Derision of Gentile Philosophers

Hermias the Philosopher (2nd–5th century)

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HERMIAS THE PHILOSOPHER — DERISION OF GENTILE PHILOSOPHERS.
[Translated by J.A.Giles, 1857] 1. PAUL the blessed apostle, my beloved brethren, writing to the Corinthians who inhabit Laconian Greece, spake saying, "The wisdom of this world is folly in the sight of God" [1 Cor. iii, 19], and he said not amiss. For it seems to me to have taken its beginning from the rebellion of the angels ; for which cause the philosophers put forth their doctrines, saying things that neither sound the same, nor mean the same as one another. For some of them say that the soul is fire, like Democritus; air, like the Stoics; some say it is the mind; and some say it is motion, as Heraclitus ; some say it is exhalation; some an influence flowing from the stars ; some say it is number in motion, as Pythagoras; some say it is generative water, as Hippo; some say an element from elements; some say it is harmony, as Dinarchus; some say the blood, as Critias; some the breath; some say unity, as Pythagoras; and so the ancients say contrary things. How many statements are there about these things ! how many attempts ! how many also of sophists who carry on a strife rather than seek the truth!

2. Be it so then: they differ about the soul, but have |194 pronounced other things about it in unison: and of others, one man calls pleasure its good, another its evil, and again a third man, its middle state between good and evil. But its nature some call immortal, some mortal, and others say that it remains for a time, but others that it becomes brutalised, others divide it into atoms, others embody it three times, others assign to it periods of three thousand years. For though they do not live even an hundred years, they talk of three thousand years about to come. What then must we term these things? They seem to me, to be a prodigy, or folly, or madness, or rebellion, or all these together. If they have found out anything true, let them agree together about it, or let them join together, and I then will gladly listen to them. But, if they distract the soul, and draw it, one into a different nature, another into a different being, changing one kind of matter for another; I confess I am harassed by the ebbing and flowing of the subject. At one time I am immortal and rejoice; at another time again I become mortal and weep. Anew I am dissolved into atoms: I become water, and I become air: I become fire, and then after a little, neither air, nor fire: he makes me a beast, he makes me a fish . Again then I have dolphins for my brothers;

but when I look on myself, I am frightened at my body, and I know not how I shall call it, man, or dog, or wolf, or bull, or bird, or snake, or serpent, or chimaera; for I am changed by the philosophers into all the beasts, of the land, of the sea, having wings, of many forms, wild or tame, dumb or vocal, brute or reasoning: I swim, I fly, I rise aloft, I crawl, I run, I sit. But here is Empedocles, and he makes me a stump of a tree.

3. Since then it is not possible for the philosophers by agreeing together to find out the soul of man, they can scarcely be able to declare the truth about the gods or the universe. For they have this audacity, that I may not call it infatuation. For those who are not able to discover their own soul, seek into the nature of the gods themselves; and those who do not know their own body, busy themselves |195 about the nature of the world. In truth they wholly oppose one another about the principles of nature. When Anaxa-goras catches me, he teaches me thus : The beginning of all things is mind, and this is the cause and regulator of all things, and gives arrangement to things unarranged, and motion to things unmoved, and distinction to things mixed, and order to things disordered. Anaxagoras, who says these words, is my friend, and I bow to his doctrine. But against him rise up Melissus and Parmenides. Parmenides indeed, in his poetical works, proclaims that being is one, and everlasting, and endless, and immoveable, and in every way alike. Again then, I know not why I change to this doctrine : Parmenides has driven Anaxagoras out of my mind. But when I am on the point of thinking that I have now a firm doctrine, Anaximenes, catching hold of me, cries out, "But I tell you, everything is air, and this air, thickening and settling, becomes water and air; rarefying and spreading, it becomes aether and fire: but returning into its own nature, it becomes thin air: but if also it becomes condensed, (says he) it is changed." And thus again I pass over to this opinion of his, and cherish Anaximenes.

4. But Empedocles stands opposite chafing, and crying aloud from Aetna . The principles of all things are enmity and friendship, the one drawing together, the other separating; and their strife makes all things. But I define these to be, like and unlike, boundless and having bounds, things eternal, and things made. Well done, Empedocles; I follow you now even up to the craters of fire. But on the other hand stands Protagoras, and draws me aside, saying, Man is the term and arbitrement of things, and those are things that fall under sensation: but those which do not so fall are not in the forms of being. Enticed by Protagoras with this description, I am pleased, because every thing or at least the greatest part is left to man. But on the other hand Thales nods the truth to me, defining water to be the principle of all, and that all things are formed out of the moist, and are |196 resolved into the moist,, and the earth rides over the water. Why then should I not listen to Thales the elder of the Ionians? But his countryman Anaximander himself says that eternal motion is an older principle than moisture, and that by it some things are generated, and some things perish. And so let Anaximander be our guide.

5. And is not Archelaus of good repute, who declares that the principles of the whole are heat and cold ? But again in this also the grandiloquous Plato does not agree; saying that the principles are God, and matter, and example. Now then I am persuaded. For how shall

I not trust a philosopher who made the chariot of Jupiter ? But behind stands his disciple Aristotle, envying his master for his coach-making. He lays down other principles, to do, and to suffer; and that the active principle is the aether, which is acted on by nothing, but the passive has four qualities, drought, moisture, heat, and cold: for by the change of these into one another all things are produced and perish. We were now tired, changing up and down with the doctrines, but I will rest on the opinion of Aristotle, and let no doctrine henceforth trouble me.

6. But what can I do ? For old men more ancient than these hamstring my soul: Pherecydes saying that the principles are Jupiter, and Tellus , and Saturn—Jupiter the aether, Tellus the Earth, and Saturn Time. The aether is the agent, but the earth is passive, and Time in which all created things are comprised. These old men have contentions with one another. For Leucippus, deeming all these things madness, says that the principles are boundless, motionless, and infinitesimal ; and that the lighter parts going up, become fire and air, whilst the heavier parts, subsiding, become water and earth. How long am I taught such things, learning nothing true? Unless else Democritus will set me free from error, declaring that the principles are Existence and Non-existence, and that Existence is full, but Non-existence is empty ; but the full affects all things by change or by order in the empty. Perhaps I might listen to good Democritus, and should like |197 to laugh with him, did not Heraclitus persuade me otherwise, at the same time weeping and saying, Fire is the principle of all things: it has two states of being, thinness and thickness: the one active, the other passive, the one blending, the other separating. This is enough for me, and I should already be drunk with so many principles: but Epicurus calls me away from thence also, by no means to revile his good doctrine, of atoms and of emptiness. For by the varied and manifold interweaving of these, all things are born and perish.

7. I do not contradict you, my best of men, Epicurus. But Cleanthes , raising his head from the well, laughs at your doctrine. And myself also derive from him the true principles, God and matter; and that earth changes into water, and water into air; that the air floats, and that the fire comes to the parts near the earth, that the soul extends through all the world, of which we also, sharing a portion, have the breath of life. Which things then being thus many, another multitude throngs me out of Libya, Carneades, and Clitomachus, and all their followers, treading down all the doctrines of the others, and themselves declaring plainly, that all things are incomprehensible, and that a false imagination always hangs about the truth. What then will become of me, after having toiled so long a time? How can I deliver forth so many doctrines from my mind? For if nothing be comprehensible, truth is gone from men, and vaunted philosophy throws a shade rather than conveys a knowledge of the things that be.

8. But lo, from the old school, Pythagoras and his fellows, grave and silent men, deliver to me other doctrines, as mysteries, and among them this great and ineffable one, HE HATH SAID. The principle of all things is unity, but from its forms and numbers are produced the elements, and the number and form and measure of each of these is thus somehow declared.

Fire is completed out of four-and-twenty right-angled triangles, being contained by four equilateral ones. Each equilateral one is composed of six triangles, whence also they liken it to a pyramid. But air is completed by forty-eight triangles, |198 being contained by eight equilateral ones. But it is likened to an octahedron, which is contained by eight equilateral triangles, each of which is divided into six right-angled ones, so that they are forty-eight in all. But water being contained by an hundred and twenty, is likened also to a figure having twenty sides, which indeed consists of twenty-six equal and equilateral triangles .... and ... . But the aether is completed of twelve equilateral pentagons, and is similar to a figure having twelve sides, Earth is completed of forty-eight triangles, and is also contained by six equilateral triangles, and is like a cube. For the cube is contained by six squares, each of which extends to four triangles; so that all together are twenty-four.

9. Thus Pythagoras measures the world. But I again, becoming inspired, despise my home, and my country, and my wife, and my children, and I no longer care for them, but mount up into the aether itself, and taking the cubit from Pythagoras, begin to measure the fire. For Jupiter's measuring it is not enough for me. Unless also the great animal, the great body, the great soul, MYSELF, mount into heaven, and measure the aether, the rule of Jupiter is gone. But when I have measured it, and Jupiter has learnt from me, how many angles fire has, I again go down from heaven, and eating olives, and figs and cabbage, I make the best of my way to the water, and with cubit, and digit and half-digit, measure the watery being, and calculate its depth, that I may also teach Neptune, how much sea he rules over. I pass over all the earth in one day, collecting its number and its measure and its forms. For I am persuaded that, such and so great a person as I am, of all things in the world, I shall not make a mistake of a single span. But I know both the number of the stars, and of the fishes, and of the wild beasts, and placing the world in a balance, I can easily learn its weight. About these things then my soul has been earnest until now, to have rule over all things.

10. But Epicurus, stooping towards me, says, "You have |199 measured one world, my friend; there are many and endless worlds ." I am compelled then again to speak of many heavens, other aethers, and many of them. Come then, without more delay, having victualled yourself for a few days' travel into the worlds of Epicurus. I easily pass its bounds, Tethys and Oceanus. But when I have entered into a new world, and as it were into a new city, I measure the whole in a few days. And from thence I cross back into the world again, then into a fourth, and a fifth, and a tenth, and an hundredth, and a thousandth, and where will it end ? For all things already are the darkness of ignorance to me, and black error, and endless wandering, and unprofitable fancy, and ignorance not to be comprehended: unless else I intend to number the very atoms also, out of which such great worlds have arisen, that I may leave nothing unexamined, especially of things so necessary and useful, from which both houses and cities prosper. These things have I gone through, wishing to point out the opposition which is in their doctrines, and how their examination of things will go on to infinity and no limit, for their end is inexplicable and useless, being confirmed neither by one manifest fact, nor by one sound argument.

[Note to the online text: numbers have been added to the end notes so that they can be inserted in the text as hyperlinks] 1. Page 193, line 5. rebellion of the angels] This opinion was held by many other philosophers, and is refuted by Clemens Alexandrinus, Strom. i, pag. 310, and vi, pag. 647. It is a well-known eastern notion, and has been beautifully embodied in the writings of some of our modern poets. 2. Line 10. Heraclitus] The editors think these names of the philosophers were originally side-notes, and have been copied by mistake into the text. The Oxford editor says that the name of Heraclitus is here misplaced, and should come after exhalation, in the next line. See Plut. de Placit. Philosoph. iv, 3. |269 3. Page 194, line 9. three thousand years] In allusion to Plato's views about the three periods of three thousand years. See Phaedo, p. 248.

4. Line 21. a fish] Empedocles and Plato seem to be here meant. See Tertullian de Anima, xxxii, and Plato's Timaeus, sub fin. 5. Page 195, line 22. Empedocles] It is said that Empedocles, in order that he might utterly disappear from the sight of men and be thought immortal, leaped into the crater of Mount Etna, but that one of his shoes was cast up with the lava, and detected his design. 6. Page 196, line 2. elder] tw|~ presbute/rw| tw~n 'Iw&nwn. 7. Line 28. Jupiter and Tellus, &c.] In Greek Zeus, Chthonia, and Kronos: we use the equivalent names of the corresponding Roman deities. 8. Line 35. empty] The doctrine of the plenum and the vacuum, as it is generally termed. I prefer the plain English words, full and empty. 9. Page 197, line 6. Epicurus] The reader must be told that the doctrine of unrestrained enjoyment was promulgated, not by this eminent philosopher, but by his disciples after him, who took a corollary from his system, as the exponent of the system itself.

10. Line 11. Cleanthes] the successor of Zeno as head of the stoic school, famous for his sobriety----a water-drinker. 11. Page 198, line 7. triangle, &c.] Here is some omission or corruption in the Greek. Worth, the Oxford editor of Hermias, has tried to reconstruct the whole passage: but it is an unfruitful labour to follow him; the general idea of the doctrine is as obvious as it is absurd. 12. Page 199, line 1. endless worlds] The ancients were not wholly without a knowledge of the wonders of astronomy, and the immense number of the heavenly bodies; though it is generally believed that it was nothing in comparison with the revelations of modern science made by means of the telescope.

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