

## CHAPTER I

*Knowledge and the good life: the ethical motivation  
of the Cyrenaic views on knowledge*

What we usually call Cyrenaic ‘epistemology’ is not an epistemology in the sense that other ancient and modern theories are. It is not a systematic theory exploring coherently and in depth the provenance, nature and structure of knowledge, objective or subjective. Nor, when it comes to scepticism, do we find the Cyrenaics coming to grips with the range of epistemological issues that both Academic and Pyrrhonian enquirers raise in order to cast doubt on the possibility of knowledge. The epistemology of the school basically consists of a two-fold epistemological theme – namely that we have knowledge of our *pathē* but cannot have knowledge of things in the world – and of a number of elaborations upon that theme. Too often in the course of this study we shall see the Cyrenaics in possession of the conceptual tools that would allow them to raise epistemological issues that are recognisably modern, only to realise thereafter that, nonetheless, they do not go much further than their one basic theme. Those who go through the ancient testimonies may experience a sensation not altogether different from bumping their heads repeatedly against a glass door – a feeling that there is an obstacle there, only it is not immediately obvious what it is.

The problem comes down to this. The fact that the Cyrenaics stop short of following up epistemological issues that they themselves raise, and that they do so in virtually every case where we would expect them to develop their position and draw its implications, indicates that we do not get this picture because of gaps in the evidence. We should not assume, I think, that they did not see how they could proceed, for they lack neither originality nor inventiveness so long as they keep to a point of discussion. So we can reasonably infer that, from a given point onwards, they did not have any interest in pursuing matters further, and this seems to imply that they did not act as conventional epistemologists in the sense that they did not explore epistemological questions for their own sake. If so, there are three questions that we need to answer in order

to acquire a perspective on their epistemological views. First, if they did not have an intrinsic interest in epistemological questions, why did they take the trouble to make the claim that we can grasp only our own *pathē* but have no grasp of real objects? Second, why do they decide to elaborate somewhat upon that claim? And third, what is it that determines the point where they cut short their remarks on particular epistemological issues – why do they stop where they stop?

The one context that may help us come up with an answer is, I suggest, ethics. The Cyrenaics were hedonists and hence posited pleasure as the supreme good of human life. There are various splits and sects within the members of that school, all of which are over issues in hedonistic ethics. This is not the place to discuss them, but it will suffice to say that, despite their differences, all Cyrenaic philosophers agree that the pleasure that is of supreme positive value is bodily pleasure: not the accumulation of such pleasure over a lifetime, but the bodily pleasure that one is experiencing at present. And conversely, the only thing that is of negative value is pain, defined not as the sum of painful experiences over an extended period, but as the bodily pain that a person is suffering at present.

There is an obvious connection between the ethical thesis that the only things that matter are the *pathē*, pleasurable or painful, that we are experiencing and the epistemological thesis that the *pathē* are the only things we can grasp: our ultimate goal is to achieve pleasure and shun pain, and this goal is perfectly within our reach, precisely because pleasure and pain (as well as other experiences that may be indirectly related to our getting pleasure or avoiding pain) are things we grasp unfailingly and cannot be in error about. Perhaps there is also a further connection bearing upon the very character of pleasure as the moral good, namely that it is vindicated as the moral good precisely in virtue of the fact that we experience it as such; what we grasp unmistakably is not only that our experience is one of pleasure, but also that this pleasurable experience is self-evidently the greatest good.<sup>1</sup>

These links give us an angle from which we are to look at the views that constitute the object of this study. It is not the angle of someone who is particularly interested in analysing *how* we know the things we know and in organising the results into a coherent system. It is rather the perspective of somebody who is mainly interested in *what* we know and makes a series of remarks, some of them fairly elaborate, about the

<sup>1</sup> On this see Irwin 1991 and my article ‘The Cyrenaics’ in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

things we do know and those that we do not. The point is not positive, it is negative: the *pathē* are all we can know and are what we want to look at, since at any rate they are all that matters. The philosophical interest of the remarks about our knowledge of the *pathē* lies precisely in that negative point. The Cyrenaics invite us to look within, and to organise our life on the basis of what we find there, namely our experiences. And they set their position deliberately in contrast to the doctrines of other philosophers who urge us to acquire objective knowledge of various further things and lead our lives on the basis of it: we do not in fact need any of that knowledge, since the moral good is found among our *pathē* and can be achieved by attending to them.

Connected to the turn inwards is the physiological and epistemological talk about the *pathē*: for example, the remarks about what kind of states they are, the linguistic ways of expressing them, their epistemological characteristics and the analysis of the manner in which they affect us. The rejections of empirical knowledge and of knowledge of other minds are instances of, and also grounds for, the Cyrenaics' refusal to seek the secret of life outside, in the world around them. Whether they are accumulating positive features in favour of trusting the *pathē* or whether they give epistemological reasons why we should not aspire to information about things and people around us, they follow the same strategy: they pursue questions to the point of vindicating their ethical project, and perhaps to the degree of eliminating any substantial opposition (or so they may hope), and then they drop them. In doing so they act primarily as ethicists, not as epistemologists: they see the exploration of epistemological issues principally as a means to an end, not as an activity that is itself worth practising.

An indication that this is the way they proceed is the conspicuous absence of a distinction that lies at the heart of epistemological doctrines, ancient and modern, namely the distinction between knowledge and belief. Although our sources occasionally mention beliefs, these are always beliefs about *pathē*, true and incorrigible beliefs that amount to knowledge. What we do not find is the full-fledged distinction between knowledge as a cognitive state that has certain epistemic characteristics, such as truth and certainty, and belief as a cognitive condition which bears different epistemic characteristics, notably it can be true or false and does not convey certainty in the way knowledge does. Why is that distinction absent? One answer might be that if we cannot have empirical knowledge we cannot have empirical beliefs either; we have beliefs only about the things of which we have certain knowledge, the *pathē*. But

in fact the evidence suggests that the Cyrenaics took a very different line: we may or may not entertain beliefs about various things, but we should not organise our life around beliefs, we should organise it around knowledge. If so, the fully developed epistemic distinction between knowledge and belief is not relevant, I submit, to what the Cyrenaics are proposing: it would not significantly help their ethical project and therefore its epistemological impact is disregarded.

Is there any actual evidence that this is indeed the perspective in which the Cyrenaics placed their study of the nature of the *pathē* and of our knowledge of them? There is, and part of it has to do with the way in which they interpreted the Socratic project and defined the Socratic identity of their school.<sup>2</sup> They adopted to an extent the attitude of thinkers such as Aristo,<sup>3</sup> and also Antisthenes and the Cynics, concentrating on ethics and rejecting intellectual activities such as physics, logic<sup>4</sup> and mathematics.<sup>5</sup> The idea behind this anti-intellectual attitude is one traditionally ascribed to Socrates, namely that we should pursue what helps us to live the good life and we should not worry about matters that are both incomprehensible and useless.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the sources inform us that the Cyrenaics left some room after all for logic, epistemology, and even physics: they subdivided ethics into five sections,<sup>7</sup> one of which is on arguments, another on the *pathē* and yet another on aetiology. We shall understand the spirit in which they allow talk about such subjects if we pay attention to the fact that they define these topics as subsections of *ethics*. The moral is clear, I think: we may talk about causes and arguments and *pathē* in so far as this may be of use in helping us to organise our lives with a view to pleasure. But once it becomes clear how this should be done, further enquiry into non-ethical subjects becomes purposeless and wrong.

There is no doubt that this strategy is at times frustrating to the

<sup>2</sup> On the Socratic origins and identity of the school, see D.L. 11.47, 65; Hesychius, *Onom.* xc.6–9; Strabo xvii.3.22; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* viii.343c–d; Themistius, *Or.* 34.5; Numenius *apud* Eusebius xiv.5.5; ps.Galen, *Hist.phil.* 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Eusebius xv.62.7 [T8b].

<sup>4</sup> The sources are divided about the study of logic: some attest that the Cyrenaics did away with both physics and logic (D.L. 11.92 [T7d]; Sextus, *M* vii.11 [T6d]; and Eusebius xv.62.7 [T8b]), while others inform us that they rejected the study of physics, but kept practising ethics as well as logic in so far as they are useful (D.L. 11.92 [T7d] and Sextus, *M* vii.15). If members of the school did do any logic, they probably concentrated on the more practical and less technical aspects of it.

<sup>5</sup> See Aristotle, *Metaph.* B 2, 996a29ff. and M 3, 1078a31ff., and the comments of Alexander and of Syrianus on these passages. See also D.L. 11.92 [T7d]; Eusebius 1.8.9 and xv.62.7 [T8b]; and Themistius, *Or.* 34.5.

<sup>6</sup> See Xenophon, *Mem.* iv.7.2–8; see also Themistius, *Or.* 34.5 and Eusebius xv.62.7 [T8b].

<sup>7</sup> This is attested by Seneca, *Epist.* 89.12 and by Sextus, *M* vii.11 [T6d].

modern reader. At least it has been for me, partly because I approached the material with the eye of someone interested in epistemology, not only in its history, and partly because I found, and still find, the epistemology of the Cyrenaics so much more interesting than their ethics. However, there are two considerations to take into account here. First, on a general level, the subordination of epistemology and other extra-ethical matters to ethics is not wholly indefensible. For it is part of a concern, which pervades ancient ethical stances, to join the activities, values and goals of each person into a pattern directed to the achievement of whatever each ethical theory defines as the supreme good. Whatever its shortcomings, the model of unifying and giving meaning to human life by relating it to a set of overarching values is not unappealing, I think. Second, the practice of keeping distinct what the Cyrenaics want to achieve from what we might have desired them to have achieved may actually prove philosophically rewarding: in many cases, we may see the point of a remark or assess the force of an argument better if we keep in mind what our philosophers are ultimately driving at than if we do not. This of course is not the only defensible way of approaching the doctrine. For my part, I did not think it wrong also to ask questions that the Cyrenaics might have asked but did not care to, outline answers that they might have given but did not bother to, and occasionally expand on a phrase or on an argument more than the evidence strictly warrants.

So much for the philosophical context. Regarding the historical framework of the doctrine, I only need to identify the main branches or sects of the Cyrenaic school and their leaders, because I shall occasionally refer to them. Readers who are disconcerted by unknown names may skip them altogether, for my argument does not essentially depend upon historical issues.<sup>8</sup>

The founder of the Cyrenaic school was Aristippus of Cyrene, an associate of Socrates and a man of many interests and talents. Around the turn of the fourth century BC, we find as heads of the school his daughter Arete and later his grandson Aristippus the Younger or the Mother-Taught, probably a near contemporary of Aristotle. He is often held responsible by modern scholars for the formulation of the central epistemological views of the school. By the time of Aristotle's death (322 BC), we encounter three new Cyrenaic sects founded by Theodorus,

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive bibliography on historical and philological problems concerning the Cyrenaic philosophers, see most recently *SSR*. For the arguments defending my claims in this chapter, see Tsouna 1988.

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Anniceris and Hegesias. Each of them is identified by the name of its founder (Theodorians, Annicerians, Hegesians) but appears to have kept its Cyrenaic affiliation as well.<sup>9</sup> There seems to have been yet another Hellenistic sect bearing the original name of the school and claiming to represent Cyrenaic orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup> As I mentioned above, these splits are almost entirely over ethics. Very occasionally, they are also over physiological and psychological issues and it is in connection with such issues that the names of individual Cyrenaics and of their sects will turn up in the subsequent discussion. But all branches of the school defend the same epistemological theses – not surprisingly since, despite their variations, they all adhere to the central claim of Cyrenaic hedonism, namely that our experiences are the only things that matter.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See Tsouna 1988, pp. 48–9, and J. Brunschwig, ‘La théorie cyrénaïque de la connaissance: quoi de socratique?’, in Gourinat (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting discussion of what counted as canonical Cyrenaic doctrine and what was considered as a deviation from it, see A. Laks, ‘Annicéris et les plaisirs psychiques’, in Brunschwig and Nussbaum 1993, pp. 18–49.

<sup>11</sup> The last Cyrenaic scholar died towards the middle of the third century BC. Assuming that their followers survived them by a few years, the end of the Cyrenaic school should be placed sometime between Arcesilaus’ death (242 BC) and the beginning of Chrysippus’ career in the Stoa (232 BC).

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## CHAPTER 2

*The nature of the pathē*

## I PHYSIOLOGY

Pleasure and pain are *pathē* (singular, *pathos*).<sup>1</sup> The term *pathos* is related to the Greek verb *paschein* ('to undergo', 'to suffer a change'), and denotes effects upon a subject, usually caused by contact with an external object. Depending on the context, a *pathos* may occur in inanimate substances or in animate beings, and may be an entity or an occurrence of various kinds: a stone heated by the sun undergoes a *pathos* and becomes warm; the diagnosis of a disease is sometimes effected by observing the *pathē* or physical symptoms displayed by the patient; and the pain that the patient feels is a *pathos* as well.

Although the Cyrenaics focused on *pathē* in connection with perceivers, their analysis preserves physicalistic overtones. These are reflected, I believe, in the definitions of pleasure and pain as smooth and rough motions<sup>2</sup> located in the flesh (Sextus, *PH* 1.215 [T6a]) or in the soul (D.L. 11.90 [T7c]),<sup>3</sup> which are somehow related to pleasurable and painful feelings. There is little direct evidence about the nature of these motions, but, in my view, 'smooth' and 'rough' designate empirical properties of physical changes in the body and do not refer to the way these changes feel to the perceiver. First, pleasure does not *feel* smooth but pleasurable, and pain does not *feel* rough but painful. Second, most sources agree<sup>4</sup> that the Cyrenaics in fact drew some distinctions between

<sup>1</sup> I have left this term untranslated. The English term 'undergoing', which is often used to render *pathos* is, I think, too broad; 'affection' stresses the mental aspects of what the Cyrenaics indicated by *pathos*, but misses its physicalistic nuances. The same holds for 'passion', which may be misleading on account of its uses in early modern philosophy, notably in Descartes and Malebranche.

<sup>2</sup> 'Motion' or 'movement' are convenient translations for *kinēsis*, but they should not be taken to mean locomotion.

<sup>3</sup> Sextus refers to the motions of the flesh by the word *kinēsis*, whereas Diogenes Laertius uses the term *kinēma* for the motions of the soul.

<sup>4</sup> However, some sources identify these bodily alterations with pleasurable and painful feelings. On this view, pleasure and pain *are* physical movements possessing empirical properties, namely

the *motions* associated with pleasure and pain and the *experiences* of feeling pleasure and pain, and they also agree that it is the motions, not the sensations or the experiences resulting from the motions, that are smooth and rough. However, it still remains unclear what precisely is meant by calling physical changes in the body smooth or rough. My speculation is that ‘smooth’ is an empirical property of bodily alterations that occur in accordance with our natural constitution and therefore find no resistance inside the body, while ‘rough’ characterises changes that are somehow disruptive of our bodily nature and functions and do not come about without violence to our nature.<sup>5</sup>

Let us now have a closer look at the evidence concerning the physical changes in question and the way they feel to the perceiver. Diogenes Laertius reports that Aristippus of Cyrene defined the supreme good or moral end (*telos*, plural *telē*),<sup>6</sup> i.e., pleasure, as ‘the smooth movement that comes forth to *aisthēsis*’ (D.L. II.85 [Γ7a]).<sup>7</sup> And Clement of Alexandria adds that ‘the concept of pleasure is a smooth and gentle motion accompanied by some kind of *aisthēsis*’ (*Strom.* II.20.106). It seems to me it would be natural to read these passages as making a clear distinction between the physical movement and one’s consciousness of it. If so, they suggest that there are smooth motions of the flesh which are sensed, but also some that are not, and that the physical motions counting as *pathē* of pleasure are only those which are sensed.<sup>8</sup>

Aristippus the Younger appears to have drawn a similar distinction and to have applied it not only to *pathē* of pleasure and pain, but also to a third category of *pathē* that he may have been the first to introduce into the Cyrenaic doctrine, the so-called intermediates.

smoothness and roughness. For example, in the doxographical presentation of the doctrine of ‘those who remained faithful to the teaching of Aristippus and were called Cyrenaics’, Diogenes Laertius reports: ‘they held that there are two *pathē*, pain and pleasure, the one of them, pleasure, being a smooth movement, the other, pain, being a rough movement’ (D.L. II.86 [Γ7b]), and the same position is attested by the *Suda* (II.553.4f.).

<sup>5</sup> Compare the transmission of *pathē* in naturally mobile substances and their perception by the *phronimon* in Plato, *Tim.* 64b–c. Also, compare the account of pleasure and pain in *Tim.* 64d–65b.

<sup>6</sup> The primary sense of *telos* is end or goal. In ethical contexts, it can mean the goal or purpose of a particular action, and also the overriding goal of a person’s life, the supreme good. Yet another sense in which we can speak about the *telos* in an ethical context (and which is particularly relevant to the interpretation of testimonies about the Cyrenaics such as Sextus, *M* VII.199) is ‘fulfilment’. See p. 12 and n. 12 of this chapter, and also chapter 10, n. 35.

<sup>7</sup> I discuss the meaning of *aisthēsis* below, pp. 11, 24 and in chapter 4, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> The use of the term *telos* in this context is anachronistic and the position that pleasure is the *telos* was probably not held by Aristippus; see *SSR* IV A 173. However, Aristippus may well have used the term *aisthēsis* to refer to the experience of pleasure and to differentiate it from the corresponding physical change. Notice that the differentiation between bodily motions and experiences does not imply that the *pathē* of which we have awareness can only be physical – although they may be.