

**CHIEF ANCIENT
PHILOSOPHIES.
STOICISM**

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Chief ancient philosophies. Stoicism by W. W. Capes

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STOICISM.

BY

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STOICISM.

CHAPTER I.

THE THOUGHT AND CHARACTER OF SOCRATES.

THE study of Stoicism cannot be properly begun without some attempt to trace its germs in earlier speculation, and to note what was the state of Greek society in which it first took root before it was transferred to other and perhaps to kindlier soils. Like all the famous systems which divided the earnest thinkers of the old Greek world, its real starting-point is to be found in the life and thought of Socrates, whose original and striking figure fills so marked a place in the pictures of the social life at Athens towards the close of the fifth century before our era.

Not that Greek philosophy began with him. There had been no lack before of serious efforts to solve some of the many problems which had forced themselves upon men's thoughts when they looked out upon the universe around them, or tried to think about their own relations to the world unseen, and to the infinities that lay before and after. But these earlier seekers after wisdom had no chart or rules by which to steer, had no instruments or method

of discovery, and could make therefore little progress in their course. There was a sublime audacity in the way in which they grappled with great questions, constructed systems of the universe, and explained as they thought the laws of nature, before they had determined the simplest rules of logic, or had any more appliances than the experience of the untrained senses. They were like the early painters who aspired often to portray the imagery of heaven, or to deal with lurid scenes of future judgment, before they had learnt even the rudiments of perspective or anatomy. They gave birth therefore to little more than guess-work, lighted up here and there with flashes of strange insight, that may remind us of the discoveries of later ages ; but nothing came of all their subtle thought, for they had no tests by which to disentangle truth from error. There was a want of balance and proportion in their hasty systems which seemed to oscillate from pole to pole. At one time they had only eyes to see the moods and qualities of outward nature, and language seemed to them to bear no higher meaning, and mind and its processes to be but subtler forms of matter. At another time they were so much impressed by the fleeting character of all the knowledge gained through sense, that thought alone seemed sure and solid, while all experience else was treacherous and unreal. There was no practical value in their speculations while they rested on this level. The love of wisdom, which the name philosophy implied, was strong and earnest ; it was a natural yearning to explain the mysteries of the world in

which men lived, but it had borne as yet no solid fruits to justify itself to sober sense. It had not furnished men with any rule of action, with any standard of what was right or wrong. It had not helped to train them for the needs of social life; for it had not fitted them to serve their country or to push their fortunes in any of the arts of peace or war. Such had not been its aim indeed; it never had aspired to do such work, but then again it might be urged that little else had yet been gained: no sure knowledge of the world of nature, no full acquaintance with the powers of thought. But while philosophy was dreaming on, disdainful to be man's counsellor and guide in common life, another power was ready to step into the vacant place, and to meet all the demands of higher culture. In Sicily, and among the isles of Greece, a class of teachers had arisen, who had made a special study of the arts of speech and forms of language, and all the show of literary graces. They had learnt much of men and manners as they passed from land to land, and were familiar with all the topics of politics and art and morals which had roused the interest of the age. They professed to educate the rising youth for public life, to train them for the fence of words in the national assembly and the law courts, to stock their memory with graceful phrases as well as with the lessons of ripe statecraft. Old-fashioned folks, indeed, might shake their heads and say that the so-called sophists had the show of wisdom, not its substance; that they did not care for truth, but only for effect, and were quite

indifferent to the ends which knowledge should be made to serve. They probably unsettled old convictions by comparing the customs and the laws of different nations, and often ran a tilt at venerable dogmas out of mere bravado or caprice.

It might seem, perhaps, to careless eyes as if Socrates were only one of this new class of professional teachers. Like them he seemed to court men's notice, to live chiefly out of doors, and to be for ever talking to the young men he gathered round him, and to treat often too with scant respect time-honoured customs and beliefs. But unlike them he affected no display, and made no pretensions to superior knowledge; like older thinkers, he was but a seeker after wisdom, with a deeper sense of his own ignorance than the rest; the *irony*, which was so marked a feature of his style, consisted in the humility with which he owned his want of knowledge, in his willingness to hear what others had to say, and in what they thought the captious spirit with which he probed and criticised their answers. But he felt strongly that the ideas of men around him were all loose and hasty and one-sided, not based on any sure experience or careful scrutiny of facts. They were often inconsistent in themselves, or carelessly gathered from imperfect data; a few questions or a few appeals to other cases were enough to show the need of further thought to correct and to complete such notions. Knowledge, he said, was true and real only in so far as it consisted in conceptions in which the class qualities were duly gathered from a