

**THE GREEK SCEPTICS FROM
PYRRHO TO SEXTUS: AN
ESSAY WHICH OBTAINED THE
HARE PRIZE IN THE YEAR 1868**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649512317

The Greek Sceptics from Pyrrho to Sextus: An Essay Which Obtained the Hare Prize in the Year 1868 by Norman Maccoll

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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NORMAN MACCOLL

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THE GREEK SCEPTICS.

THE GREEK SCEPTICS,

FROM

PYRRHO TO SEXTUS.

In Essay

WHICH OBTAINED THE HARE PRIZE IN THE
YEAR 1868.

BY

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*Ὁ μέντοι Ἀρκεσίλαος πάνυ μοι δοκεῖ Πυρρωνεῖος κοινωνεῖν λόγοις, ὡς
μίαν εἶναι σχεδὸν τὴν κατ' αὐτὸν ἀγωγὴν καὶ τὴν ἡμετέραν.*

SEXT. EMP. P. II. i. 232.

London and Cambridge:
MACMILLAN AND CO.

1869.

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monograph on the same subject as the present essay, by M. Thorbecke, in the *Annals of the University of Leyden*. I regret I have had little opportunity of using a paper by Prof. Kayser in the "*Rheinisches Museum*" on Sextus Empiricus. I have consulted without advantage the history of Scepticism by Stäudlin: that by Tafel I could find neither in the Public Library, nor in the British Museum, nor in the *Bibliothèque Impériale*.

THE GREEK SCEPTICS.

THE death of Aristotle marks the close of a great epoch in the course of Greek speculation—an epoch which, beginning with the Sophists, includes a term of little more than one hundred years: yet within that brief compass is comprised all that is most brilliant and perfect in ancient philosophy. When it began, Greek thinkers had just emancipated themselves from the cosmological theories current in Ionia nearly two hundred years before: when it closed, the most complete and far-reaching system had been promulgated to which the ancient world ever attained. Whether we look to the wide circle of knowledge embraced, the new methods adopted, or the precision introduced, we cannot but allow that the progress was immense. As Rome, from being a petty state struggling for existence on the Tiber and the slopes of the Apennines, rose in a few score years to be the mistress of all the peoples who dwelt on the shores of the Mediterranean, Greek philosophy, in its infancy a vague and crude attempt to solve the problems, that lie most closely before our eyes, had, by

the time of Aristotle, mapped out and to some extent formed the paths, along which all subsequent thinkers have been forced to travel. Xenophanes and Anaxagoras had made only the beginnings of a distinction between the several provinces of thought. Psychology was still unknown: Logic was all but unrecognized as having a claim to a separate existence¹; it was but dimly perceived that there is a difference between physics and ethics. In Aristotle, on the contrary, we find a scientific method resting largely on observation and experiment, and a scientific terminology of marvellous richness. The boundaries of the sciences are definitely laid down: their relations ascertained; their objects determined, and also to some extent investigated.

In Plato and Aristotle ancient speculation reached its culminating point, and to us at the present day they appear to stand far above all who followed them, and yet it is very noteworthy how slight was the influence they exercised over the thinkers of the three following centuries. Their systems were neither accepted as final, and as rendering unnecessary any further inquiry, except in the way of comment and illustration; nor, on the other hand, were they sharply criticized; their shortcomings pointed out, and new theories formed with the endeavour at least to avoid their supposed errors. They were neither used as models nor warnings. The very faults they are most

¹ Cf. Prantl. *Gesch. d. Logik*, I. pp. 10, 11.

chargeable with—faults, which are in great part the result of imperfect observation and too hasty generalization¹—were reproduced in an exaggerated form in Zeno and Epicurus. Outside the circle of their professed followers², not much quoted, and—Aristotle especially—not much read, they were neglected or, one might rather say, abandoned by an age which had a different tone of thought and a different aim. This was the result of a change that came over not philosophers only, but the intellect and the feelings of all Greece.

That outward circumstances and mental dispositions act and re-act on one another, is a truth that has almost passed into a truism, but in Greece it was a fact pre-eminently true and important. There the tie which bound the citizen to his city was so close, so far closer indeed than such relations are or can be in a modern state, that the fortunes of the city swayed with a power unknown to us the thoughts and feelings of the citizens. With us local prejudices and associations not uncommonly chill or check general patriotism, but to the Greek there was no such *imperium in imperio*. With him local prejudices and general patriotism were one and the same thing, for his state was his birth-place, and he had no feeling more

¹ Zeller, *Phil. der Gr.* III. a. p. 2.

² The strange story regarding the fate of Aristotle's writings, told by Strabo (XIII. 1. 148), and in slightly different terms by Plutarch, may have had its origin in this neglect of Aristotle. On Cicero's ignorance of Aristotle, see Madvig, ad Cic. *de Fin.* IV. 12.