

# Doxography of Ancient Philosophy

First published Thu 18 Mar, 2004

The great majority of Greek (and Roman) philosophical writings have been irretrievably lost. But this loss is made good to some extent not only by quotations from lost works recorded by later writers, but also by the varieties of ancient reportage that are extant. The modern name for these forms of reportage is 'doxography', which could be translated 'tenet-writing'. Broadly speaking, doxography encompasses those writings, or parts of writings, in which the author presents philosophical views of some or other of the ancient philosophers or schools, in some or other areas, or on some or other topics, of philosophy, whether with or without presentation of the argumentation or analysis through which they offered philosophical support or reasons in favor of their 'tenets', and whether or not they also include critical evaluations and comments of the author's own. In other words, these are works (or sections of works) taking as their subject matter the tenets or doctrines of the philosophers, rather than independent works of philosophy in which the author addresses in the first instance issues or topics of philosophy, with ancillary discussion along the way of the opinions of other philosophers. The terms for tenets, or views, in ancient Greek are *doxai* or *dogmata*, in Latin *opiniones*; those for doctrines are, in Greek, *areskonta*, translated into Latin as *placita*. But note that these designations were used interchangeably.

- 1. Introduction and overview
- 2. Diels' reconstruction of the narrow doxographical tradition
- 3. Objections to Diels' theory: the Aristotelian background
- 4. Theophrastus and the Placita
- 5. Using Doxographies
- 6. Doxography. Broad and Narrow
- 7. Conclusion
- Bibliography
- Other Internet Resources
- Related Entries

## 1. Introduction and overview

The term 'doxography' has come to be applied in a much larger sense than seems to have been intended by its creator Hermann Diels. This name for the genre, if we may misleadingly call it that, derives from the Latin neologism 'doxographi' used by Diels to indicate the authors of a rather strictly specified type of literature studied and edited in his monumental *Doxographi Graeci* ('Greek Doxographers') of 1879. His researches were focused on writings concerned with the *physical* part of philosophy (including principles, theology, cosmology, astronomy, meteorology, biology and part of medicine). But today overviews in the field of ethics are also called doxographical. And scholars speak of 'doxographies' to be found in the dialogues of Plato and the treatises of Aristotle, although these are works in which issues of philosophy are addressed, with only ancillary discussion of the views of others.

The following authors and main works, listed in chronological order, are representative of doxography in the *broad* as well as in the *narrower* sense (a complete list of names and titles would be impractical).<sup>[1]</sup>

- Cicero, 1st c. BCE: one of our indispensable sources for (the debates among the) schools of Hellenistic philosophy, esp. Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Academic Skepticism: *Academics* (book two deals with questions of epistemology from Stoic and Academic Skeptic angles); *On the Chief Ends of Good and Evil*; *On the Nature of the Gods* (contrasting Epicurean and Stoic views on nature and the gods and

3714 cat  
MANSFELD, J.  
2004  
p. 1-8

The logo for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, featuring the text "STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY" in white capital letters on a dark red background with a subtle grid pattern.

## STANFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY

# Notes to Doxography of Ancient Philosophy

1. For the sources for Hellenistic philosophy (Cicero, Diogenes Laërtius etc.) see e.g., Mansfeld 1999; for editions of texts see Algra *et al* 1999.
2. See further Runia 1996b.
3. Theodoret as source for Aëtius accepted Mansfeld & Runia 1997, rejected Frede 1999.
4. On doxography of medicine see further van der Eijk 1999.
5. Reconstructions of Aëtian chapters: Runia 1989, 1992, Runia 1996a, 1999b, Laks 1997.

---

Copyright © 2008 by

Jaap Mansfeld <[jaap.mansfeld@phil.uu.nl](mailto:jaap.mansfeld@phil.uu.nl)>

---