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Ancient Philosophy and the Doxographical Tradition

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It is an unfortunate fact that by far most of the texts written by ancient philosophers have been lost. We are lucky to have the more or less complete works of important philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Epicetus (as reported by Arrian), Sextus Empiricus, Plotinus, Lucretius, Cicero and Seneca; we have many late commentaries on Plato and Aristotle, and we have some important texts by Epicurus, preserved in Diogenes Laertius (cf. below). In addition to these texts transmitted through medieval manuscripts, a few philosophical texts have been preserved on papyrus: a long section from Empedocles' poem, a couple of sections from the Sophist Antiphan's *On Truth*, longer and shorter passages in the Herculanean papyri from Epicurus' *On Nature* and from Philodemus' treatises, and the second century CE Stoic Hierocles' *Elements of Ethics* (Sider, 2005). But most of the philosophical texts written by the pre-Socratic, the Socratic and the Hellenistic philosophers have not survived even though many passages were quoted by other ancient authors.

This is not surprising. In fact, most ancient texts disappeared before the end of antiquity, and the study of philosophical texts had an even smaller public in Greco-Roman antiquity than has been the case since the Renaissance. It demanded a public interest like the dramatic tradition in Athens, or a dedicated group of people like the members of an established philosophical school to secure the transmission and survival of texts. The situation as we find it first described in Plato's dialogues did not change significantly in Greek and Roman antiquity: philosophy was practiced in gymnasia, stoas, and other public places, or in private homes, not in institutions of teaching or learning. The Platonic Academy, the Aristotelian Peripatos and Epicurus' Garden were the only institutions that provided space for continuous philosophical activity and for collections of philosophical texts, and even these locations were not able to survive Sulla's attack on Athens in 86 BCE.¹ The famous Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum from shortly after that date was an Epicurean establishment, and the library found there was beyond doubt the library of the Epicurean scholar Philodemus, but apart from Epicurean philosophical texts it has so far not provided other original works by philosophers (Gigante, 1995). In general, the study of texts does not seem to have played a significant role in philosophical activity, at least down to the Roman Empire.

ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY AND THE DOXOGRAPHICAL TRADITION

There are numerous testimonies that philosophical texts became very difficult to get hold of and even disappeared before the end of antiquity. In fact, in the second century BCE the Athenian scholar Apollodorus "happened to find" (D.L. 2.2) a copy of the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander's one and only book – which is otherwise lost except for one possible sentence. The Platonic dialogues were not readily available one hundred years after his death (D.L. 3.66), and though some of the Aristotelian treatises were known during the Hellenistic period, the main body of his works only became available to the public after the editorial work done by Andronicus and others in the first century BCE (Barnes, 1997; Gottschalk, 1987; Moraux, 1973) when the scholarly tradition of commenting upon his works began. A commentary in antiquity was usually a separate volume and the commentaries followed the order of the statements of the original work, citing a few words to indicate from where the comment took off, the so-called *lemma*. Hence a commentary presupposes the presence of the book with which it deals.

Even if it was possible to find a copy of a philosophical text, it was difficult to be certain what was a genuine work, to find a good copy of a genuine work by an earlier philosopher, and to get hold of the complete oeuvre of an author. Hence the work of Andronicus who had to put together various Aristotelian treatises and determine the authorship of some of the texts; hence the work of Thrasylus on the works of Plato and of Demetrius in the first half of the first century CE – the *Corpus Platonicum* as it has been transmitted to us in the medieval manuscripts (and as it is still printed in the Oxford Classical Library) goes back to Thrasylus (Tarrant, 1993). It is no coincidence that many quotations from Demetrius come from authors living between 50 and 250 CE, and that the tradition of making commentaries on the texts of Plato and Aristotle gained ground in the same period. In the middle of the fourth century CE Emperor Julian complains that most of the Epicurean and Skeptic texts had disappeared (Julian fr. Ep. 89, p. 141 Bidez), and the commentator Simplicius in the sixth century CE specifically states that he will quote from Parmenides' poem and other pre-Socratic texts because they were hard to find (e.g., *In Phys.* 39.20–21 or 144.28 Diehl). The fact that philological questions play such a significant role in the late Platonic commentaries proves that it was always hard to study philosophical texts, not only because of the scarcity of texts, but also because it was, then as now, difficult to read texts that were hundreds of years old.

It is only when we reach the Neoplatonic school in the third century CE, that we find direct evidence for the use of philosophical texts in the daily routine of a philosophical school, and it is no coincidence that we have not only a substantial body of texts by Plato and Aristotle, but also numerous commentaries on these texts.² A vivid account of the reading of philosophical texts in a "class," accompanied by written or oral commentaries, was given by Plotinus' student Porphyry in his *Life of Plotinus* as follows:

In the meetings of the school he [Plotinus] used to have the commentaries read, perhaps of Severus, perhaps of Cronius or Numenius, or Galus or Atticus, and among the

1. See Benardoull, PHILOSOPHIC SCHOOLS IN HELLENISTIC AND ROMAN TIMES.

2. On the composition and production of these commentaries, see Hoffmann, WHAT WAS COMMENTARY IN LATE ANTIQUITY?

Peripatetics of Aspasius, Alexander, Adrastus, and others that were available. But he did not just speak straight out of these books but took a distinctive personal line in his consideration, and brought the mind of Ammonius to bear on the investigation at hand. He quickly absorbed what was read, and would give the sense of some profound subject of study in a few words and pass on. When Longinus' work *On Principles* and his *Lover of Antiquity* were read to him, he said, "Longinus is a scholar, but certainly not a philosopher" . . . The rhetorician Diophanes read a defense of Alcibiades in Plato's *Symposium* in which he asserted that a pupil for the sake of advancing in the study of virtue should submit himself to carnal intercourse with his master if the master desired it. Plotinus repeatedly started up to leave the meeting, but restrained himself, and after the end of the lecture gave me, Porphyry, the task of writing a refutation. Diophanes refused to lend me his manuscript, and I depended in writing my refutation on my memory of his arguments. When I read it before the assembled hearers . . . (Porphyry *Plot.* 14–15 Armstrong)

Towards the end of antiquity, the period in which most of our commentaries on Aristotelian texts were written, the teaching of philosophy had become a very systematic enterprise in which texts and commentaries played a central role, including the study of philosophical predecessors whose views had bearing on the texts of Plato and Aristotle. Already Seneca had complained that philosophy had become philology (*Ep.* 108.23ff.), and in the Neoplatonic school after Plotinus there was a more or less fixed curriculum of texts to be studied and explained according to a prescribed method. The reading of Aristotelian texts preceded the reading of a selection of Platonic dialogues, and in each case the curriculum began with a series of topics that we also find in modern courses on Plato and Aristotle. Thus, when reading Plato, the lecturer would begin his teaching by discussing the following topics (cf., Anon. *Prolegomena in Philosophiam Platonis*; cf., Sorabji, 1990):

1. The nature of Platonic philosophy; Plato compared to other philosophical schools
2. Why has Plato, but not Pythagoras and Socrates, written philosophical books?
3. Why did Plato write dialogues?
4. The main elements of a dialogue, in particular the dramatic setting, the style, and the arguments.
5. The title of the dialogues.
6. How are the philosophical topics of the dialogues to be distinguished from one another?
7. The style of presentation.
8. How many rules are there for determining the purpose of the dialogue?
9. The order of the dialogues.
10. Plato's way of teaching philosophy.

While this approach may seem natural to us, there is little evidence that this or any other systematic approach was common before the Neoplatonic school. A similar, systematic approach was given in connection with the study of Aristotle's *Categories*. But the fact that philosophy now had become mainly the study of texts by Aristotle and Plato is the reason why so many of the fragments of the pre-Socratic philosophers come from the commentaries of the Neoplatonic commentators, especially Simplicius:

in order to understand the Aristotelian text it was necessary to know the many names and views of previous philosophers to whom Aristotle refers.

The modern concept of "history of philosophy" did not exist in the Greco-Roman antiquity. Philosophers turned to their predecessors in order to throw light on the problems they themselves were dealing with or in order to reject competing views, not because they were interested in the historical development of human thinking. It is important to keep this in mind because the reason for quoting a philosophical text is almost always to find confirmation or to express criticism. Thus, the modern scholar is obliged always to take the context into consideration before evaluating the significance of a quotation or "fragment," the more so since the concept "fragment" is nowhere clearly defined in modern scholarship. Many so-called fragments appear in different sources with different variations, and it is often difficult to determine whether a reference to an earlier philosopher is a direct quotation (fragment), a paraphrase, or an individual interpretation of a text.

No ancient text pretends to offer an account of the development of philosophy as a sequence of conceptual thinking. It may have been Sophists like Gorgias and Hippias who began to collect excerpts from philosophical and other texts in the fifth century BCE, but this is not the beginning of history of philosophy. It is, however, one important characteristic of early Greek philosophy that philosophers seem to have been aware of their predecessors and contemporaries (see e.g., DK 31B1 and B112 Empedocles, DK 47B1 Archytas, or DK 64B1 Diogenes of Apollonia), but a real interest in the philosophy of the past was at first closely connected with Aristotle's view of philosophy and the acquisition of knowledge. Plato may have known many of the pre-Socratics, but since reality for him was the world of Forms and this reality came to the philosopher as a direct experience, as, for example, described in the *Symposium*, history as such was never central to his philosophical project.

For Aristotle, the reality of the world as described by earlier philosophers was too strong to be neglected even if his predecessors only had discovered part of the truth: "Let us remember that we should not disregard the experience of the ages; in the multitude of years these things, if they were good, would certainly not have been unknown; for almost everything has been found out, although sometimes they are not put together; in other cases men do not use the knowledge which they have (Arist. *Pol.* II.5, 1264a1–4, cf. also *Met.* α.1, 993a31–b19 and M.1, 1076a12–16). Aristotle always stressed the significance of the beginning (*archē* meaning both beginning and principle) of thoughts and things and hence he always tried to lead up to his own views by reviewing those of his predecessors. This was part of the dialectical process, cf. *Top.* II.2 and II.14. Needless to say, he was never writing history of philosophy as such, but always reviewed the past in the light of his own philosophical problems and solutions. Some of the most influential passages of this kind are in the first book of the *Metaphysics* and in the early books of his *Physics*. In addition to the numerous passages that deal with earlier and contemporary philosophy in his preserved works, he also wrote a fair number of (now lost) books on individual pre-Socratics. His work was in particular carried on by his pupil and successor, Theophrastus, and a significant part of the so-called doxographical tradition must have been derived ultimately from their books even though there were also other kinds of works on philosophical ideas, in particular of Hellenistic philosophy (see below). There can be

little doubt that it was far more common for intellectuals to have learnt about earlier philosophy from such reports than from reading the original philosophical works themselves, except for the Platonic dialogues which were known throughout antiquity, and for those Aristotelian texts which were studied by members of the Peripatos and especially the Platonic Academy in the Roman Empire.

It is, however, wrong to think of doxographical works as constituting a literary genre in classical antiquity. Doxography is a nineteenth-century term, made famous by Hermann Diels' *Doxographi Graeci* (Berlin, 1879), in which he collected a number of texts that all report the views of Greek philosophers from Thales to the mid first century BCE. In the long Latin preface to this collection Diels discussed the characteristics of these texts, which exhibit so many similarities that they can be considered with some justification as belonging to a particular tradition. Diels' establishment of this so-called doxographical tradition has dominated the discussion of the sources for early Greek philosophy for more than 100 years, but has recently come under decisive criticism (see Mansfeld and Runia, 1996). It is important to notice that the term "doxography" is modern, created as an analogy to the term *logographos* (= speech-writer for litigants in courts, writer of prose), and based on the title of a number of Hellenistic books called *On the Opinions of...* (Greek *doxa*, *dogma*; other terms are used, and in particular the Latin word *placita* has been used to designate these texts).

The two texts that constitute the main specimens of doxography are Pseudo-Plutarch's *Epitome of the Opinions of the Philosophers* (often called *Placita Philosophorum*) from the second century CE, also copied out by Eusebius in his *Praeparatio Evangelica* Books 14–15 in the fourth century and translated into Arabic shortly before 900 CE, and the very similar anonymous excerpts in Stobaeus' *Anthology* (1.1–46; 4.36–37; and 4.50a30). The texts of these two sources were printed in parallel columns by Diels (*Doxographi Graeci*, pp. 273–444; for an example, see Table 2.1); they consist of entries, or questions, on philosophical and other matters, according to Ps.-Plutarch arranged in five books dealing with cosmology and (meta)physics (I), the heavenly bodies (II), meteorology (III), psychology and perception (IV), and human physiology and embryonics (V). Under each entry are listed the views of a number of philosophers, from the pre-Socratics to the first century BCE (and even in a few cases later), views that purport to give answers to topics like: On the void. On time. How did the world originate? What is the nature of the heavenly bodies? Are sense impressions true? How does conception take place? The selection of philosophers is far from systematic, and their views are presented as simple statements of fact, without any context or arguments. The different views are organized in such a way that similar views are put together, without regard for the chronological sequence, and then contrasted with a different view. As an example, in Table 2.1 we take two chapters on time as presented in Diels p. 318, labeled Aëtius 1.21–22.

In fact, Diels' presentation is deceptive unless the reader takes his critical apparatus into consideration, for the chapter headings are not in Stobaeus, and the three sections on Plato (21.2; 22.1 and 9) are not listed here by Stobaeus but in a later chapter (1.8.45), and 22.7–8 follow the section on Eratosthenes. Furthermore, Stobaeus has an extra section on the Stoic Chrysippus following Xenocrates, obviously taken from a later chapter on Chrysippus (1.8.42).

Table 2.1 Sample from *Doxographi Graeci*

Ps.-Plutarch <i>Epitome</i> 1.21 <i>On Time</i>		Stobaeus <i>Ecl.</i> 1.8.40b <i>On Time</i>
Pythagoras says that time is the sphere of the surrounding.	1	Pythagoras says that it is the sphere of the surrounding.
Plato, that it is a moving image or the distance of the movement of the world.	2	Plato that it is a moving image or the distance of the movement of the world.
Eratosthenes, that it is the path of the sun.	3	Eratosthenes that it is the path of the sun.
Ps.-Plutarch <i>Epitome</i> 1.22 <i>On the Nature of Time</i>		Stobaeus <i>Ecl.</i> 1.8.40b <i>On the Nature of Time</i>
Plato says that the movement of the universe is the nature of time.	1	[Plato] says that the movement of the universe is the nature of time.
	2	Xenocrates says that the nature of time is what measures things created, and eternal movement.
	3	Hestiaeus from Perinthus, the physicist, says that it is the movement of the stars relative to one another.
	4	Strato says that it is the size of the things in movement and at rest.
	5	Epicurus says that it is an attribute [of attributes], i.e. an attendant circumstance of movements.
	6	Antiphon and Critolaus say that time is a thought or a measure, not a substance.
Most of the Stoics say that it is movement in itself.	7	The Stoics say that time is movement in itself.
Most people say that time is ungenerated.	8	Most people say that time is ungenerated.
Plato says that it is generated in thinking.	9	[Plato] says that it is generated in thinking.

These two chapters demonstrate some of the problems that make it difficult to reconstruct a common source, and the recent analysis in Mansfeld and Runia (1996, 226–8), suggests a different arrangement of the original text than that given by Diels. While there is good reason to assume that Ps.-Plutarch has preserved the structure of the lost sources, it is not always certain that all the views presented by Stobaeus belong to the original text, and it is obvious that it is far more important to study the later doxographical texts as transmitted than Diels did. They may have had different purposes in shaping their presentations than the sources which they used, and this

may affect the reliability of their reports. What matters, obviously, is the variety of opinions, not the connection between notions nor the argumentation of individual philosophers as such: the order follows neither chronology nor connections to philosophical schools, and the presence or absence of any individual philosopher is no indication of the significance of the information. If we follow Ps.-Plutarch, *Epit.* 1.22 begins with two opposing views (Plato vs. the Stoics) while sections 2–4 give the views of philosophers who gave time a place in the physical world, 5 and 6 the views of those who seem to deny the reality of time. Sections 8–9 deal with a separate issue, viz. whether or not time is generated.

Both Ps.-Plutarch's and Stobaeus' accounts must, despite variations, have been based on the same source, who according to Diels and most other scholars was an otherwise unknown writer of a doxographical work by the name of Aëtius, to be dated c. 100 CE. This work, in its turn, seems to be based on similar works from the first century BCE and even the earlier Hellenistic period since the earliest trace of it is found in Chrysippus in the third century BCE. One or more of these works were extremely popular both in the Hellenistic period and in the Roman Empire, and we can recognize their influence in, for example, Cicero, Varro, Athenagoras, Soranus, and the *Historia Philosopha*, which is falsely attributed to Galen, but in fact dates from late antiquity. But it is obvious from the example given above that there are major variations in the doxographical texts: It is important that the modern scholar look not only at what is claimed to be the reconstructed text of Aëtius but also at the transmitted text of the numerous doxographical sources from the second to the sixth centuries CE (see further Mansfeld and Runia, 1996).

A different kind of doxography is found in (primarily) the church father Hippolytus, Diogenes Laertius, and Ps.-Plutarch's *Stromateis* (= *Patchwork, Miscellanies*), (see Mansfeld, 1992, and Mejer, 1992). These doxographies differ from the first kind in that they present the views of each philosopher in a separate chapter, but they are similar to it in that they report on the same five areas, often in the same order and with the same wording. As an example we may take Diogenes Laertius' summary of Democritus' philosophy (D.L. 9.44–45):

Democritus' opinions are as follows:

(44) The principles of everything are atoms and void, and everything else is conventional. There are infinitely many worlds which come into being and pass away. The atoms are infinite in size and number, and they are carried about in the whole in a swirl, and in that way they generate all the compounds, fire, water, air, earth. For these things too are complexes of atoms, which are incapable of being affected and changeless because of their solidity. The sun and the moon are compounded of smooth, round bodies of that kind, as is the soul, which is the same as the mind. We see through the impact of images. (45) Everything comes to be by necessity, the swirl, which he calls necessity, being the cause of the coming to be of everything. The goal in life is to be in a good state of mind (*euthymia*), but this state is not, as some erroneously have interpreted it, the same as pleasure, but the state in which the soul is quiet and well balanced, undisturbed by any fear or superstition or any other emotion. Democritus calls this state of mind "well-being" (*euestō*) and uses many other terms. Conventions are artificial; in reality only atoms and the void exist. – These are the opinions of Democritus. (Taylor, 1999, with some changes)

In §44 the information follows the order of the presentation in Ps.-Plutarch's *Epitome*, and once again, there are no arguments or reasons offered. This report does not, like so many other doxographical sources, add to what we know from other sources, mainly Aristotle and Theophrastus, though in some instances it is possible to draw conclusions that we could not obtain from other sources. Thus, the cosmological information about Anaximander in Hippolytus' *Refutatio* 1.6.1–7 (= DK 12A11) is important, and the otherwise questionable interpretation of Heraclitus' cosmology in D.L. 9.7–11 is indicative of some definite structure of Heraclitus' book, which must have been more than just a collection of sayings (cf. D.L. 9.5).

The second paragraph of the Democritean doxography is, however, unique and deserves further scrutiny. It confirms the important principle stated in the beginning of §44 that only atoms and void are real, thus denying the possibility of primary and secondary qualities, a distinction which is sometimes attributed to Democritus, and it proves that there must have been a discussion of Democritus' ethics, a subject which is otherwise neglected in the ancient sources, though Thrasyllus placed Democritus' ethical works first in his catalog of his writings (cf. D.L. 9.46). It is also noteworthy that a reference to ethics can be combined with the usual five areas of doxographical reports, thus demonstrating that the individual doxographer can add to or subtract from what he found in his sources.

While some of these doxographical reports thus contain important information, others demonstrate that the knowledge about earlier Greek philosophy in late antiquity can be confused and misleading. It is important to notice that both kinds of doxography basically abstain from criticizing or discussing the views presented, as is also clear from some remarks quoted by St. Augustine in his preface to *De haeresibus* (*Patr. Lat.* vol. 42, p. 23):

A certain Celsus [otherwise unknown] has presented the views of all philosophers who founded philosophical schools down to his own period . . . in six rather large volumes. He did not refute any of them, he just explained what they thought, with such brevity that both style and content gave room, not for praising and criticizing, nor for confirming or defending, but only for explaining and presenting their ideas. For Celsus mentioned more than one hundred philosophers, not all of whom even founded their own schools, since he was of the opinion that he ought not to neglect those philosophers who followed their teachers without dissent.

Quotations from Aristotle's student Theophrastus in the Aristotelian commentator Simplicius in the sixth century CE demonstrate that the sections on the Greek philosophers from Thales to Plato in the doxographical sources must ultimately go back to Theophrastus who both in independent treatises (on Democritus, Anaxagoras, etc.) and in his philosophical works discussed his predecessors. It is not certain that all this information is derived from his *Peri phusikōn doxōn* (= *Physical Opinions*, as the likely meaning is), though this has often been assumed, since Theophrastus like Aristotle used to discuss the historical development of ideas as a preliminary step to his own philosophy: many of the fragments which Diels attributed to his *Peri phusikōn doxōn* in fact come from Theophrastus' *Physics*. We cannot be sure from which book the fragment of his *De Sensibus* comes (Balthussen, 2000), but it seems likely that this

fragment in any case gives a fair impression of the way Theophrastus presented the views of his predecessors.

It is not known who changed the Aristotelian-Theophrastean way of discussing their predecessors according to the affiliation of their views into the less problem-oriented system we find in the so-called doxographers. It is important to notice that each doxographer seems to have changed and added to his immediate predecessor, but the fact that several sources attribute the same view to a particular philosopher does not by itself increase the likelihood that it reflects the original ideas of that philosopher. All it means is that this was a standard item within the doxographical tradition.

Though doxography in a strict sense originally applied only to those sources that were thought to derive from Theophrastus, it has later come to be used about any ancient source which reports the views of earlier philosophers. It has even been suggested (Giusta, 1964–8) that, corresponding to the doxographies on physics and metaphysics, there must have been another doxographical tradition dealing with ethics. There seems, however, to be general agreement that such a parallel tradition cannot be proven to have existed. The similarity between various texts, e.g. in Cicero and Seneca, is no greater than can be explained as a result of a common way of dealing with particular ethical problems.

There is another type of philosophical historiography which may be called doxographical, viz. a series of works called *Peri haireseōn* (= *On Sects*), written in the second and first centuries BCE. These works are all lost and only known from references and quotations in, especially, Diogenes Laertius; only one substantial excerpt on Peripatetic and Stoic ethics, from Arius Didymus preserved by Stobaeus, can possibly be attributed to this type of work (*Ecl.* 2.7 = 2.37, 14–152, 25 Wachsmuth; the identity of Arius Didymus, commonly assumed to be Augustus' Stoic court philosopher, is uncertain, cf. Göransson, 1995). Eusebius and Stobaeus also preserve sections on the physical theories of these two schools which may come from the same work; since we can compare the Peripatetic material with Aristotle's own works, it is of less importance than the sections on the Stoics whose writings are all lost (cf. Pomeroy, 1999). It appears that this type of doxography dealt with only the post-Socratic schools of philosophy, and mainly with ethics, and that they offered systematic accounts of the philosophical doctrines, so that the views of each school on a particular philosophical topic were presented in separate sections.

In late antiquity, for instance, in the church fathers, there can be little doubt that doxographical works of one type or another were the sources consulted by most students of philosophy. Few of the original works by pre-Socratic and Hellenistic philosophers were available outside Alexandria and other centers of scholarship. Hence the study of doxography and of the transmission of philosophical texts in antiquity is important for a proper evaluation of the significance of late testimonies and of their interpretations *vis-à-vis* the original statements by philosophers who are now lost.

Biography

The ancient Greeks and Romans were just as fascinated by the lives of philosophers and other famous men as the modern world is, though it is obvious that they were

more interested in the personalities than in the social and educational aspects of biography. Thus, we know next to nothing about the early development and the philosophical studies of young philosophers. In fact, it is important to understand that it was always difficult to find information about men of the past because the documentary evidence was virtually nonexistent: the biographer had to cull whatever evidence he could from the writings of the individual personality, something which was difficult in the case of both ancient dramatists and philosophers, the dramatists because they do not speak in *propria persona* – the philosophers because they concentrate on argument and do not describe their own lives. Even when philosophers seem to have spoken about themselves, it is often hard to connect this information with their external life. When we are told that Democritus in a book stated that he wrote it 730 years after the fall of Troy, we are completely at a loss as to which date he assigned to this event (D.L. 9.41), and thus the information does not help us date Democritus.

This lack of information did not prevent ancient writers from producing a large number of biographies of philosophers, but it is important to realize that they necessarily had to rely on very scattered evidence. The main element in ancient biography was anecdotes and characteristic sayings (gnomic statements, *apophthegmata*), but unless the author had a personal relationship with his subject, there is little chance that the information provided is correct in a historical sense. This can, for instance, be gathered from the fact that the same anecdote can be told about more than one philosopher: the anecdotes say more about which characteristics the ancients attributed to a philosopher than about the actual life of that individual.

One of the basic problems in biography is of course to determine the life span of the subject in question. Since the ancients had no absolute chronology, it was necessary to establish dates by means of synchronisms with known events like Olympiads or with names of office holders; thus the Athenians dated years by referring to one of the nine archons. Sometimes a well-known event took place during a philosopher's life, e.g. the foundation of the Athenian colony Thurii in 444 BCE with which Protagoras was associated since he was said to have written the laws for that city. Consequently, he was assumed to have been at the height of his career at that date, and it was said to be his *acme* (Gr.) or *floruit* (Lat.), usually identified with his fortieth year of age. The fortieth year was also used to fix the date of two philosophers when one of them was supposed to be the student of the other. Democritus had said something about being young when Anaxagoras was old, and as their relationship was supposed to be that of teacher/student, Democritus' birth was dated to 460 BC, which was Anaxagoras' *floruit*. It is very unlikely that this interval of 40 years reflects any actual difference in age between the two philosophers, not to mention the fact that we cannot be sure that Democritus ever studied with Anaxagoras. But the Hellenistic biographers had a tendency to link philosophers in successions so that any relationship between two philosophers would be interpreted as that of teacher to student. In some cases it was known how old a philosopher was when he died – for example, Socrates was 70 years old when he was executed in Olympiad 95.1 (= 399 BCE), hence he must have been born Ol. 77.4 (= 469 BCE). Contrary to modern practice, it is in fact of great interest to contemplate those pieces of information that do not fit in with the usual dating systems. Thus, when we are told by Thrasyllus that Democritus was born one year before Socrates (i.e., 470 BCE), this deserves to be taken into serious consideration

since it is hard to see why Thrasyllus should have contradicted the usual date unless he had good reasons to do so.

The first biographies of philosophers seem to have been written by Plato's students shortly after his death, but philosophical biographies were popular throughout the Hellenistic period. Around 200 BCE Sotion from Alexandria wrote a book called *Successions of Philosophers*, in which he made one philosopher succeed another as head of a particular philosophical school and similarly connected various schools with one another. This system of "successions" were generally followed by all later writers; the two main successions were a) the Ionic line from Thales via Archelaus and Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to Clitomachus as head of the Academy and Chrysippus as head of the Stoa, and b) an Italic line from Pythagoras over Democritus to the Epicurean and Skeptic schools. Sometimes a separate line of Eleatics was added. There can be little doubt that this way of organizing the history of philosophy was modeled on the Hellenistic schools and that the notion that philosophers were organized in schools prior to Plato's Academy is anachronistic. All of these historical works have been lost, but neither from the bits and pieces quoted by Diogenes Laertius and other sources nor from the two partly preserved books of the Epicurean Philodemus' *Survey of Philosophers* (*Suntaxis tōn philosophōn*) on the Academy and the Stoa (Dorandi 1991, 1993) from the middle of the first century BCE, does it appear that they were much concerned with the philosophical contributions of the various schools covered: the emphasis was on the life of the individual philosopher and of the institution to which he belonged, and philosophical topics seem mostly to have been introduced when the innovations ("inventions") of a philosopher were listed.

The most important specimen of historiography of philosophy from antiquity follows the structure of the *Successions*, viz. Diogenes Laertius' *Compendium of the Lives and Opinions of Philosophers*. The author is not otherwise known and his work can only be dated from a combination of the latest personalities he mentions, and the fact that he was not yet influenced by Neoplatonism, i.e., it must have been written around 200 CE. His work is divided into ten books: introduction and various wise men (including Thales) (1); The Ionian Tradition (Books 2–7): Ionian physicists, Socrates and the minor Socratics (2), Plato (3), the Academy down to Clitomachus (4), Aristotle and the Peripatetics down to Lyco (5), Antisthenes and the Cynics (6), Zeno of Citium and the Stoics – possibly down to the first century CE; the end of Book 7 is lost (7); the Italic Tradition (Books 8–10): Pythagoras and his early successors, and Empedocles (8), Heraclitus, the Eleatics, the Atomists, Protagoras, Diogenes of Apollonia, and Pyrrho (9), and finally Epicurus (10).

Diogenes' book is basically a compilation of excerpts from a large number of sources and often provides us with the main evidence for the Hellenistic tradition. The qualities and the structure are very uneven: some lives are nothing but anecdotes and aphorism while others are primarily doxographies. Some Lives have important sections on philosophy (e.g., the Lives of Zeno in Book 7 and Pyrrho in Book 9) while others are of no help in reconstructing the philosophy of a thinker (e.g., Plato in Book 3 and Aristotle in Book 5; in both cases, however, they exemplify how later generations interpreted their predecessors). For the pre-Socratics, Diogenes has used a doxographical source of the type described above, pp. 24–8. However, in Book 10 Diogenes has chosen to quote four long texts by Epicurus himself that constitute the most important evidence

for Epicurus' philosophy prior to the first century BCE (viz., Cicero and the papyri from Herculaneum). Diogenes ends his book with Epicurus' 40 "Principal Doctrines" because he considers them a culmination of philosophical wisdom.

Most of Diogenes' biographies included a number of items like birth, parents, name, appearance, relations to other philosophers, travels, life style, and manner of death; many Lives also contain bibliographies and some pieces of documentary evidence. There is no fixed order in which these items are presented, some Lives are much more comprehensive than others, but in most cases the comprehensiveness of a Life depends on the number of anecdotes available. The factual information must always be viewed with skepticism and there are many obvious mistakes. Though it is clear that Diogenes is no philosopher, he has preserved much of philosophical interest.

Most of the other philosophical Lives from late antiquity are written in the context of the Platonic philosophy: Apuleius wrote a book on Plato and his philosophy in the second century CE, and a hundred years later both Porphyry and Iamblichus wrote biographies of Pythagoras, but they are all three more of value as a source to the times of their authors than as a source to the subject of their biographies. Porphyry's life of Pythagoras was part of his *Historia Philosopha*, on the history of philosophy in four books up to and culminating in Plato. More important is the fact that we have biographies of some Neoplatonic philosophers written by their students: Porphyry not only collected and edited Plotinus' writings at the end of the third century CE, he also wrote a vivid description of Plotinus' life as he knew it from his own time with the Neoplatonic philosopher in Rome.³ Two hundred years later Marinus wrote a life of Proclus who was head of the Academy in Athens in the fifth century CE, and early in the sixth century Damascius wrote a *Historia Philosopha* (previously called *Life of Isidorus*), which covers the last couple of generations of Platonic philosophers in Athens. Since we have so many writings by the Neoplatonic philosophers themselves, the significance of these biographies is not what they have to tell us about the thoughts of these Neoplatonists, but their description of the philosophical activities in Athens. Taken together with the numerous commentaries on works of Plato and Aristotle, they offer important information about the institutional aspects of doing philosophy in late antiquity, and much remains to be done in this area.⁴ It is no coincidence that Simplicius and many others in this period were capable of composing commentaries that are still important both for our understanding of the texts they comment on and for our knowledge of Greek philosophy.

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3. On Porphyry's biography, see further Brisson and Pradeau, PLOTINUS.
4. On this topic, see Hoffmann WHAT WAS COMMENTARY IN LATE ANTIQUITY?

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