

A HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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A history of philosophy by Clement C. J. Webb

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CHAPTER I

PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORY

“ WISE I may not call them; for that is a great name which belongs to God alone; *lovers of wisdom* or *philosophers* is their modest and befitting title.” So speaks Socrates in Plato’s *Phædrus* of the genuine teachers of mankind, who, whether they be poets or law-givers or dialecticians like Socrates himself, know what they are talking about, and can distinguish what is really good from what is only apparently so, preferring what can be shown to be true to what is merely plausible and attractive. The word Philosophy has in the course of its long history been used now in a wider, now in a narrower sense; but it has constantly stood for inquiry not so much after certain particular facts as after the fundamental character of this world in which we find ourselves, and of the kind of life which in such a world it behoves us to live.

Sometimes a distinction has been drawn between *natural* and *moral* philosophy, according as attention is directed to the world, or to our life in it. In English books of a

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hundred years ago "philosopher" more often than not meant a "natural philosopher," and "philosophy" what we should nowadays call "natural science." This may be explained by the fact that it was at that time a prevalent view in this country that, apart from what could be learned from a supernatural revelation, the inductive and mathematical methods used in the natural sciences were the only means we had for discovering the nature of the world; while (apart again from duties prescribed by supernatural authority) it was man's chief task to be, in Bacon's words, the "minister and interpreter" of that "Nature" whose ways by those methods he endeavoured to search out. On the other hand, in popular language a "philosopher" often means no more than a person who in the conduct of his life is not at the mercy of circumstance. It is, no doubt, suggested that this is so because he has come to know the sort of world he has to do with, and so is not to be taken by surprise, whatever happens to him; yet the stress is laid rather on his behaviour than on the knowledge which has made it possible. Nowadays, we do not so commonly speak of "natural philosophy" as of "natural science"; and an astronomer or a physicist, a chemist or a biologist, we should not call a philosopher, unless, over and above his special researches, he were also to engage in some

speculation as to the fundamental nature of the one world in which there is mind as well as matter, unity as well as multiplicity, individuality as well as general laws, and were to put to himself such questions as these : How are matter and mind mutually related ? How can what is one be also many, and what is many be also one ? What is an individual ? How can what is not individual be real ? and yet how can we describe any individual at all except in terms which might at any rate be applicable to other individuals as well ? Such questions may be provoked by the investigations of the natural sciences, but cannot be decided by the methods used in those investigations. So long as a scientific investigator does not raise questions of this kind, he cannot, in our sense of the word, be called a philosopher ; though he may perhaps be so called, if, having raised them, he arrives after consideration at the conclusion that they are unanswerable and therefore not worth raising again.

Philosophy, says Plato, begins with wonder ; and, certainly, no kind of animal could learn to philosophize but one whose nature it was not to take things as they come, but to ask after the why and the wherefore of each, taking for granted that each *has* a why and a wherefore, and seeing in whatever happens to him (though he might not put it in this language)