
Promises Unkept
The Chapter That
Misleads

THE MEANING OF THE WORD "PHILOSOPHY" IN THE PAST AND IN THE PRESENT

I must warn the reader at the outset that the title of this chapter seems to promise a great deal more than he will find carried out in the chapter itself. To tell all that philosophy has meant in the past, and all that it means to various classes of men in the present, would be a task of no small magnitude, and one quite beyond the scope of such a volume as this.

But it is not impossible to give within small compass a brief indication, at least, of what the word once signified, to show how its signification has undergone changes, and to point out to what sort of a discipline or group of disciplines educated men are apt to apply the word, notwithstanding their differences of opinion as to the truth or falsity of this or that particular doctrine. Why certain subjects of investigation have come to be grouped together and to be regarded as falling within the province of the philosopher, rather than certain other subjects, will, I hope, be made clear in the body of the work. Only an indication can be given in this chapter.

THE BEGINNINGS OF PHILOSOPHY.—The Greek historian appears to have been the first to use the verb "to philosophize." He makes Croesus tell Solon how he has heard that he "from a desire of knowledge has, philosophizing, journeyed through many lands." The word "philosophizing" seems to indicate that Solon pursued knowledge for its own sake, and was what we call an investigator. As for the word "philosopher" (etymologically, a lover of wisdom), a certain somewhat unreliable tradition traces it back to .

As told by, the story is that, in a conversation with Leon, the ruler of, in the, he described himself as a philosopher, and said that his business was anat the outset that the title of this chapter seems to promise a great deal more than he will find carried out in the chapter itself. To tell all that philosophy has meant in the past, and all that it means to various classes of men in the present, would be a task of no small magnitude, and one quite beyond the scope of such a volume as this. But it is not impossible to give within small compass a brief indication.At least, of what the word once signified, to show how its signification has undergone changes.

And to point out to what sort of a discipline or group of disciplines educated men are apt to apply the word, notwithstanding their differences of opinion as to the truth or falsity of this or that particular doctrine. Why certain subjects of investigation have come to be grouped together and to be regarded as falling within the province of the philosopher, rather than certain other subjects, will, I hope, be made clear in the body of the work. Only an indication can be given in this chapter. investigation into the nature of things. At any rate, both the words "philosopher" and "philosophy" are freely used in the writings of the disciples of Socrates ,and it is possible that he was the first to make use of them.

The seeming modesty of the title philosopher —for etymologically it is a modest one, though it has managed to gather a very different signification with the lapse of time—the modesty of the title would naturally appeal to a man who claimed so much ignorance, as and represents him as distinguishing between the lover of wisdom and the wise, on the ground that God alone may be called wise. From that date to this the word "philosopher" has remained with us, and it has meant many things to many men. But for centuries the philosopher has not been simply the investigator, nor has he been simply the lover of wisdom. An investigation into the origin of words, however interesting in itself, can tell us little of the uses to which words are put after they have come into being.

If we turn from etymology to history, and review the labors of the men whom the world has agreed to call philosophers, we are struck by the fact that those who head the list chronologically appear to have been occupied with crude physical speculations, with attempts to guess what the world is made out of, rather than with that somewhat vague something that we call philosophy to-day. Students of the history of philosophy usually begin their studies with the speculations of the Greek philosopher Thales .We are told that he assumed water to be the universal principle out of which all things are made, and that he maintained that "all things are full of gods." We find that Anaximander, the next in the list, assumed as the source out of which all things proceed and that to which they all return "the infinite and indeterminate".

And that Anaximenes, who was perhaps his pupil, took as his principle the all-embracing air. This trio constitutes the Ionian school of philosophy, the earliest of the Greek schools; and one who reads for the first time the few vague statements which seem to constitute the sum of their contributions to human knowledge is impelled to wonder that so much has been made of the men. This wonder disappears, however, when one realizes that the appearance of these thinkers was really a momentous thing. For these men turned their faces away from the poetical and mythologic way of accounting for things, which had obtained up to their time, and set their faces toward Science.

Aristotle shows us how Thales may have been led to the formulation of his main thesis by an observation of the phenomena of nature. Anaximander saw in the world in which he lived the result of a process of evolution. Anaximenes explains the coming into being of fire, wind, clouds, water, and earth, as due to a condensation and expansion of the universal principle, air. The boldness of their speculations we may explain as due to a courage born of ignorance, but the explanations they offer are scientific in spirit, at least. Moreover, these men do not stand alone. They are the advance guard of an army whose latest representatives are the men who are enlightening the world at the present day. The evolution of science—taking that word in the broad sense to mean organized and systematized knowledge—must be traced in the works of the Greek philosophers from Thales down.

Here we have the source and the rivulet to which we can trace back the mighty stream which is flowing past our own doors. Apparently insignificant in its beginnings, it must still for a while seem insignificant to the man who follows with an unreflective eye the course of the current. It would take me too far afield to give an account of the Greek schools which immediately succeeded the Ionic: to tell of the, who held that all things were constituted by numbers; of the Eleatics, who held that "only Being is," and denied the possibility of change, thereby reducing the shifting panorama of the things about us to a mere delusive world of appearances. who was so impressed by the constant flux of things that he summed up his view of nature in the words: "Everything flows"; of Empedocles.

Who found his explanation of the world in the combination of the four elements, since become traditional, earth, water, fire, and air; of Democritus, Who developed a materialistic atomism which reminds one strongly of the doctrine of atoms as it has appeared in modern science; of, who traced the system of things to the setting in order of an infinite multiplicity of different elements,—"seeds of things,"—which setting in order was due to the activity of the finest of things, Mind. It is a delight to discover the illuminating thoughts which came to the minds of these men; and, on the other hand, it is amusing to see how recklessly they launched themselves on boundless seas when they were unprovided with chart and compass.

They were like brilliant children, who know little of the dangers of the great world, but are ready to undertake anything. These philosophers regarded all knowledge as their province, and did not despair of governing so great a realm. They were ready to explain the whole world and everything in it. Of course, this can only mean that they had little conception of how much there is to explain, and of what is meant by scientific explanation. It is characteristic of this series of philosophers that their attention was directed very largely upon the external world. It was natural that this should be so. Both in the history of the race and in that of the individual, we find that the attention is seized first by material things, and that it is long before a clear conception of the mind and of its knowledge is arrived at. Observation precedes reflection.

When we come to think definitely about the mind, we are all apt to make use of notions which we have derived from our experience of external things. The very words we use to denote mental operations are in many instances taken from this outer realm. We "direct" the attention; we speak of "apprehension," of "conception," of "intuition." Our knowledge is "clear" or "obscure"; an oration is "brilliant"; an emotion is "sweet" or "bitter." What wonder that, as we read over the fragments that have come down to us from the Pre-Socratic philosophers, we should be struck by the fact that they sometimes leave out altogether and sometimes touch lightly upon a number of those things that we regard to-day as peculiarly within the province of the philosopher.

They busied themselves with the world as they saw it, and certain things had hardly as yet come definitely within their horizon. THE GREEK PHILOSOPHY AT ITS HEIGHT.—The next succeeding period sees certain classes of questions emerge into prominence which had attracted comparatively little attention from the men of an earlier day. Democritus of Abdera, to whom reference has been made above, belongs chronologically to this latter period, but his way of thinking makes us class him with the earlier philosophers. It was characteristic of these latter that they assumed rather naïvely that man can look upon the world and can know it, and can by thinking about it succeed in giving a reasonable account of it.

That there may be a difference between the world as it really is and the world as it appears to man, and that it may be impossible for man to attain to a knowledge of the absolute truth of things, does not seem to have occurred to them. The century before Christ was, in Greece, a time of intense intellectual ferment. One is reminded, in reading of it, of the splendid years of the Renaissance in Italy, of the awakening of the human mind to a vigorous life which cast off the bonds of tradition and insisted upon the right of free and unfettered development. Athens was the center of this intellectual activity.

In this century arose the Sophists, public teachers who busied themselves with all departments of human knowledge, but seemed to lay no little emphasis upon certain questions that touched very nearly the life of man. Can man attain to truth at all—to a truth that is more than a mere truth to him, a seeming truth? Whence do the laws derive their authority? Is there such a thing as justice, as right? It was with such questions as these that the Sophists occupied themselves, and such questions as these have held the attention of mankind ever since.

When they make their appearance in the life of a people or of an individual man, it means that there has been a rebirth, a birth into the life of reflection. When Socrates, that greatest of teachers, felt called upon to refute the arguments of these men, he met them, so to speak, on their own ground, recognizing that the subjects of which they discoursed were, indeed, matter for scientific investigation.

His attitude seemed to many conservative persons in his day a dangerous one; he was regarded as an innovator; he taught men to think and to raise questions where, before, the traditions of the fathers had seemed a sufficient guide to men's actions. And, indeed, he could not do otherwise. Men had learned to reflect, and there had come into existence at least the beginnings of what we now sometimes rather loosely call the mental and moral sciences. In the works of disciple and in those of disciple,abundant justice is done to these fields of human activity. These, the greatest among the Greek philosophers, differ from each other in many things, but it is worthy of remark that they both seem to regard the whole sphere of human knowledge as their province.

Is much more interested in the moral sciences than in the physical, but he, nevertheless, feels called upon to give an account of how the world was made and out of what sort of elements. He evidently does not take his own account very seriously, and recognizes that he is on uncertain ground. But he does not consider the matter beyond his jurisdiction. As for , that wonderful man seems to have found it possible to represent worthily every science known to his time, and to have marked out several new fields for his successors to cultivate. His philosophy covers physics, cosmology, zoölogy, logic, metaphysics, ethics, psychology, politics and economics, rhetoric and poetics we see that the task of the philosopher was much the same at the period of the highest development of the Greek philosophy that it had been earlier.

He was supposed to give an account of the system of things. But the notion of what it means to give an account of the system of things had necessarily undergone some change. The philosopher had to be something more than a natural philosopher. PHILOSOPHY AS A GUIDE TO LIFE.—At the close of the fourth century before Christ there arose the schools of the Stoics, the Epicureans, and the Skeptics. In them we seem to find a somewhat new conception of philosophy— philosophy appears as chiefly a guide to life.

The necessity of living "according to nature," and dwells upon the character of the wise man; the Epicurean furnishes certain selfish maxims for getting through life as pleasantly as possible; the Skeptic counsels apathy, an indifference to all things, —blessed is he who expects nothing, for he shall not be disappointed.

And yet, when we examine more closely these systems, we find a conception of philosophy not really so very different from that which had obtained before. We do not find, it is true, that disinterested passion for the attainment of truth which is the glory of science. Man seems quite too much concerned with the problem of his own happiness or unhappiness; he has grown morbid. Nevertheless, the practical maxims which obtain in each of these systems are based upon a certain view of the system of things as a whole. The Stoic tells us of what the world consists; what was the beginning and what will be the end of things; what is the relation of the system of things to God. He develops a physics and a logic as well as a system of ethics.

The Epicurean informs us that the world originated in a rain of atoms through space; he examines into the foundations of human knowledge; and he proceeds to make himself comfortable in a world from which he has removed those disturbing elements, the gods. The Skeptic decides that there is no such thing as truth, before he enunciates the dogma that it is not worth while to worry about anything. The philosophy of each school includes a view of the system of things as a whole. The philosopher still regarded the universe of knowledge as his province. PHILOSOPHY IN THE MIDDLE AGES.—I cannot do more than mention Neo-Platonism, that half Greek and half Oriental system of doctrine which arose in the third century after Christ, the first system of importance after the schools mentioned above.

But I must not pass it by without pointing out that the NeoPlatonic philosopher undertook to give an account of the origin, development, and end of the whole system of things. In the Middle Ages there gradually grew up rather a sharp distinction between those things that can be known through the unaided reason and those things that can only be known through a supernatural revelation. The term "philosophy" came to be synonymous with knowledge attained by the natural light of reason This seems to imply some sort of a limitation to the task of the philosopher. Philosophy is not synonymous with all knowledge. But we must not forget to take note of the fact that philosophy, even with this limitation, constitutes a pretty wide field. It covers both the physical and the moral sciences.

Nor should we omit to notice that the scholastic philosopher was at the same time a theologian.the famous scholastics of the thirteenth century, had to write a "Summa Theologiae," or system of theology, As well as to treat of the other departments of human knowledge. Why were these men not overwhelmed with the task set them by the tradition of their time? It was because the task was not, after all, so great as a modern man might conceive it to be. famous romance, finds it possible to become a skilled physician in the twinkling of an eye, when has imparted to him the secret that the remedy for all diseases is to be found in bleeding the patient and in making him drink copiously of hot water. When little is known about things, it does not seem impossible for one man to learn that little. During the Middle Ages and the centuries preceding, the physical sciences had a long sleep. Men were much more concerned in the thirteenth century to find out what Aristotle had said than they were to address questions to nature. The special sciences, as we now know them, had not been called into existence.

THE MODERN PHILOSOPHY.—The submission of men's minds to the authority of and of the church gradually gave way. A revival of learning set in. Men turned first of all to a more independent choice of authorities, and then rose to the conception of a philosophy independent of authority, of a science based upon an observation of nature, of a science at first hand. The special sciences came into being. But the old tradition of philosophy as universal knowledge remained. If we pass over the men of the transition period and turn our attention to and ,the who are commonly regarded as heading the list of the modern philosophers, we find both of them assigning to the philosopher an almost unlimited field.

holds that philosophy has for its objects God, man, and nature, and he regards it as within his province to treat of "philosophia prima" (a sort of metaphysics, though he does not call it by this name), of logic, of physics and astronomy, of anthropology, in which he includes psychology, of ethics, and of politics. In short, he attempts to map out the whole field of human knowledge, and to tell those who work in this corner of it or in that how they should set about their task.

As for Descartes, he writes of the trustworthiness of human knowledge, of the existence of God, of the existence of an external world, of the human soul and its nature, of mathematics, physics, cosmology, physiology, and, in short, of nearly everything discussed by the men of his day. No man can accuse this extraordinary Frenchman of a lack of appreciation of the special sciences which were growing up. No one in his time had a better right to be called a scientist in the modern sense of the term. But it was not enough for him to be a mere mathematician, or even a worker in the physical sciences generally. He must be all that has been mentioned above. The conception of philosophy as of a something that embraces all departments of human knowledge has not wholly passed away even in our day.

I shall not dwell upon, who believed it possible to deduce a world a priori with mathematical precision; upon, who defined philosophy as the knowledge of the causes of what is or comes into being; upon ,who believed that the philosopher, by mere thinking, could lay down the laws of all possible future experience; upon ,who, without knowing anything worth mentioning about natural science, had the courage to develop a system of natural philosophy, and to condemn such investigators as Boyle and Newton; upon ,who undertakes to construct the whole system of reality out of concepts, and who, with his immediate predecessors, brought philosophy for a while into more or less disrepute with men of a scientific turn of mind.

I shall come down quite to our own times, and consider a man whose conception of philosophy has had and still has a good deal of influence, especially with the general public—with those to whom philosophy is a thing to be taken up in moments of leisure, and cannot be the serious pursuit of a life. "Knowledge of the lowest kind," says, "is un-unified knowledge; Science is partially-unified knowledge; Philosophy is completelyunified knowledge." Science, he argues, means merely the family of the Sciences—stands for nothing more than the sum of knowledge formed of their contributions. Philosophy is the fusion of these contributions into a whole; it is knowledge of the greatest generality.

In harmony with this notion Spencer produced a system of philosophy which includes the following: A volume entitled "First Principles," which undertakes to show what man can and what man cannot know; a treatise on the principles of biology; another on the principles of psychology; still another on the principles of sociology; and finally one on the principles of morality.

To complete the scheme it would have been necessary to give an account of inorganic nature before going on to the phenomena of life, but our philosopher found the task too great and left this out. Now, Spencer was a man of genius, and one finds in his works many illuminating thoughts. But it is worthy of remark that those who praise his work in this or in that field are almost always men who have themselves worked in some other field and have an imperfect acquaintance with the particular field that they happen to be praising.

The metaphysician finds the reasonings of the " Principles" rather loose and inconclusive; the biologist pays little heed to the "Principles of Biology"; the sociologist finds Spencer not particularly accurate or careful in the field of his predilection. He has tried to be a professor of all the sciences, and it is too late in the world's history for him or for any man to cope with such a task. In the days of a man might have hoped to accomplish it.

WHAT PHILOSOPHY MEANS IN OUR TIME.—It savors of temerity to write down such a title as that which heads the present section. There are men living to-day to whom philosophy means little else than the doctrine of the brothers Caird,for we must not forget that many of the seminaries of learning in Europe and some in America still hold to the mediaeval church philosophy. But let me gather up in a few words the purport of what has been said above. Philosophy once meant the whole body of scientific knowledge. Afterward it came to mean the whole body of knowledge which could be attained by the mere light of human reason, unaided by revelation. The several special sciences sprang up, and a multitude of men have for a long time past devoted themselves to definite limited fields of investigation with little attention to what has been done in other fields.

Nevertheless, there has persisted the notion of a discipline which somehow concerns itself with the whole system of things, rather than with any limited division of that broad field. It is a notion not peculiar to the disciples of Spencer. There are many to whom philosophy is a "Weltweisheit," a worldwisdom. Shall we say that this is the meaning of the word philosophy now? And if we do, how shall we draw a line between philosophy and the body of the special sciences?