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978-0-521-61670-6 - The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy

Edited by Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld and Malcolm Schofield

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HISTORY OF
Hellenistic Philosophy

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521616706

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First published 1999
Reprinted 2002
First paperback edition 2005
Third printing 2010

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

The Cambridge history of Hellenistic philosophy / edited by Keimpe
Algra . . . [et al.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 25028 5 (hardback)

I. Philosophy, Ancient. I. Algra, Keimpe, 1959–.

BI71.C36 1999 180–dc21 98–36033 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-25028-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-61670-6 Paperback

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Preface

Not so many decades ago Hellenistic philosophy was widely regarded as a dark age in the history of thought: it was a period of epigoni, a period of post-Aristotelian depression. The age produced nothing worth pondering and little worth reading. Moreover, there was little enough to read: few texts from the period survive in their entirety; and the fragments and testimonies to which we are now reduced derive for the most part from jejune epitomators or hostile commentators. An historian of philosophy would be best advised to doze through the Hellenistic period – indeed, why wake up before the birth of Plotinus?

Fashions change, and this dismal and depreciatory assessment is now universally rejected. Hellenistic philosophy was not dull: on the contrary, it was a bright and brilliant period of thought. The Hellenistic philosophers were not epigoni: on the contrary, they opened up new areas of speculation and they engaged in debates and discussions which were both passionate and profound. It cannot be denied that time has served the period badly. If the textual situation is less desperate than has sometimes been pretended, it remains true that for the most part we are obliged to reconstruct the thought of the Hellenistic philosophers from later reports – and these reports are indeed often thin or confused or biased. But such difficulties no longer daunt – rather, they add a certain piquancy to the study.

The revived interest in the Hellenistic period has caused a spate of publications – articles and monographs and books pour from the learned presses, and some of them are distinguished contributions to scholarship. But for the most part they deal with particular problems or specific aspects of the matter; and a good, full, general treatment of Hellenistic philosophy is not easy to discover. It may thus seem opportune to essay a general history of the subject – and that is what this volume attempts to do. Not that it represents, or pretends to determine, an orthodoxy. Indeed, there are few interesting claims about Hellenistic philosophy which are not controversial, and few areas where any scholar would be

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inclined to say: There we have it. This *History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, then, is not definitive. Nor did the editors seek to persuade the contributors to disguise their discords: the riding of hobby-horses was discouraged, and a contributor who proposed to offer a novel or a bold interpretation was asked to confess the fact and to provide references to rival views; but no doctrinal uniformity was imposed, and readers of the *History* will occasionally find an interpretation commended on one page and rejected on another.

The phrase ‘Hellenistic philosophy’ consists of two disputable words. The Hellenistic period conventionally begins with the death of Alexander the Great and ends with the battle of Actium some three hundred years later. The *History*, for reasons which are explained in the Epilogue, has a slightly more modest chronological scope: it starts, in effect, from the last days of Aristotle (who died a year after Alexander) and it stops in about 100 BC. In consequence, it says nothing – save incidentally – about certain figures who standardly count as Hellenistic philosophers: Posidonius is not among its heroes; Philodemus and the Epicureans of the first century BC, do not appear in their own right; Aenesidemus and the revival of Pyrrhonism are not discussed.

Any division of any sort of history into chronological segments will be arbitrary, at least at the edges, and it would be absurd to pretend that philosophy changed, abruptly or essentially, in 320 BC and again in 100 BC. Equally, any history must choose some chronological limits; and the limits chosen for this *History* are, or so the editors incline to think, reasonably reasonable – at least, they are more reasonable than the traditional limits. It may be objected that the word ‘Hellenistic’ is now inept. (In truth, some historians dislike the word *tout court*.) But there is no other word with which to replace it, and it is used here without, of course, any ideological connotations – as a mere label, a sign for a certain span of time.

The term ‘philosophy’, too, is not without its vagaries – what people have been content to name ‘philosophy’ has changed from age to age (and place to place), and at the edges there has always been a pleasing penumbra. The *History* has, in effect, adopted something like the following rule of thumb: anything which both counted as philosophy for the Hellenistic Greeks and also counts as philosophy for us is admitted as philosophy for the purposes of the *History*; and in addition, a few other items which find themselves on the margins of the subject – the sciences, rhetoric and poetics – have been considered, though less fully than they might have been in a history of the general intellectual achievements of the period. Other

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principles might have been followed: the editors claim that their rule of thumb is no worse than any other.

Then there is the question of order and arrangement. In effect, any historian of Hellenistic philosophy is confronted by a difficult choice: to write by school or to write by subject? Each choice has its advantages and its disadvantages. Writing by school – Part I: the Epicureans, Part II: the Stoa . . . – allows for a systematic and coherent presentation of the main ‘philosophies’ of the period; and since those philosophies were – or at least purported to be – systematic, such a presentation is in principle desirable. On the other hand, the Hellenistic period was also characterized by vigorous debate and discussion among the partisans of the different schools of thought: if systems were built, they were also attacked – and defended, redesigned, attacked again . . . A history which proceeds school by school will find it relatively hard to bring out this dynamic aspect of its subject and hence it will tend to disguise the very aspect of Hellenistic philosophy which has contributed most to the revival of its fortunes.

Writing by subject has, evidently enough, the opposite features: the cut and thrust of debate is more readily exhibited and explained – but the school systems will be presented in fragmented fashion. The editors decided, without great confidence, to prefer subjects to schools: readers who require an account of, say, Stoicism may, without great labour, construct one for themselves by studying a discontinuous selection of sections of the *History*.

If a history is to be written by subject, then how is philosophy best divided into its component subjects? It would have been possible to take one of the ancient ‘divisions’ of philosophy, and to let it give the *History* its structure. Indeed there was, in later antiquity, a standard division, for

most, and the most important, authors say that there are three parts of philosophy – ethical, physical, logical.¹

Ethics comprehended political theory as well as moral philosophy; physics included most of what we should call metaphysics, as well as philosophy of science and philosophical psychology; and logic embraced not only logic in the broadest of its contemporary senses but also epistemology – and sometimes even rhetoric.

Numerous texts acknowledge the tripartition as a feature of Hellenistic philosophy. Thus according to Sextus Empiricus,

¹ Sen. *Ep.* 89.9; cf. e.g. Apul. *Int.* 189, 1–3.

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there has been much dispute among the Dogmatists about the parts of philosophy, some saying that it has one part, some two, some three; it would not be appropriate to deal with this in more detail here, and we shall set down impartially the opinion of those who seem to have dwelt upon the matter more fully . . . The Stoics and some others say that there are three parts of philosophy – logic, physics, ethics – and they begin their exposition with logic (although there has indeed been much dissension even about where one should begin). (S.E. *PH* II.12–13)

Elsewhere Sextus goes into the details; and he reports that ‘implicitly, Plato was the originator’ of the tripartition, although ‘Xenocrates and the Peripatetics introduced it most explicitly – and the Stoics too stand by this division’ (*M* VII.16).²

The reference to Plato is a matter of piety rather than of history; and most scholars are content to ascribe the formal origin of the division to Xenocrates. The Peripatetics acknowledged a three-fold division, but not a literal tripartition; for they preferred to split philosophy itself into two parts, theoretical and practical (which corresponded roughly to physics and ethics), and to deem logic to be not a part but a tool or instrument of philosophy.³ As for the Stoics, Zeno and Chrysippus and many of their followers did indeed subscribe to the tripartition; but

Cleanthes says that there are six parts – dialectic, rhetoric, ethics, politics, physics, theology – although others, among them Zeno of Tarsus, say that these are not parts of philosophical discourse but rather parts of philosophy itself. (D.L. VII.41)

Other Schools, and individuals, might acknowledge three parts in principle while in practice ‘rejecting’ one or another of them – usually logic. Thus the Epicureans ‘rejected logical theory’, in the sense that they thought that it was somehow superfluous or useless (S.E. *M* VII.14). Nonetheless, they studied what they called ‘canonics’, a subject which covers much of what their rivals subsumed under logic, and which they chose to regard as a part of physics (D.L. x.30).

Sextus decided to follow the order: logic, physics, ethics. And this was the usual practice. But, as Sextus insists, there was dissent on this matter too, and most of the possible permutations had their advocates. To be sure, it is not clear what the dissension was about. Sometimes the question at issue seems to be pedagogical: in which order should a student of

² See also S.E. *M* VII.1–19; D.L. VII.39–41; Plut. *Stoic. Repug.* 1035A (further texts in Hülser 1987–8, 12–22); discussion in Hadot 1979; Ierodiakonou 1993b; Dörrie and Baltes 1996, 205–31. ³ See Barnes *et al* 1991, 41–3.

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philosophy be taught the three parts of the subject? Sometimes it is rather systematical: what are the logical relations among the parts, which presuppose which? Sometimes, again, it appears to have had a normative colouring: which part is the culmination, the summit, of the philosophical ascent? Connected to these issues were certain similes or analogies. Thus philosophy was likened to an orchard: the trees are physics, the fruit is ethics, and the fencing is set up by logic. Or to an egg: ethics the yolk, physics the white, logic the shell. Or to an animal: physics the flesh and blood, logic the bones, ethics the soul.⁴

What was the importance, inside Hellenistic philosophy, of this tripartition? It might be thought, first, to have had a certain negative significance, inasmuch as it served to exclude various intellectual disciplines from the study of ‘things human and divine’ and hence to determine the bounds of philosophy proper. Thus the tripartition might seem to leave no place for mathematics, say, or for medicine; or for astronomy, music, rhetoric, grammatical theory . . . But this is not so. Some philosophers, to be sure, would have no truck with rhetoric; but the Stoics treated it as a philosophical discipline – and they had no difficulty in subsuming it under logic, as the companion to dialectic. Again, astronomy was usually taken to be a technical discipline to which philosophers had no professional access; but the cosmological parts of physics in fact brought philosophers into contact with the heavens – and the Epicureans found much to say on the matter. In truth, the tripartite scheme was a fairly elastic sausage-skin: you might stuff it with what you would.

Secondly, and more obviously, the tripartition might be thought to have given a structure to the enquiries of the Hellenistic philosophers. No doubt the subject – like a well planted orchard or a good egg – had a unity and an internal coherence; but it also had its compartments, and you might research here rather than there, write or teach on this aspect rather than on that. This, to be sure, is true; the ancient ‘doxographies’ reveal it in its most jejune form; and the titles of numerous Hellenistic works offer a meatier indication. But it would be a mistake to insist on the point. Readers of Plato sometimes ask themselves: What is this dialogue – the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus* – about? to what part or branch of philosophy does it pertain? And they quickly see that the question has no answer: the dialogue advances whithersoever reason leads it, unconstrained by school-masterly notions of syllabus and timetable. And the same, it is reasonable to think, was often the case in Hellenistic texts. Read the

⁴ See esp. S.E. *M* vii.17–19 (where the simile of the body is ascribed to Posidonius); D.L. vii.40.

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surviving fragments of Chrysippus, and guess from which works they derive: where the answer is known (which, to be sure, is not often), you will be wrong as often as right.

Yet if the ancient tripartition was not universally recognized, if the contents of its constituent parts were not uniformly determined, and if ordinary philosophical practice allowed a fair amount of seepage from one part to another, nonetheless – to return to Seneca – ‘most, and the most important, philosophers’ accepted it. And we might have based this *History* upon it. In fact, we decided to prefer a modern to an ancient division. To be sure, the standard tripartition Seneca refers to is reflected in the general structure we have imposed on the material. But its detailed articulation does not purport to follow an ancient pattern, and some of our topics and subtopics were not known to the Hellenistic world. (Epistemology, for example, was not a branch, nor yet a sub-branch, of ancient philosophy.)

The choice of a modern rather than an ancient principle of division was determined by a prior choice of the same nature. In general, we may look at a past period of thought from our own point of view or we may try to look at it from the point of view of the thinkers of the period itself; that is to say, we may consider it as an earlier part of the history to which we ourselves now belong, or we may consider it as it appeared at the time. The two approaches will produce, as a rule, two rather different histories; for what then seemed – and was – central and important may, with hindsight, seem and be peripheral, and what was once peripheral may assume, as the subject develops and changes, a central importance. Each approach is valuable. The two cannot always be followed simultaneously. Most contemporary historians of philosophy, for reasons which are both various and more or less evident, have adopted the former approach. The *History* is, in this respect, orthodox. But it is a mitigated orthodoxy: several of the contributors have followed – or hugged – the ancient contours of their subject; and the faculty of hindsight is a subjective thing – some readers of the *History* will doubtless find it antiquated rather than contemporary in its implicit assessment of the centre and the periphery of philosophy.

A pendant to these remarks. It would be satisfying were the number of pages allotted to a subject a rough measure of its weight or importance. The *History* does not distribute its pages according to such a principle; for the nature of the evidence imposes certain constraints. Where the evidence is relatively extensive, a longer discussion is possible; and where the evidence is relatively sparse, a longer discussion is desirable. A topic for which we have only a handful of summary reports focused on what the

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ancients thought, not why they thought what they thought, can hardly be given a generous allowance of space, however important it may seem to us (or have seemed to them). The exigencies of the evidence have not determined the distribution of pages among subjects; but they have powerfully and inevitably influenced it.

*

The *History* has been written by specialists: it has not been written for specialists. Nor, to be sure, has it been written for that mythical personage, General Reader. The editors imagine that any serious student, amateur or professional, of ancient philosophy might find a history of Hellenistic philosophy useful and interesting; and they have supposed that a similar, if less direct, interest and utility might attract students of classical antiquity who have no special concern for philosophy and students of philosophy who have no special concern for classical antiquity.

Such hopes have determined the degree of technical expertise which the *History* expects of its readers – expertise in the three pertinent disciplines of philosophy, history, and philology. From a philosophical point of view, some of the issues discussed in the *History* are intrinsically difficult and dense. No account of them can be easy, nor have the contributors been urged to smooth and butter their subjects. But in principle the *History* does not presuppose any advanced philosophical training: it tries to avoid jargon, and it tries to avoid knowing allusions to contemporary issues. For quite different reasons, the history of the period – its intellectual history – is not easy either. Here too the *History* in principle offers a text which supposes no prior expertise in the chronicles and events of the Hellenistic period. Those historical facts (or conjectures) which are pertinent to an understanding of the discussion are, for the most part, set down in the Introduction; and in general, the *History* itself purports to supply whatever historical information it demands.

As to philology, the nature of the evidence makes a certain amount of scholarship indispensable: as far as possible, this has been confined to the footnotes. On a more basic level, there is the question of the ancient languages. In the footnotes there will be found a certain amount of untranslated Greek and Latin; but the body of the *History* is designed to be intelligible to readers whose only language is English. Any passage from an ancient author which is cited is cited in English translation. (If a Greek or Latin word appears in the main text, it serves only to indicate what lies behind the English translation.) Technical terms – and technical terms were common enough in Hellenistic philosophy – form a problem apart.

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In most cases a technical term has been given a rough and ready translation; in a few cases a Latin word or a transliterated Greek word has been treated as a piece of honorary English: every technical term is introduced by a word or two of paraphrase or explication when first it enters the discussion.

Principles of this sort are easy to state, difficult to follow with consistency. There are, no doubt, certain pages where a piece of philosophical jargon has insinuated itself, where an historical allusion has not been explained, where a morsel of ancient terminology remains unglossed. The editors hope that there are few such pages.

*

The several chapters of the *History* are largely independent of one another: the *History* will, we imagine, sometimes be used as a work of reference; and it is not necessary to begin at page 1 in order to understand what is said on page 301. Occasional cross-references signal interconnections among the chapters, so that a reader of page 301 might find it helpful (but not mandatory) to turn back or forward in the volume. The requirement of independence leads to a small amount of repetition: the odd overlappings among the chapters may detract from the elegance of the *History* but they add to its utility.

The footnotes serve three main functions: they quote, and sometimes discuss, ancient texts – in particular, esoteric or knotty texts; they provide references to ancient passages which are not explicitly quoted; and they contain information, for the most part sparing, about the pertinent modern literature on the subject. The Bibliography serves to collect those modern works to which the footnotes refer: it is not a systematic bibliography, let alone a comprehensive bibliography, of Hellenistic philosophy. Printed bibliographies are out of date before they are published; and any reader who wants a comprehensive list of books and articles on Hellenistic philosophy may readily construct one from the bibliographical journals.

The *History* was begun more years ago than the editors care to recall. It was inaugurated in a spirit of euphoria (occasioned by a celebrated sporting triumph). Its career was punctuated by bouts of depression (which had nothing to do with any sporting disasters). Twice it nearly succumbed. The editors therefore have more cause than most to offer thanks: first, to the contributors, some of whom must have despaired of ever seeing their work in print; secondly, to the University of Utrecht, its Department of Philosophy, the Netherlands Organization for Scientific

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-61670-6 - The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy

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Research (NWO), and the C. J. de Vogel Foundation for their generous financial aid; thirdly, to the Cambridge University Press – and in particular to Jeremy Mynott and to Pauline Hire – for their patience, encouragement and optimism. In addition, we would like to express our gratitude to Stephen Chubb for his translation of chapters 2, 3, 18, and parts of chapter 21; and we would like to record that without the unstinting technical support of Han Baltussen and Henri van de Laar the *History* would never have reached the public.

KA · JB · JM · MS

Utrecht, September 1997

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