critical philosophers, but their influence was

Copyrighted material

naturally restricted and often negative. Stoicism and Epicureanism could be understood in a rudimentary sense by almost anyone, and they could also provide intellectual satisfaction for those who wanted more than a message. The early Academy and Lyceum were less flexible in terms of general appeal. They did not make the world intelligible in a manner which could be found satisfying at many different levels.

Both the Epicureans and the Stoics were prepared to popularize their teaching. In his *Letter to Herodotus*—the name refers to a friend, not the fifth-century historian—Epicurus opens by remarking that he has prepared an epitome of his philosophy for those unable to study his technical writings (D.L. x 35). He also compiled a set of ethical maxims which set out the cardinal doctrines and were learnt by heart. But within the school itself there were those like Epicurus himself who devoted their main energies to philosophy. The Stoics assigned a special place to what they called 'suasions and dissuasions', the purpose of which was moral advice. The serious student will have been expected to advance far beyond such things, much as Lucilius, in Seneca's *Moral letters*, is conducted from the rudiments of ethics to problems about the meaning of 'good'. Under Chrysippus a course at the Stoa must have included a considerable assignment of logic and natural philosophy.

We should not think of professional Stoics and Epicureans as men in whom freedom of thought had ossified. But they became the transmitters of doctrines which provided many people throughout the Hellenistic world with a set of attitudes that religion and political ideologies might also have supported. The decline of the Greek cities accelerated the decline of the Olympian gods. Stoics attempted to accommodate the Olympians by interpreting them as allegorical references to natural phenomena. The Epicureans denied the gods any influence over the world. Eastern religious ideas infiltrated into the Mediterranean world. Some embraced them; others chose Stoicism or Epicureanism instead. Stoic and Epicurean philosophers, particularly the latter, made it their business to win supporters, but the market was open to be developed. The price which they paid for entering it with such success was dogmatism, at least outwardly, and the divorce of philosophy from scientific research. Epicurus' attitude to science was naïve and reactionary. The Stoics defended out-of-date theories in astronomy and physiology against the new discoveries of Aristarchus and Erasistratus. The Sceptics were unsympathetic to science, and only

Copyrighted material

Posidonius in the later Hellenistic period made a serious effort at re-uniting philosophy with mathematics and other scientific studies.

But Epicurus and especially the Stoics were clearly interested in many problems for their own sake. The humanist focus of their philosophy is one of its most interesting features, and it leads to very different results in the two systems. In neither case is it narrowly moralistic because the ethical values of both philosophies are related to two fully developed, if divergent, conceptions of the universe.

In the period covered by this book philosophy became thoroughly institutionalized and practically synonymous with higher education. Epicureanism was the exception. For a brief period at the time of Lucretius and Julius Caesar, it was fashionable and influential in Rome. But it never achieved the public respectability of Stoicism. Philosophers were among the most eminent members of the community and some of the men who feature in this book were chosen to represent their cities as ambassadors. From the middle of the second century B.C., philosophers are found in Rome, but no school was permanently set up there. Some Romans during this period took up Hellenistic philosophy, but they made few original contributions to it. Most of the impetus and the ideas came from Athens and the eastern Mediterranean cities in which many of the Hellenistic philosophers were born.

Copyrighted material

CHAPTER TWO

Epicurus and Epicureanism

We must not make a pretence of doing philosophy, but really do it; for what we need is not the semblance of health but real health (Usener 220).

It has often been said that Epicurus was primarily a moralist, and if by this we mean someone who strives by theory and practice to advocate a particular way of life the description is appropriate. Epicurus thought that he could trace the causes of human unhappiness to mistaken beliefs in his society, beliefs about the gods, the destiny of the soul, and the objects in life which are truly valuable. Ultimately all his teaching has the aim of discrediting such beliefs and replacing them with those which he holds to be true. By his adherents Epicurus was regarded as a 'saviour', as the bringer of 'light', words which we naturally associate with Judaism and Christianity. But Epicurus was not a preacher, even if he sometimes preaches. He wished ardently to persuade, and to convince; it would be quite wrong to try to make him into a purely academic philosopher. But he was a philosopher. Arguments and evidence are the instruments by which he hoped to persuade those who would listen, and it is with the theory rather than the practical aspects of Epicureanism that I shall be concerned here. Beginning, after some introductory remarks, with Epicurus' theory of knowledge I propose to consider the details of his system in an order which seems to be both coherent and representative of his own methodology. Ethics proper is dealt with last, for other topics have ethical implications which can be noted *en passant* and moral conclusions are the ultimate goal of Epicurus' philosophy.

(*i*) *Life and works*

Epicurus was born on the island of Samos in 341 B.C. (D.L. x 14). His father, who held Athenian citizenship, had settled there some ten years earlier. The first philosophical influence on Epicurus may have come in Samos itself from Pamphilus, a Platonist (Cic. *N.D.* i 72; D.L. x 14). But Epicurus' own philosophy is strikingly at odds with Platon-

Copyrighted material

ism, and perhaps while still an adolescent he began an association with Nausiphanes on the neighbouring island of Teos (Herculaneum papyrus 1005) which nipped in the bud any positive allegiance to Plato. Nausiphanes was a Democritean (D.L. i 15; Cic. *N.D.* i 73), and it is likely that Epicurus first became acquainted with the basic principles of atomism through the teaching of Nausiphanes. In later life Epicurus denounced Nausiphanes in highly vitriolic language (D.L. x 7–8). It is not clear what prompted these attacks, but they are typical of Epicurus' attested attitudes towards other philosophers.

At the age of eighteen Epicurus went to Athens to do his two years of military and civilian service alongside the comic poet Menander (Strabo xiv 638). We know little in detail of his activities during the next fifteen years. He may have taught for some time as an elementary school teacher in Colophon, a small town to the north-west of Samos on the Persian mainland, where his family had now taken up residence (D.L. x 1; 4). Later he established his own philosophical circle first in Mytilene (on Lesbos) and then in Lampsacus (D.L. x 15), a port near the site of ancient Troy, returning to Athens at the age of thirty-four in 307/6. Here he remained for the rest of his life. The return to Athens indicates that Epicurus was now confident of attracting followers in the main centre of philosophy. Between Athens and Piraeus Epicurus bought a house the garden of which came to stand as the name of the Epicurean school.

The community which Epicurus founded differed in important respects from the Academy and Lyceum. Its modern analogue is not a college or research institution but a society of friends living according to common principles, in retreat from civic life. Friendship has particular ethical significance in Epicureanism, and the Garden provided a setting for its realization. Women and slaves were admitted, and scraps of several private letters are preserved in which Epicurus expresses deep affection for his friends and followers. It is doubtful whether the Garden during Epicurus' lifetime offered much that might be called formal training to would-be Epicureans. Those who committed themselves to Epicurus were not so much students 'reading for a course' as men and women dedicated to a certain style of life. Seneca quotes the revealing maxim: 'Act always as if Epicurus is watching' (*Ep.* 25, 5). The similarity to George Orwell's 'Big brother is watching you' could scarcely be more misleading. Epicurus clearly inspired the strongest regard in his associates and personified the values of his own philosophy. But if the Garden lacked the formal curriculum of the Academy

Copyrighted material

we can safely assume that its members devoted much time to reading and discussing Epicurus' books; his *Principal doctrines* (see below) were probably learnt by heart; some members must have been engaged in the preparation and copying of works both for internal consumption and for dissemination to Epicureans outside Athens; and Epicurus' chief adherents, such as Metrodorus, will have engaged in advanced study with the master himself.[1] Book xxviii of Epicurus' *On Nature* refers to Metrodorus in the second person, and the fragments which survive record parts of a discussion between the two philosophers on problems of language and theory of knowledge. Epicurus kept in touch with his followers outside Athens by correspondence, and the opening of his *Letter to Pythocles* is worth quoting for the attitudes it reveals of Epicurus himself and one of his disciples:

> Cleon brought me a letter from you in which you continue to show goodwill towards me matching my own love for you. You are trying not ineffectively to memorize the arguments which are directed at a life of sublime happiness, and you ask me to send you a brief summary of the argument about astronomical phenomena so that you can easily get it by heart. For you find my other writings difficult to remember even though, as you say, you are always using them. I was delighted to receive your request and it caused me joyous expectations.[2]

Consistent with these principles Epicurus preferred the company of a few intimates to popular acclaim (Sen. *Ep.* 7, 11). He did not however withdraw completely from civic life. In a letter cited by Philodemus Epicurus says that he has participated in all the national festivals (Us. 169); his slogan 'live quietly' was not a revolutionary denunciation of contemporary society but a prescription for attaining tranquillity. Opponents of Epicureanism vilified the founder as a libertine and voluptuary, but this is inconsistent both with his teaching on pleasure, as we shall see, and with his own professed attitudes. He claimed to derive great pleasure from a subsistence diet which cheese would turn into a feast (Us. 181f.). On his death in 271 B.C., Epicurus bequeathed his house and garden to his follower, Hermarchus, for the benefit of the Epicurean community, and succeeding heads of the school probably nominated their own successor. On the twentieth of

[1] Epicurus probably first encountered Metrodorus, his junior by about ten years, at Lampsachus, the latter's native town.

[2] The authenticity of this letter has been questioned, but there is no reason to doubt its reliability as a statement of Epicurus' attitudes and doctrine.

Copyrighted material

every month Epicurus' memory and that of Metrodorus were celebrated at a festival within the Garden. This and other arrangements which are recorded in Epicurus' will (D.L. x 16–21) throw an interesting light on the character of the man himself.

Epicureanism has rightly been called 'the only missionary philosophy produced by the Greeks'.[1] Before he took up residence at Athens, Epicurus had established a following in Lampsachus and Mytilene, and his disciples helped to propagate the Epicurean gospel throughout the Mediterranean world. Antioch and Alexandria are two major cities in which Epicureanism established itself at an early date. Later, it spread widely into Italy and Gaul. Cicero in the middle of the first century B.C. could write, and it gave him no pleasure to do so, 'The [Roman] Epicureans by their writings have seized the whole of Italy' (*Tusc.* iv 6–7). This was a time when Epicureanism briefly claimed the allegiance of some prominent Romans including Calpurnius Piso and Cassius. Julius Caesar may have been sympathetic and Cicero's Atticus was an Epicurean. The fortunes of the movement fluctuated. Political opposition was not unknown, but the main antagonists were first rival philosophers, especially Stoics, and later Christianity.

In the Roman world Epicureanism seems to have been at its strongest immediately before the fall of the Republic. But it suffered no sudden decline. Seneca quotes with approval many Epicurean moral maxims; Lucian's *Alexander*, written in the second century A.D., gives a fascinating account of Epicurean and Christian reactions to persecution in the area south of the Black Sea. And most remarkable of all, about A.D. 200 in the interior of modern Turkey, at a place called Oenoanda in antiquity, an old man named Diogenes had erected a huge philosophical inscription carved on a great stone wall. Between 1884 and the present day many fragments of his work have been recovered, and it constitutes a summary of Epicurus' teaching which Diogenes bestowed on his countrymen and humanity at large for their happiness.[2] Apart from adding valuable information to our knowledge of Epicureanism, Diogenes' inscription proves the vitality of Epicurus' gospel five hundred years after the foundation of the Garden.

Epicurus himself was a prolific writer. Diogenes Laertius, who records forty-one titles of Epicurus' 'best books', says that his writings

[1] N. W. De Witt, *Epicurus and his Philosophy* (Minneapolis 1954) p. 329. The last chapter of this book should be consulted for a survey of the later fortunes of Epicureanism.

[2] For the evidence see Bibliography.

Copyrighted material

ran to three hundred rolls (x 26), and that he exceeded all previous writers 'in the number of his books'. Many of these consisted of short popular tracts and letters. Epicurus' major work was the series of thirty-seven books *On Nature*, a treatise *On the criterion* or *kanôn*, and a collection of ethical books which included *On lives*; *On the goal*; *On choice and avoidance*. He also wrote polemical works *Against the physicists*, *Against the Megarians*, and *Against Theophrastus*. Many of the letters, as we know from our own evidence, summarized points of doctrine or discussed these in some detail. Of all this writing only a small fraction has survived. Three letters are preserved which Diogenes Laertius included in his Life of Epicurus. The longest and most important of these, *To Herodotus*, gives a compressed and difficult summary of the main principles of atomism. Astronomical phenomena are the subject of the *Letter to Pythocles*, and the third letter, *To Menoeceus*, presents a clear if somewhat over-simplified account of Epicurean moral theory. In addition to these letters, Diogenes gives us a collection of forty *Kuriai doxai*, 'Principal doctrines', and a further set of maxims (*Vaticanae sententiae*) survives in a Vatican manuscript. Excavation at Herculaneum during the eighteenth century brought to light many charred rolls of papyrus which originally formed the library of some wealthy Roman. He was probably an adherent of Epicureanism, since most of the papyri which have been unrolled and read are fragmentary works by Philodemus of Gadara, an Epicurean philosopher and poet contemporary with Cicero. The rolls also contain fragments of some of the books of Epicurus *On Nature*. These are formidably difficult to read and reconstruct, but an invaluable supplement to earlier knowledge. Much work remains to be done on them.[1]

For our information about details of Epicurus' doctrine we are heavily dependent upon secondary sources. The most important of these is the Roman poet Lucretius, who wrote more than two hundred years after Epicurus' death. It is perhaps misleading to describe Lucretius as a secondary source. His poem, *De rerum natura*, is a work of genius which preceded the *Aeneid* and challenges it as a literary masterpiece. Lucretius, whose life and character are virtually unknown to us, was a fervid proponent of Epicureanism who presents Epicurus' teaching as the only source of human salvation. But Lucretius is no

[1] Nearly all the Herculaneum papyri belong to the Biblioteca Nazionale of Naples; but the British Museum has substantial fragments of Epicurus *On Nature* Book ii.

Copyrighted material

mere panegyrist. His six books set out in great detail Epicurean arguments concerning the basic constituents of things, the movement of atoms, the structure of body and mind, the causes and nature of sensation and thought, the development of human culture, and natural phenomena. At the same time, there is no reason to regard Lucretius himself as an original thinker. His work amplifies and explains points that we can find in Epicurus' own writings. Even where Lucretius reports theories, for instance the swerve of atoms (ii 216–93), which cannot be checked against Epicurus' own words, he was probably drawing on original sources which we cannot recover. Epicurus' own immediate successors were not noted for any major innovations. Certain refinements were doubtless made, and Philodemus' treatise *On signs* (preserved partially on papyrus) incorporates logical work by Zeno of Sidon (*c.* 150–70 B.C.) which may well go beyond anything worked out by Epicurus himself. But for the most part Epicurus' own writings remained canonical throughout the history of the school.

After Lucretius the best secondary sources are Diogenes Laertius, Cicero, Seneca and Plutarch. Cicero and Plutarch intensely disliked Epicureanism, and their criticism is of interest for understanding the adverse reception which the school often encountered. Seneca, though officially a Stoic, concludes most of his first *Moral letters* with an Epicurean maxim which he recommends to his correspondent, Lucilius. Sextus Empiricus, to whom Epicureanism was the most congenial of the dogmatic schools of philosophy, provides a useful supplement to our direct knowledge of Epicurean empiricism. Finally, as I have already mentioned, we have substantial fragments from the inscription of Diogenes of Oenoanda.

(*ii*) *The scope of Epicurus' philosophy*

Epicurus' philosophy is a strange mixture of hard-headed empiricism, speculative metaphysics and rules for the attainment of a tranquil life. There are links between these aspects of his thought, some of which are clearer than others. But one thing which certainly unites them is Epicurus' concern to set the evidence of immediate sensation and feeling against the kind of logical analysis which is characteristic of Platonic and Aristotelian methodology. Epicurus rejected many of the fundamental principles in terms of which Plato and Aristotle described the world. But more important than his disagreement concerning what is to be said about the world is his dismissal of certain logical and metaphysical concepts which are basic to Plato and Aristotle.

Copyrighted material

Epicurus recognized the distinction between universal and particular; but he did not regard universals as having existence in their own right, like Plato; nor apparently was he interested, as Aristotle had been, in classifying things under genera and species. He did not set up principles such as Plato's *same* and *different*, or Aristotle's *substrate* and *form*, for the analysis of objects and their properties. Philosophers who proceed in this way, he held, are merely playing with words, setting up empty assumptions and arbitrary rules. He did not deny that philosophy uses language and logic as its tools (Us. 219). But he vehemently rejected the view that linguistic analysis by itself can tell us anything about the world which is true or relevant to a happy life. The value of words is to express those concepts which are clearly derived from sensations and feelings. These latter give us our only hold on facts and the only secure foundation for language.

One might suppose from this that Epicurus would have dispensed with metaphysics altogether. In fact, his account of what exists does not stop short at the objects of which we are made aware by immediate sensations and feelings. Our senses report to us things which we call sheep, grass, cats etc., but for Epicurus all such things are compounded out of atoms and void, neither of which is something that we can sense or feel. In asserting atoms and void to be the ultimate entities which constitute the world, Epicurus is making a metaphysical statement. This is not something which he can prove or verify directly from sensations with or without the help of experiment. He has to establish it by setting up certain axioms and assuming the validity of certain methods of inference.

The first atomist explanation of things was advanced more than a century before Epicurus began his philosophical career. Epicurus clearly believed it to be a theory for which he could offer new and improved proof. But while providing an elegant and economical answer to such questions as 'What is the structure of physical objects?' or 'How are bodies able to move?', the atomist theory attracted Epicurus on other than purely theoretical grounds. If all events and all substances are ultimately explicable by reference to atoms necessarily moving in empty space, both divine causation as popularly conceived and its sophisticated equivalents—Plato's Forms and Demiurge or World-Soul, Aristotle's Prime Mover and Heavenly Intelligences—become superfluous. Epicurus held that beliefs in divine management of the cosmos and of human destiny were a major cause of human failure to live a tranquil life. On an atomist analysis of the world,

Copyrighted material

supposing this to be demonstrable, consequences would follow which could not fail to affect beliefs about a man's own place in the world.

Epicurus often asserts that philosophy has no value unless it helps men to attain happiness. This applies with particular force to his moral theory, but there is no necessary connexion between atomism and hedonism. The claim that pleasure is the only thing which is good as an end is compatible with all manner of metaphysical hypotheses. Epicurus has various ways of establishing his hedonism, none of which draws direct support from atoms and void. In this he differs markedly from the Stoics whose moral theory is intrinsically related to their metaphysics. But Epicurus thought he could show the validity of hedonism by appeal to immediate experience which, less directly, he held to support atomism. If labels can be usefully applied to a philosopher, Epicurus should be called an empiricist. That at least is what he would like to be remembered as, and empiricism provides the clearest internal connexion between his different ideas.

(*iii*) *Theory of knowledge*

If you fight against all sensations, you will have nothing by reference to which you can judge even those which you say are deceptive (*K.D.* xxiii).

The foundation of Epicurus' theory of knowledge is sense-perception. He starts from the fact that all men have sensations (*aisthêseis*), and asserts, without proof, that these must be caused by something other than themselves (D.L. x 31). It does not of course follow from this assertion that sensations are caused by things external to the percipient, and Epicurus would acknowledge that a feeling such as hunger (a *pathos* in his terminology) has an internal cause. But he takes it as self-evident that sensations of colour, sound, smell etc. must be caused by actual objects which possess these properties. 'We must suppose that it is when something enters us from things which are external that we perceive . . . their shapes' (*Ep. Hdt.* 49). This statement at once raises questions which the Sceptics did not hesitate to ask about mirages, hallucinations and the like. But Epicurus has an answer to put forward, as we shall see later.

Suppose we accept that sensations cannot lie concerning their causes: in other words, that if I have the sensation of hearing there must be something sounding which causes my sensation. Does this support the further proposition that there is some object like a motor-car horn

Copyrighted material

or a train whistle which corresponds precisely to the content of my sensation? For Epicurus the inference may or may not be warranted. That about which our sensations cannot deceive us is not a motor-car horn but a sense-impression (*phantasia*). What enters me from things outside is not a motor-car horn, if that is what I do genuinely hear, but a cluster of atoms (*eidôla*) thrown off the outer surface of such objects. Provided that these 'effluences', as we may call them, enter the sense organ without experiencing any change of structure the impression they produce on us will be an accurate image of the object.[1] If on the other hand their structure is disrupted in transit, the effluences will cause us to sense something which corresponds not to some actual characteristic of the object itself but to their own modified structure.

Sensations therefore are necessarily good evidence only of effluences. This raises the problem of how we can distinguish between those sensations which report to us accurately about objects and those which do not. For we cannot get at objects independently of effluences. Epicurus tackles this problem in an interesting way. He distinguishes sharply between the sense-impression itself and judgments, or the identification of sense-impressions with objects (*Ep. Hdt.* 50–1). Our sense-impressions are not judgments, nor are they dependent upon reason. We are not to say that this sense-impression is reliable, that one untrustworthy, for to do so presupposes an object which can test the validity of sensation, and our sole knowledge of objects is derived from sensations. Considered as an item of information about that which affects our senses every impression is of equal validity (D.L. x 31–2).

Nevertheless, sense-impressions can be distinguished from one another in terms of clarity or vividness. Sounds may be sharp or faint, visual images both clear and blurred. Epicurus was also aware of the fact that as we move away from the apparent source of many sensations our impressions change, and may decrease in clarity. Putting these facts together he concluded that sensations provide reliable evidence about objects if and only if they are characterized by clear and distinct impressions (*enargeia*, *Ep. Hdt.* 52, cf. *K.D.* xxiv). Other impressions 'await confirmation' by those which are clear. This conclusion could also seem to derive some support from Epicurus' explanation of the physical processes by which sensation takes place.

[1] Epicurus did not invent the 'effluence' theory of sense-perception. It goes back to Democritus and still earlier, in a different form, to Empedocles.

Copyrighted material

If we are near the ultimate source of our sensations the effluences which affect us are less likely to encounter disruption. It is only from a distance, supposedly, that the tower which is square looks round (Us. 247).

Epicurus does not specify conditions which establish the clarity of a sense-impression. He probably regarded this as something which would entail an infinite regress. He could take it as a datum of experience that we do distinguish within limits between that which is clear and that which is blurred or obscure. Clarity however is not a sufficient guarantee that we see things as they really are. Epicurus was grossly misled by 'clear views' when he argued that the sun is about the same size as it is seen to be (*Ep. Pyth.* 91).

Close attention to clear impressions is the first stage in acquiring knowledge. But Epicurus did not regard it as sufficient by itself. However clear our sense-impressions may be they do not constitute knowledge. They do not tell us what something is. Before judgments about objects can be made, our sense-impressions must be classified, labelled and so marked off from one another. Epicurus proposed to satisfy these conditions by what he called *prolêpseis*, 'preconceptions'.[1] These are general concepts or mental pictures produced by repeated sense-impressions which are both clear and similar in kind. They persist after particular sensations cease and constitute a record of our experience of the world. We acquire a concept or *prolêpsis* of man by repeated and remembered experience of particular men. Hence we are able to interpret new sensations by comparing them with preconceptions, and all our judgments about objects are made on this basis of recorded experiences, which we classify by using language (D.L. x 33). Epicurus agreed broadly with Aristotle who asserted that 'science comes to be when out of many ideas born of experience a general concept which is universal arises concerning things that are similar' (*Met.* A 981a5 ff.). For Epicurus, preconceptions are the foundations of judgments and language. 'We should not have named anything unless we had previously learnt its form by a preconception' (D.L. ibid.). Language is a method of signifying those preconceptions which seem to us to fit the present object of experience. Because preconceptions themselves are supposed to possess 'clarity', they establish, in association with the appropriate new sense-impressions, what it is that we see,

[1] Cicero (*N.D.* i 44) says that Epicurus was the first to use the word *prolêpsis* in this sense.

Copyrighted material

Philosophy/Classics

'A scholarly but readable account of Epicureanism, Scepticism and Stoicism . . . beautifully lucid.' *Greece and Rome*

'Fulfills a long-felt need for an up-to-date general appraisal.' *Journal of Hellenic Studies*

'The best general introduction to the subject now available.' *Philosophical Quarterly*

'The great merit of Long's work lies precisely in the extent to which he appreciates the conceptual significance of the philosophical systems with which he deals . . . a book that should surely enliven interest in Hellenistic philosophy and help to attract to it the attention it deserves.' *Journal of the History of Philosophy*

'Remarkably successful . . . a most welcome and accomplished book.' *Classical Review*

University of California Press
Berkeley 94720 / www.ucpress.edu

ISBN 0-520-05808-9