

CHAPTER IX.

GREEK PHILOSOPHY—Ionic Sect—Thales—Anaximander—Anaximenes—Anaxagoras—Italic Sect—Pythagoras—Empedocles, &c.—Eleatic Sect—Zeno—Leucippus—Democritus—Heraclitus—Socrates—Cyrenaic Sect—Aristippus—Cynics—Diogenes—Megaric Sect—Plato—Peripatetics—Aristotle—Skeptics—Pyrrho—Stoics—Epicureans—Reflections.

I HAVE already remarked that one considerable effect of the public games and festivals of the Greeks was the propagation and advancement of the literary spirit. The Olympic and other solemn games of the Greeks were not only the field of martial and athletic exercises, but of the contests for the palm of literature. Those immense assemblies were the stated resort of the poets, the historians, the rhapsodists, and even the philosophers.

After the days of Homer and Hesiod, the increasing relish for poetical composition gave rise to a set of men termed *rhapsodists*, whose original employment was to travel from one city to another, frequenting public entertainments and solemn festivals, and reciting the works of the poets which they had committed to memory. As the early poets were the first teachers of the sciences, those rhapsodists became commentators on their works, and expositors of their doctrines. The youth, who resorted to them for instruction, dignified their masters with the title of Sophists or professors of wisdom, and these sophists soon became the founders of different sects or schools of philosophy.

The history of the ancient philosophy, if we consider how small a portion it embraced of useful knowledge, and yet how ardent the zeal of its teachers, and how keen the controversies of the different sects, affords on the whole a mortifying picture of the caprice and weakness of the human mind: but on these very accounts, no subject of contemplation is more fitted to subdue in man those arrogant ideas of his own abilities, and of the all-sufficiency of his intellectual powers to subject the whole phenomena both of the natural and moral world to his limited reason and understanding.

The most ancient school of philosophy was that founded by Thales of Miletus, about 640 years before the Christian era, and termed the Ionic sect, from the country of its founder. Thales is said to have learned great part of his knowledge in Egypt, as the ancients were fond of attributing the rudiments of all wisdom to that happy quarter. He became celebrated for his knowledge in

geometry and astronomy; but the former of these sciences must be supposed to have been at that time in mere infancy, when one of Thales's discoveries is said to have been, that all right lines passing through the centre of a circle divide it into two equal parts. Yet Thales made some bold and fortunate conjectures in the science of astronomy. He conjectured this earth to be a sphere, and that it revolved round the sun. He believed the fixed stars to be so many suns encircled with other planets like our earth: he believed the moon's light to be a reflection of the sun's from a solid surface: and if we may trust the testimony of ancient authors, he was able to calculate eclipses, and actually predicted that famous eclipse of the sun 601 years before the birth of Christ, which separated the armies of the Medes and Lydians at the moment of an engagement. The metaphysical opinions of Thales are but imperfectly known. He supposed the world to be framed by the Deity out of the original element of water, and animated by his essence as the body is by the soul; that the Deity therefore resided in every portion of space; and that this world was only a great temple, where the sight of every thing around him reminded man of that Great Being which inhabited and pervaded it.* As a specimen of the moral doctrines of Thales we have the following excellent opinions and precepts: "Neither the crimes of bad men, nor even their thoughts are concealed from the gods. Health of body, a moderate fortune, and a cultivated mind, are the chief ingredients of happiness. Parents may expect from their children that obedience which they themselves paid to their parents. Stop the mouth of slander by prudence. Take care not to commit the same fault yourself, which you censure in others."†

The disciples of the ancient philosophers frequently made bold innovations on the doctrines of their masters. Anaximander, the disciple and successor of Thales, who first committed the tenets of the Ionic school to writing, taught that all things are in a state of continual change; that there is a constant succession of worlds: and that while some are daily tending to dissolution, others are forming. Anaximander is said to have been the first constructor of the sphere, to have delineated the limits of the earth and sea, and to have invented the gnomon for pointing the hours by the shadow on the sun-dial. His contemporary Anaximenes, of the same school, believed the Divinity to reside in the air, which he likewise made to be the original and constituent principle of all the other elements.

The most intelligible and rational opinions of any philosopher of

* Thales—homines existimare oportere, omnia quæ cernerent Deorum esse plena; fore enim omnes castiores, velutique in fanis essent, maximè religiosi.—Cic. de Nat. Deor. i. 2.

Diog. Laert in Vita Thal.

this school were those of Anaxagoras; and, as deviating most from the vulgar errors and superstition, he was accused of impiety. He taught that the first efficient principle of all things was an immaterial and intelligent Being, existing from all eternity; that the *substratum*, or subject of his operations, was *matter*, which likewise existed from all eternity in a chaotic state, comprehending the confused rudiments of all different substances, which the intelligent mind of the Creator first separated, and then combined for the formation of the universe, and of all bodies, animate and inanimate. It is true that Thales propagated the doctrine of an eternal mind, the Creator and Ruler of the universe; but he, like most of the ancient philosophers, seemed to consider this mind as united to matter, which was animated by it, as the body is by the soul. Anaxagoras regarded the mind of the Creator to be altogether distinct from matter; incapable of being included in space or substance of any kind, and of a nature entirely pure and spiritual. But if the general principles of Anaxagoras's philosophy were correct and rational, when he came to particulars, his notions partook of the vulgar absurdities. He conjectured the stars to be stones, which the rapid movement of the ether had whirled up into the region of fire. The sun he supposed to be a mass of red-hot iron, somewhat bigger than the Peloponnesus; an opinion, we are told, which led to a charge of impiety, and was punished by sentence of banishment and a fine of five talents; though Pericles, who had been Anaxagoras's pupil, stood forth on that occasion as his defender. His successors of the Ionic school were Diogenes of Apollonia, and Archelaus; the latter, the master of Socrates, who thence, in strict arrangement, should be recorded among the philosophers of the Ionic sect; but as this great man made a signal revolution in philosophy, I delay to mention his doctrines and opinions, till I give a brief account of the notions of his predecessors.

Soon after the Ionic, arose the Italic sect, so termed from the country where Pythagoras, its founder, is said to have first taught. Pythagoras is generally believed to have been a native of Samos; but the time in which he flourished is quite uncertain. All that Brucker concludes, from comparing the different accounts, is, that his era may be placed somewhere between the forty-third and fifty-third Olympiad; that is to say near six centuries before the birth of Christ. Pythagoras travelled into Egypt, where he spent, as is said, no less than twenty-two years in the study of the sciences, as well as of the secret doctrines of the priests. After the invasion of that country by Cambyses, he was carried among the captives to Babylon, where he increased his stores of wisdom by the conversation of the magi. Thence he is said to have travelled into India, to acquaint himself with the doctrines of the Gymnosophists. Returning into his native country of Samos, he chose to escape the tyranny of its sovereign by migra-

ting into Italy, where he established a school at Crotona, and signally contributed, by his doctrines and example, to reform the manners of that dissolute city. In imitation of the Egyptian priests, Pythagoras professed two different kinds of doctrine, the one accommodated to vulgar use, and the other reserved for the private ear of his favorite disciples. The object of the former was morality; the latter consisted of many mysteries which we are probably at no loss for being very little acquainted with. Five years of silence were requisite for preparing his scholars for the participation of these secrets. These disciples formed among themselves a sort of community; they lived all in the same house together with their wives and children; they had their goods in common, and their time was parcelled out and appropriated to various exercises of mind and body. Music was in high esteem with them, as a corrective of the passions; and they had one kind of music for the morning, to awaken and excite the faculties, and another for the evening, to relax and compose them. The notion which Pythagoras inculcated of the soul's transmigration through different bodies, made his disciples strictly abstain from animal food. As a proof that Plutarch, though commonly regarded by the critics as an unpolished writer, was not destitute of eloquence, we might desire any one to read that short oration of his *περι σαρκοφαγίας*; an apology for the Pythagoreans abstaining from the flesh of animals, of which there is a beautiful paraphrase in the *Emile* of Rousseau; an address to the feelings which would almost make us believe ourselves monsters, for indulging an appetite so cruel and unnatural.

The main object of the philosophy of Pythagoras was to mortify and subdue the corporal part of our nature by a certain prescribed course of discipline, and thus to prepare and fit the intellectual part for its proper function, the search of immutable truth, the contemplation of the divine nature, and the nature of the human soul. The long silence enjoined to his disciples accustomed them to mental abstraction. The sciences of arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy, were sedulously cultivated; but whether as considered to be parts of the preparatory discipline, or as the objects of that discipline, seems to be a little uncertain. The latter would appear the more probable supposition, for this reason, that the philosopher taught that much mysterious and hidden truth was contained in certain arithmetical numbers and geometrical and musical proportions, which he communicated only to the higher and more advanced class of his disciples. Pythagoras regarded the human soul as consisting of two parts—the one a sensitive, which is common to man and the inferior animals; the other a rational and divine, which is common to man with the Deity, and is indeed a part of the divine nature. The first perishes with the body, of which it is an inseparable adjunct; the other survives and is immortal; but after the death of one body it enters into

another, and so passes through an endless series of transmigrations. It is punished by degradation into the body of an inferior animal, and thus suffers a temporary suspension of its rational and intellectual nature. It was this notion which led to abstinence from the flesh of animals. It is uncertain whether Pythagoras committed any of his doctrines to writing. What remains under his name is commonly believed to have been the writing of some of his disciples. The Golden Verses, on which Hierocles has written a commentary, and which contain the principal moral tenets of the Pythagorean philosophy, are, from the polished structure of the verse, evidently of a much later age than that of the philosopher. They have been attributed with some probability to Epicharmus, who lived about 440 B. C.

Of the Pythagorean or Italic sect, there were many philosophers of reputation:—among others, Empedocles of Agrigentum, who attained to considerable eminence in physical science, and who is said to have thrown himself into the crater of Mount Etna, either from the desire of exploring the cause of its eruptions, or of propagating the belief that the gods had caught him up into heaven; it is a wiser and more charitable supposition, that he owed his death to a laudable but rash curiosity. Epicharmus of Agrigentum, the supposed author of the *Aurea Carmina*, was likewise a teacher of the Pythagorean philosophy, and attempted to render its doctrine popular by introducing them to the public through the medium of the drama; a project which gave offence to the graver teachers of wisdom, but procured this philosopher a more extensive reputation; for his comedies were so excellent, that Plautus did not disdain to borrow from them. Archytas of Tarentum was likewise of the Pythagorean school. He is said to have suggested that division of the ten predicaments, which was afterwards adopted by Aristotle. It is as an able geometrician and astronomer that Horace has embalmed his memory and recorded his unhappy fate.

“Te maris et terræ, numeroque carentis arenæ
Mensorem cohibent, Archyta,
Pulveris exigui prope litus parva matinum
Munera, nec quicquam tibi prodest
Aeris tentasse domos, animoque rotundum
Percurrisse polum morituro.”*

Hor. Od. 1. i. 28.

He perished by shipwreck, in a voyage undertaken probably for the purpose of astronomical or geometrical discoveries. But the

* “Close by the shore a span of earth contains,
Oh, mighty man of art! thy last, thy great remains;
Whose penetrating mind and skilful hands
Measured the heavens and earth, and numbered all the sands.
Vain is thy learning now; thy active soul
No more shall trace the stars, or travel to the pole.”

Bentley.

most celebrated philosopher of the Pythagorean sect, of whose opinions we have the best information, because derived from his own writings, is Ocellus Lucanus. His treatise *Περὶ τοῦ παντός*, or of the Universe, has come down to our times entire, and is a valuable monument of the philosophy of the ancients. His fundamental doctrines are the eternity of the mundane system, and its absolute perfection, so as to exclude the possibility of change from the failure or corruption of any of its parts. From this ancient philosopher, Aristotle and Plato have borrowed largely in their writings on the nature of the universe.

The Eleatic sect of philosophy, believed to have sprung from the Pythagorean or Italic, was founded by Xenophanes, about 500 years before Christ. It was called Eleatic because it owed its fame chiefly to Parmenides, Zeno, and Leucippus, natives of Elea, a city of Æolia. The metaphysical doctrines of this sect, in so far as we can judge of them from the few fragments which have survived, and the notices of them found in the works of Aristotle, are perfectly unintelligible. They maintained that things had neither a beginning, an end, nor any change; that all the phenomena which we see of changes in the visible world are entirely in our own senses; and that of the real essence of things we have no perception, and therefore can attain to no knowledge: but as our senses are fallacious, and it is only through their medium that we perceive any thing, so we cannot trust to them, and therefore have no assurance of the truth of any thing whatever. Yet upon this basis of nothing, the Eleatics (strange to tell) raised a system of physics, of which the principal doctrines were, that the universe was a compound of the four elements; that the stars were kindled up by the motion of the clouds; that the sun was an immense body of ignited vapor; but that various suns lighted various parts of the earth; and, finally, (the only rational dogma, though not derived by any logical inference from premises,) that there is but one God who rules over all nature.

Of the Eleatic school were Leucippus and his disciple Democritus; though they seem to have introduced a philosophy considerably different from that of Parmenides, Xenophanes, and Zeno. Leucippus supposed all things to have originated from atoms, moving in an infinite space, and producing all sensible objects by their combinations: but it was only these combinations that we perceived; we did not perceive the atoms themselves; we therefore did not perceive the reality of things, but only their appearances; a strange and pitiful sophistry. If Democritus held these opinions, it was no wonder that he, who is said to have laughed at every thing, should have laughed at the doctrines of his own sect, and at all who adopted them: but the truth is, that Democritus was of no such sportive disposition. He spent the greatest part of his life (which was extended to a hundred years) in solitary study, in observing the phenomena of nature, making

experiments on minerals, and dissecting the human body—a course of life which indicates a genius superior to the folly of framing idle theories on the sole basis of conjecture.

From the same school of Elea, though sometimes accounted the father of a new sect, was Heraclitus, whose disposition, the reverse of that of Democritus, accounted every thing a matter of melancholy. He seems to have been endowed with the austere spirit of a Carthusian; for, rejecting the chief magistracy of his native city, Ephesus, on account of the incorrigible vice of its inhabitants, he betook himself to the desert, and fed upon roots and water, making the beasts his companions in preference to man. He wrote a treatise on Nature, in which he made fire the origin of all things; but this fire he conceived to be endowed with mind, and to be properly the *anima mundi*, or the Divinity. His writings were purposely obscure, whence he got the epithet of *Σκοτεινός*, or the dark philosopher. It is said, that Euripides having sent this treatise on Nature to Socrates, the latter, with his accustomed modesty, gave it this character, "That all that he could understand of it seemed good; and that what surpassed his understanding, he presumed might likewise be so."

Hitherto, the principal object of the ancient Greek philosophy seems to have been the framing of theoretical systems of the origin and fabric of the universe, and the nature of the Divinity, accounted its soul, or animating principle: sublime, no doubt, and daring speculations, but little accommodated either to the weak intellect of man, or suited to improve his moral nature and increase his happiness. We must now speak of a philosopher who took juster views both of the powers and of the wants of human nature, and who, accordingly, directed his attention to that true philosophy whose object is at once to enlighten the understanding and improve the heart. It is easily perceived, that I speak here of Socrates, he who, according to Cicero's comprehensive eulogy, "brought down philosophy from heaven to dwell upon earth, who made her even an inmate of our habitations,"* and directed her research to the real interests of man, in the pursuit of his highest attainable happiness. With the fate of this illustrious teacher we are already acquainted. † It is necessary here only to take notice of his method of philosophizing, and of his principal doctrines. Greece was, in the days of Socrates, overrun with Sophists—pretended philosophers, whose whole science consisted in a certain futile logic; an artificial apparatus of general arguments, which they could apply to every topic, and by which they could maintain, with an appearance of plausibility, either side of any proposition. It was usual for these philosophers to get up in the public assemblies or in the

* Cic. Tusc. quæst. l. i. c. 5.

† See supra, book ii. c. 2.

theatres, and offer to argue or make an oration on any subject that should be named. The Athenians, a superficial people, fond of every thing new and extraordinary, were quite captivated with this kind of jugglery.* The Sophists passed for the wisest and most eloquent of men; and the youth flocked in crowds to their schools, where the rudiments of this precious art were explained and communicated. The sober part of the Athenians judged this to be a very useless discipline; but the wiser Socrates saw the pernicious tendency of this new art of philosophizing, which made every thing uncertain and problematical; and his penetrating intellect easily perceived the method by which it was to be exposed and destroyed.

As all the strength and skill of the Sophists lay in the application of general arguments to the questions which they canvassed, nothing more was necessary for their confutation than to bring them to particulars—to set out by some simple and self-evident proposition, which being granted, another followed equally undeniable, till the disputant was conducted, step by step, by his own confessions, to that side of the question on which lay the truth. No method could be devised more effectual than this for the detection of sophistry; and the Athenian logicians very soon found that their general apparatus of argument would not avail them against so subtle an antagonist. They lost all credit and reputation as philosophers; but they had influence enough to poison the minds of the people with the belief that Socrates taught impious doctrines, contrary to the religion of their country; and their malice, as we have already seen, was but too successful. Their revenge was satiated by the death of one of the best of men: a crime which drew upon Athens the reproach of all Greece, and which she vainly endeavored to expiate by the punishment of his judges, and the honors paid to his memory.

The doctrines of Socrates, which he never committed to writing, are only to be gathered imperfectly from Plato and Xenophon. The latter is the better authority, as Plato is generally believed to have used the name of Socrates on many occasions to give weight to his own opinions. Socrates founded all his morality on the belief of a God, who delighted in virtue, and whose justice would reward the good and punish the wicked in an after state. Of consequence, he believed in the immortality of the soul. He held that there were intermediate beings between God and man, who presided over the different parts of the creation, and who were to be honored with an inferior worship. He believed that virtuous men were particularly favored by the Divinity, who more espe-

* Seneca has well compared sophistical reasoning to the tricks of a juggler, though he judges too favorably in accounting it a harmless play: "Idem de istis captationibus dico: nec ignorantibus nocent, nec scientem juvant."—Sen. Epist. 45.