

Preface

This book aims to fill in a lacuna for the English-speaking reader by providing an introduction to the Cyrenaic school. The book is intended both for undergraduates of philosophy, ancient philosophy and classics approaching the Cyrenaics for the first time and for more skilled postgraduates and scholars, who lack a general account of Cyrenaic philosophy at the moment. The book can be read at two different levels, corresponding to the two different readerships I have in mind. Informative bits will alternate with more philosophically sophisticated parts. These latter will be useful also to readers with little philosophical expertise but they are specifically targeted for a more skilled readership. Those readers, especially undergraduates, wishing to immerse immediately into the philosophy of the Cyrenaics can begin with Part II. Part I intermixes philosophical questions with more historical matters and is more scholarly tuned.

The overall interpretation of the Cyrenaics I will be recommending in the course of the book is that of a school with a complete philosophical agenda, spanning from ethics, through epistemology, to metaphysics and philosophy of language. More unconventionally, I will also defend the claim that, together with Protagoras and Pyrrho, the Cyrenaics can be inscribed into a line of metaphysical inquiry that is centred on indeterminacy, namely the view that things in the perceptual world do not have any intrinsic ontological essence. This claim is doubly radical—in its own right and in relation to the Cyrenaics. It will also be one of the main scholarly gains of this book. In promoting such a positively integrated account of Cyrenaic philosophy, I will contrast most of the interpretations that are currently available. The ultimate aim of the book is that to provide further reasons to Grote's idea that “in the history of the Greek mind, these two last mentioned philosophers (*sc.* Antisthenes and Aristippus) are not less important than Plato and Aristotle”.¹

I now give a brief outline of the book, which is divided in three parts and subdivided in eight chapters. In chapter 1, ‘*History and Scholarship*’, I will explain why the Cyrenaics are a Socratic school and I will briefly pass in review the scholarship on them with particular reference to the last fifty years. I will also offer a

¹ Grote (1865), III, 555.

brief genealogy of the school, beginning with Aristippus the Elder and ending with the later sects and epigoni of the Cyrenaic school.

In Chapter 2, '*Aristippus*', I will reconstruct the life and doctrine of Aristippus by relying on the biographical account of Diogenes Laertius. The main problem I will be faced with will be whether Aristippus could ever be considered the real founder of the school. On the basis of Diogenes' testimony, I will argue that Aristippus was a proper philosopher and that he originally formulated the key-ideas of Cyrenaic philosophy.

In Chapter 3, '*The Theaetetus*', I argue against the view that Aristippus could not have been the real founder of the Cyrenaic school and that Plato's testimony is thus to be regarded as unfaithful. This approach severely prejudges the question of a correct understanding of the philosophy of the Cyrenaics if Aristippus were indeed responsible for the initial elaboration of Cyrenaic doctrines and the real founder of the school. I will thus argue that those subtle thinkers ('*oi kompsoteroi*') that are named in the *Theaetetus* (at 156a) are Aristippus and the early Cyrenaics. I will do so by providing textual and conceptual linkage with other important sources on Cyrenaic thinking, such as the Anonymous Commentator of Plato's *Theaetetus*, Sextus and Plutarch.

In Chapter 4, '*Indeterminacy*', I will explore the Cyrenaic commitment to the metaphysical view that things in the world are indeterminate, that is, objects in the world do not have a unitary and stable essence. Once I rule out the possibility that they are idealists, I will pass in review those ancient sources suggesting that the Cyrenaics may be understood as indeterminists in metaphysics.

In Chapter 5, '*Persons, objects and knowledge*', I will focus on the main view of Cyrenaic epistemology that affections alone can be known. On the basis of this view, I can say that, to use their neologism, I am 'being whitened', that is, that I see an object as white but I cannot say that the object itself is white. I will show that the Cyrenaics appear to have admitted also of extra-affective judgements, which can be interpreted as subjective appearances. Lastly, I will relate Cyrenaic subjectivism with other cognate epistemologies, such as Protagoras' relativism.

In Chapter 6, '*Language and meaning*', I will show that, in striking contrast with the semantic realism dominating ancient philosophy of language, the Cyrenaics appear to have adopted a behavioural theory of meaning. On the basis of this theory,

we learn the meaning of words not by relating them with their referents in the world, but by reacting to linguistic stimuli and by seeing how other people do so.

In chapter 7, '*Pleasure and happiness*', I will illustrate the meaning of the Cyrenaic view that pleasure is the end. I will explore the relationship, in Cyrenaic ethics, between pleasure and happiness. I will discuss the two alternatives mostly debated in current literature, namely that the Cyrenaics are just concerned about present pleasures with no interest for happiness or, alternatively, since happiness can be considered the sum of one's enjoyed pleasures, the Cyrenaics are concerned about happiness as well. I will defend the latter alternative on the basis of some textual evidence.

In chapter 8, '*Cyrenaic philosophy and its later epigoni*', I will present a brief overview of the later sects of the Cyrenaic school, namely the Annicerians, the Hegesians and the Theodorians. I will conclude by showing that the Cyrenaics can be best interpreted not as a minor philosophical school centred exclusively on ethics, but as a group of philosophers who formulated innovative doctrines in epistemology, metaphysics and in the philosophy of language.

I will add an Appendix, where I will provide the translation of all the main sources on the Cyrenaics. The book will end with a Guide to further reading, a Bibliography and an Index.

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