A SKIT ON GREEK PHILOSOPHY

BY ONE HERMIAS PROBABLY OF THE REIGN OF JULIAN, A.D. 362-363

THIS skit* was written as an elaboration of the words of "the blessed Paul" to the Corinthians (1 Cor. iii. 19), "the wisdom of the world is foolishness with God"—"a not inept remark." It is a useful and witty introduction by a Christian sophist to the study of Greek philosophy. The writer, Hermias, assigns the beginning of this earthly philosophy to the apostasy of the angels and says this is the reason why the philosophers put forth such contradictory dogmas and disagree so much among themselves.

Of their divergent opinions on the soul he gives the following: "Democritus and others say it is 'fire,' the Stoics 'air,' others 'mind,' others 'motion' (Heraclitus), others 'an exhalation,' others 'number endowed with the power of motion' (Pythagoras), others 'impregnating water' (Hippon), others 'element proceeding from elements,' others 'harmony' (Deinarchus), others 'blood' (Critias), others 'spirit,' others 'unity' (Monad) like Pythagoras. How many discourses have been given about these theories! How many, I say, of Sophists disputing rather than discovering the truth!

"Well, let them disagree about the nature of the soul, they surely will agree about other things. But no. One holds that pleasure is a good, others that it is an evil, others that it is between the two. Some say the nature of the soul is mortal, others that it is immortal, others that it continues on (after death) for a little while, others make it pass into animals (transmigration), others dissolve it into atoms, others give it three successive appearances in bodily form, others give it a cycle of three thousand years.† What may one call this nonsense (τερατεία)—insanity, madness or quarrelling (στάσις), or all these combined? If they have discovered anything true, let them agree about it, and I will gladly believe them.‡ But if

* It has been suggested that Heomias could have obtained his knowledge of Greek philosophy from the *Placita* of the Pseudo-Plutarch, A.D. 150, about). Menzel Diels and Harnack assign this skit to the fifth and sixth centuries. Julian's reign is suggested here. Although the work has many resemblances to the *Cohortatio* (Pseudo-Justin), also of uncertain date, its bantering tone suggests a date when the fierceness of the early controversy had subsided, and Julian's attempt to resuscitate paganism was not taken *au grand sérieux*.

† Plato, *Phœdrus*, 245.

‡ The *Cohortatio*, ascribed to Justin. The writer visited Rome (c. 37). (4) asks, after a brief summary of these conflicting theories, "How, Greeks, can those who desire salvation safely consider that they can learn the true religion from those who are proved unable to persuade themselves not to quarrel (στασιάζειν) with one another or to oppose each other's dogmas." See also *Cohort.*, 35. They not only *quarrel* (στασιάζουσι) with one another, but put forward different opinions at different times.

they pull the soul in different directions, one to this 'nature,' another to that 'essence' and turn it from one matter into another, I confess I am vexed at this ebb and flow (παλίῤῥοια) of things. For I am now immortal and I rejoice; anon I become mortal and I weep; again I am dissolved into atoms, I become water, then I become air, and again I become fire. After a little while I am neither fire nor air. Then I am made an animal, and again a fish. So then I have dolphins for brothers, and when I see myself I know not how to call myself, whether man or dog, or wolf or bull, or bird or serpent, or dragon or chimera (a mixture of lion and man). For I am turned into all these animals by the philosophers, denizens of the earth, the water, the air, winged, many-formed wild, tame, mute, musical, irrational, rational; I swim, I fly, I soar aloft, I creep, I run, I sit. Here comes Empedocles and turns me into a 'bush.'*

"Since the philosophers cannot reach unanimity in the matter of the soul of man, they can hardly set forth the truth regarding the gods (θεοί) or the world. Yet they have the courage, I do not like to say 'stupidity' (ἐμπληξία) to attempt this. They, who cannot discover their own soul,† investigate the nature of the very gods, and those who know nothing about their own body very officiously settle the nature of the world. Here too they assume opposite and contending principles. When Anaxagoras takes me into his class he teaches me that if it is mind (nous) that is the beginning of all things, the cause and Lord of the universe, giving arrangement to the ill-arranged, motion to the motionless, separation to the confused, order to the disorderly. When he says this, he is my friend and I believe in his doctrine. But then Melissus and Parmenides rise up against him. Parmenides declares that substance is one, and that it is immortal, infinite, without motion and homogeneous. Again, I know not how, but I come over to this opinion and Parmenides expels Anaxagoras from my soul. Yet when I think that I have found a dogma that nothing can change, Anaximenes takes up his parable and cries out, 'But I tell you that it is air, and this condensed forms water and land, but rarefied ether and fire.' Again I agree with him and I love Anaximenes. Empedocles, however, stands opposite to me threateningly, and shouts aloud from Ætna:‡ 'The principles are enmity and friendship, the

* Plutarch and Galen declared that Empedocles said that trees came up from the ground, the first of living things (δῶα). Aristotle says that Empedocles called trees δῶα or animals. See Lucretius, v. 780-790: "Tellus herbas virgultaque primum sustulit."

† This argument was used by Cicero, Philo and Theophilus (A.D. 180), 11. 10.

‡ He is said to have thrown himself down the crater of Ætna to prove himself to be a god; but the crater ejected his sandal!

one separating, the other uniting, and their strife makes all things. I define them as like and unlike, finite and infinite, eternal and created.'

"'Well done, Empedocles; I follow you even to the fiery crater.' But then Protagorus stands on the other side and drags me away, saying, 'Man is the norm and standard of things, what come before his senses are things, what do not are not even in the "forms" of existence.' I am flattered by this statement of Protagoras, to think that everything or nearly everything rests with man. On the other hand, Thales declares the truth to me, defining water as the creative principle, saying: 'Everything is formed of the moist principle and is resolved into it, and the earth rides upon the water.' Why then should I not believe Thales, the oldest of the Ionian philosophers? But his fellow-citizen* Anaximander declares that eternal motion is an older principle than the moist one, and that this is the cause of birth and decay. And surely Anaximander is worthy of belief.

"But is not Archelaus a famous man? And he maintained that 'the hot' and 'the cold' were the principles of creation. Plato does not agree with him. He gives as his principles God, matter and form. At last I am fully persuaded; for how could I not believe a philosopher who made 'the chariot of Zeus'?† (*Phædrus*, 246 E.). Behind him stands his pupil Aristotle, who is jealous of that chariot building. His principles are quite different: the Active and the Passive. The Active is impassive and is the ether. The Passive has four qualities, dryness, moistness, warmness, coldness. All things become and pass through their mutual changes. By this time I am really wearied of being tossed up and down, and I shall stand upon the opinion of Aristotle, and henceforth let no theory trouble me.

"But what indeed is to become of me? For two of the older school, Pherecydes and Leucippus are hamstringing (*νευροκοποῦσι*) my soul. Pherecydes declares that the principles are Zeus or Æther, Earth, and Saturn or Time. The æther is the active principle, the earth passive, and time is that in which things are made. But the old fellows are jealous of one another. Leucippus declares that all that is nonsense, and that the

* Both were citizens of Miletus. Justin's (?) *Cohortatio* (3) also stresses the fact that Anaximander was from "the same Miletus" as Thales, and that the latter was the founder of the school of natural philosophy.

† The *Cohortatio ad Gentes* ascribed to Justin refers to this chariot of Zeus in c. 31 as borrowed from Ezekiel x. 18, 19, the chariot of the cherubim (Hermias quoted from *Phædrus*, 249 A.); and in c. 6 it mentions the three Platonic principles—God, matter, form. In cc. 3-6 it gives a brief summary of the tenets of the philosophers, pointing out their contradictory statements.

principles are infinite in number, ever in motion and very tiny. The lighter ascend as fire and air, the denser sink down as water and earth. How long am I to receive such teachings and yet learn nothing true, unless perchance Democritus can save me from error? He says the principles are 'being' and 'not being.' That which 'is' is full, that which 'is not' is void. That which is full in the void makes everything by change or form. Perhaps I might agree with the good Democritus and have a laugh* with him, did not Heraclitus lead me away, weeping and saying, "The principle of all things is fire, which has two qualities of thinness and thickness, the one active, the other passive, the one blending, the other separating.' 'Hold, enough,' say I; 'I am already intoxicated with so many principles.' But then Epicurus takes me aside and begs me not to treat with scorn his lovely theory of atoms and vacuum, by whose manifold complications all things come into being and pass away.

"'My excellent Epicurus,' say I, 'I do not contradict you, but Cleanthes,† raising his head from the well, laughs at your theory. "I myself," quoth he, "am drawing up (from the well) the true principle, God and matter. Earth passes into water, water into air, air is borne aloft, but fire runs along the surface of the earth and the soul passes through the whole world, and we receiving a part of it become animated."'

"Although I have heard such a number, yet another lot flows in from Libya,‡ Carneades, Cleitomachus and all their companies, trampling under foot the theories of others, declaring that the universe is incomprehensible, that a false appearance (phantasia) (*ψευδὴς φαντασία* also in *Cohortatio* 38) is ever beside the truth. What shall I do at all? I have been such a time in misery. How shall I eject so many theories from my mind? If nothing is comprehensible, the truth has passed from man's life and philosophy is fighting a shadow and has no knowledge of realities.

"Moreover, other of the ancient school, Pythagoras and his clansmen, grave and silent men, hand to me other theories, as mysteries § and their great secret 'Ipse dixit.' They say the 'Monad' is the principle of all things and from its form and numbers the elements arise. And then he gives the number,

* Democritus the laughing, Heraclitus the weeping philosopher.

† Cleanthes was a water-carrier.

‡ Cyrene. These are "new Academicians." The nautical terms *ἐπιρρεῖ*, *παλίῤῥοια*, and the mention of Laconia suggest that the writer lived somewhere in Greece, probably in Athens.

§ The *Cohortatio* (19) has *μυστικῶς*, Hermias *ὥσπερ μυστήρια*. The allegorical character of his teaching is stressed in the *Cohortatio*, in which is a similar summary in cc. 4 and 19 of the teaching of Pythagoras.

form and measure of everything. Fire he likens to a pyramid, air to a figure with eight surfaces, water to a figure with twenty surfaces, æther to a figure of twelve surfaces. Everything is arranged in triangles and squares. And so Pythagoras measures the world.

"And now, inspired by Pythagoras, oblivious of home, native land, wife and children—these things no longer trouble me—I ascend into the very æther myself, and borrowing the cubit rule from Pythagoras proceed to measure fire. For Zeus's measurements are out of date. And unless this great being, or body, this great soul, I mean I myself, ascend to heaven and measure the æther, the empire of Zeus is done for. But when I have measured it I shall let him know how many angles fire has. Then I descend from heaven, and having partaken of a light refreshment of olives, figs and greens, I set out by the quickest way to the water and measure the moist substance by cubit, inch and half inch, and calculate its depth, in order to inform Poseidon how great his empire, the sea, is. I traverse the whole earth in one day, making up its number, measurement, and forms. For I am convinced that a man of my importance and weight shall not miss a single foot of it. I also know the number of the stars, the fishes and the animals, and by weighing the world in balance, I can easily discover the weight.* So far my soul, occupied in such matters, has been eager to rule the universe. But Epicurus stooping over me says, 'My dear fellow, you have only measured one world, and there are many, nay, infinite worlds. So again I am forced to speak of many heavens, and many other æthers too. Come along then without delay, get victuals for a few days and make off to the worlds of Epicurus. I easily fly over the boundaries, Tethys, and ocean, and I enter into a new world as a new city, and measure everything in a few days. Then I ascend to a third world, and then a fourth, a fifth, a twentieth, a thousandth, and God knows where! For it is all the darkness of ignorance,† black deceit, infinite error, immature imagination ἀτελὴς φαντασιά (the *Cohortatio* has ψευδὴς φαντασία [381], incomprehensible ignorance, unless indeed I intend to count the very atoms‡ of which so many worlds consist, so as to leave nothing without investigation, especially of those necessary and useful matters on which the happiness of state and home depends.

"Accordingly, I have gone over all these things in my desire to demonstrate the mutally contradictory character of these

* Modern science can approximately ascertain the weight of the earth, planets and sun.

† The *Cohortatio* (11) describes the opinions of the philosophers as full of ignorance and deceit (in the same order).

‡ We call them "electrons," "protons" and "photons."

theories, and how such an investigation leads to endless and boundless error, and the final end is inexplicable and unprofitable, and is supported by no manifest fact or sure utterance."

So ends this clever brochure on Greek philosophy. It is at once a brief, graphic, lucid and easily remembered summary of the various theories of the different Greek schools of philosophy, and a powerful argument based upon their mutual contradictions for the futility of the whole system. Written in a light, humorous, mocking style, its effectiveness is enhanced by the playfulness of its form. Hermias is the dear friend of all the philosophers. He has not a harsh word for anyone—he apologizes for using the word "stupidity"—he listens as an interested and then a converted adherent to every one of the philosophers in turn until he is led away from them by another philosopher, and so on until he has exhausted many schools and many theories in his rapid and necessarily superficial survey. Then he sums up briefly and trenchantly against the whole system.

It commends itself by its brevity, the simplicity of its style, and the humour and point of its wit. Its pictures are imprinted indelibly upon our memory. Who could forget Cleanthes, who during his student days supported himself by drawing water in the gardens at night, popping his head up out of a well to make a statement, or Empedocles shouting up from the crater, or Hermias himself weighing the world in scales and hastily sounding the depth of the ocean with a foot rule? It is not of course original. It is based to some extent on Justin's polemic against philosophy* and on Tatian's oration against the Greeks, and might stand as an amplification of the latter's third chapter: "Let not the assemblies of the philosophers lead you away. They teach contradictory theories, and say whatever comes into their head. There are many collisions (προσκρούματα) among them, for one hates the other, and they teach rival doctrines, contending for the best places."

And in the twenty-fourth chapter Tatian contrasts the many conflicting theories of Greek philosophy with the uniform teaching of the Christians. "Do you follow the doctrines of Plato? Then the epicurean Sophist is openly opposed to you. Do you wish to belong to the school of Aristotle, one of the followers of Democritus attacks you with abuse." And so on. But Tatian is virulent, and mentions some of the horrors of Greek mythology, as Justin and other Christian apologists do. Hermias, however,

* Justin in *Ap.* I. 4 dwells on the contradictory teachings of the philosophers. In 5 he praises Socrates for setting men free from the fear of demons by reason (*logos*). In 46 he declares that those who lived with *logos* were Christians, Socrates, Heraclitus, and others. In *Dial.* 9 he declares that Christianity is "the only safe and useful philosophy."

does not mean to offend any of the philosophic schools. He was probably a convert from philosophy, and wrote at a time when Greek philosophy was either in vogue or revived, as in the reign of Julian, A.D. 362.

Julian made a great and determined effort to revive the teaching of Greek philosophy, and at the same time to suppress Christian teaching in the schools and universities. On July 17, A.D. 362, he issued an edict on the appointment of teachers, followed by a rescript forbidding Christians to teach the classical authors, which had the effect for a time of closing educational careers to Christians. At the same time Julian gave a fresh impulse to the study of Greek poets and philosophers. In his writings he refers frequently to Heraclitus, Democritus, Epicurus, Anaxagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Empedocles, Thales, and Pythagoras, coupled with Socrates, and doubtless his favourite. His letter to Themistios may be described as a laudation of philosophy. And in his oration (vi.) to the uneducated Cynics he describes the attempts made (by Christians) to lure the young away from philosophy, by repeating stories about them. "The genuine disciples of Pythagoras and Plato and Aristotle are called 'sorcerers' (γόητες) and 'sophists,' 'conceited' and 'quacks' (198)." In this brochure Hermias does call some of the philosophers "sophists" and philosophy "portentous stuff" (τερατεία) and "madness," expressions which would have been resented by Julian. Both Julian and this writer speak of the "gravity" (σεμνότης) of the Pythagoreans, their "mysteries" and their "silence" (both use the word σιωπηλός). It is, therefore, quite possible, as Ceillier (vi. 332) argued, that this little work was written in Julian's day. The Christians were by no means intimidated by his repressive educational measures of A.D. 362.* The elder and the younger Apollinaris turned portions of the Old Testament and the New into Greek hexameters and Platonic dialogues. They were ably supported by other Christian scholars, such as the author of this witty and clever skit on the Greek philosophers. The object of the writer is to demonstrate from the want of inner harmony and logical connection and relation between the various theories put forward that the whole system was wrong and was inspired by the "apostasia." Clement of Alexandria, who gives an account of Greek philosophy (*Strom.* I. xxiv.-xxviii.), referred to that view with the object of refuting it.

An explanation of the origin of philosophy which he (Clement) favoured himself was, that it was borrowed by the philosophers

* See Ammianus Marcellinus (22. 10. 7), who condemned this action of forbidding Christian masters of rhetoric and grammar to teach in the schools because they did not believe in the theology of Homer and the other works they taught.

from the Old Testament, especially the teaching of Moses,* who lived long before this (*Strom.* I. cxv.). But his parallels do not carry conviction. We do not, for example, see how Aristotle was influenced by the Psalm "Lord in heaven is Thy mercy and Thy truth as far as the clouds" to bring providence as far down as the moon, or that Epicurus took his idea of chance from "vanity of vanities" (*Strom.* v. 24), or that the Sabbath is found in Homer. With regard to the view that the ideas came to the Greeks through the fallen angels or the "apostasia" Clement said: "Let them understand, who say that philosophy has come from the devil, that the devil can be transformed into an angel of light. If he prophesies as an angel of light, it will be truth; if he prophesies things angelic and clear, they will be useful.† And again, we may say, generally, that everything that is necessary and useful to life comes from God, and that philosophy was given to the Greeks as a sort of testament (or covenant, διαθήκη) of their own, a step towards the Christian philosophy, even if the Greek philosophers wittingly shut their ears to the truth." Whichever may be the correct explanation "of this wisdom of the world" (648), he traces God's hand in it all, and holds that Providence can make the wickedness of the apostasy promote the truth. The text "All that ever came before Me were thieves and robbers" (John x. 8) has been used, he says, by the opponents of Greek philosophy, some of whom hold that certain powers, lapsed from heaven, inspired the whole philosophy, whereas Providence directed to a useful end the issue of that deed for man.‡ He himself asserts that if it does not contain the whole truth, and is weak in following the precepts of the Lord, yet it prepares the way for the royal doctrine, in some way training and forming the character and preparing him who believes in Providence for the reception of the truth (c. xvi., finis).

In these two works of Hermias and Clement we have two divergent views of Greek philosophy; one might call both of them extreme. Remembering the Latin adage, "In medio

* Justin's (?) *Cohortatio* (20-22) says that Plato learned in Egypt the monotheism of Moses and the prophets, but, through fear of the Areopagus, did not mention the name of Moses. It argues that *Timæus* 27, D.-28, γνε, must distinguish between "that which always *is* and has no *genesis*" from "that which has *genesis* but never *is*" which was based upon Exod. iii. 14, "I AM that I AM" and "I AM." In c. 25 it asserts that the passage in *Leges*, 715 E., "God, as the ancient *saying* has it, has the beginning, middle and end of all things," refers to the *law* of Moses, and the saying "I AM that I AM," which signifies not one time but three—present, past and future. It also cites Diodorus the historian as saying that Moses was the first legislator. It refers to Diodorus in other places (c. 9), quoting a long passage from him (1. 94), praising Moses as the first to persuade men to use written laws, ἄνδρα καὶ τῇ ψύχῃ μέγαν καὶ τῷ βίῳ ἱκανώτατον. Diodorus got his information from Egyptian priests.

† *Strom.* vi. 647.

‡ *Strom.* i. 310 (Paris).

tutissimus ibis," and recognizing that Clement and other Fathers emphasized perhaps unduly and unwarrantably the importance of Greek philosophy as a preparation for and support of the Gospel, while other writers like Tatian, a converted philosopher, perhaps equally unduly emphasized its hostility and opposition to Christianity, we shall be probably on safe ground if we commit ourselves to neither view, but study for ourselves the many points of agreement and the equally numerous points of difference. We shall find that whatever is good in Greek philosophy comes from the same Divine Spirit, Who inspired Hebrew prophecy and Christian doctrine. As fellow-students in the quest of truth we must be grateful to the Greek philosophers for the problems they have attempted to solve and for their logical gifts and achievements.* We can admire their reasoning powers, their appreciation of the True, the Beautiful and the Good, their precision in definition, their meticulous care in quotation, their profound researches, their vast knowledge, while avoiding their speculative errors, their superlative conceit and egotism, their academical jealousy and intellectual rivalry, and above all their moral faults.†

The *Cohortatio* (38), on which this work appears to be based, concludes with an appeal for belief in Him whose advent was foretold by the Sibyl,‡ and who was originally (ὑπάρχων) the Logos of God, ἀχώρητος uncontainable in power, and who, having assumed (ἀναλαβών) the manhood made in the image and likeness of God, recalled us to the religion of our ancient ancestors, which their children had abandoned, led away by the teaching of an envious demon to the worship of those who were not gods.

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* See *Clement of Alexandria* (S.P.C.K.), pp. 142-148, by present writer.

† See Diogenes Laertius, iii. 23, on Plato's "loves," vii. 13 on Zeno's vices and the indecency of some of the works of Chrysippus. Also see the Platonic dialogues (*e.g.* the *Charmides*, 155 D.), Lucian's works generally and the Pseudo-Lucian's *Amores*, and Xenophon's *Symposium* for the immorality of Socrates.

‡ In c. 16 it quotes lines of the Sibyl (v. 7-9), also in Theophilus (*ad. Autol.* ii. 36), and others in Clem. Alex., *Protrept.* iv. 62.