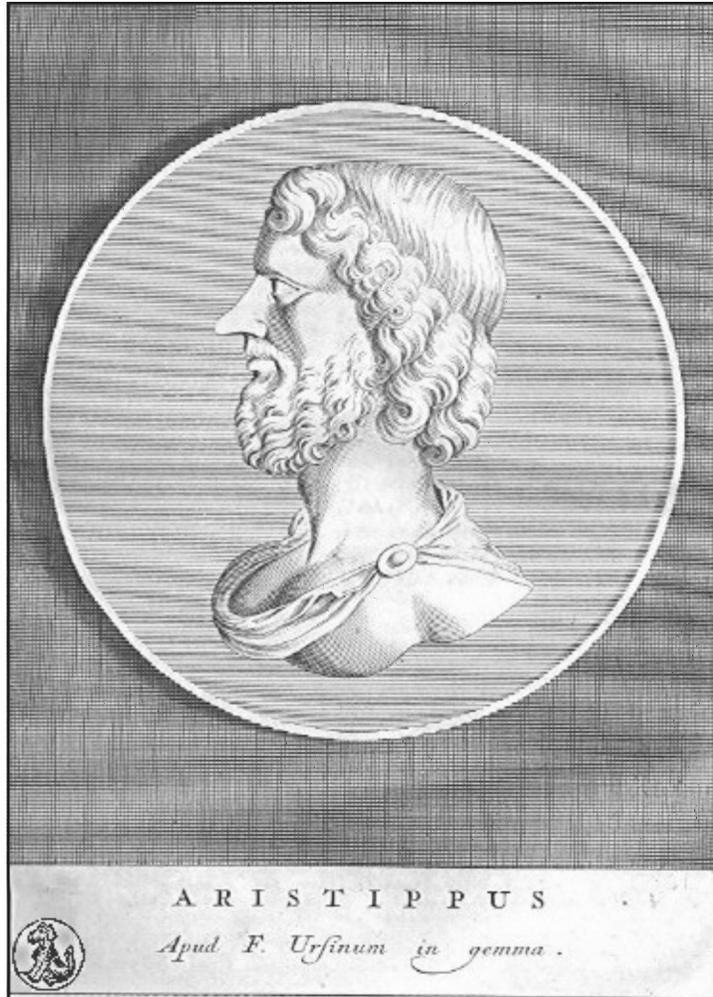


ARISTIPPUS



Aristippus.

tached from the specific object, quality, or concept. To him, perception, which is wholly individual and idiosyncratic, determines what any object or concept communicates to any single individual. These notions led Aristippus to the conclusion that there exists no explicit, objective, and absolute world identically perceived by all people. He further posited that it is impossible to compare the experiences of different people accurately, because all individuals can know are their own perceptions and reactions.

Aristippus further contended that, from birth, all living humans seek

pleasure and avoid pain. He contended that life must be lived in pursuit of pleasure. His one caveat was that pleasure must be defined by all people for themselves, that there is no universal pleasure. Some people, therefore, find the greatest pleasure in leading law-abiding, virtuous lives, whereas others find it in raucous, drunken revelry. Aristippus did not make moral judgments about where individuals sought and found their pleasures.

Aristippus also argued that the source of pleasure is always the body—which, he was quick to point out, includes the mind. For him, pleasures were most fully and satisfactorily experienced in the present. Memories of pleasures past or the contemplation of pleasures promised at some future date are weak semblances of pleasures that are immediately enjoyable.

The school of philosophy that Aristippus founded at Cyrene, based on concepts such as these, was designated the Hedonistic school, “hedonistic” being derived from the Greek word for “pleasure.” Hedonism was closely akin in many ways to the Cynicism of Antisthenes, who, like Aristippus, questioned the existence of universals. Together, Antisthenes and Aristippus formulated the Nominalist theory of universals, which flew in the face of Socrates’ and Plato’s realism.

INFLUENCE Perhaps Aristippus’s greatest contribution to Western thought came in his questioning of Socrates’ theory of ideas. In disputing these theories, he focused on individual differences and arrived at a philosophy infinitely more relativistic than the prevailing philosophies of his day. In a sense, Aristippus took the earliest tentative steps in a march of insurgent ideas that led inevitably to the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

If the Cynics, under the leadership of Antisthenes, represented the school of apathy in the ancient world, the Cyrenaics, following the lead of Aristippus, represented the school of happiness. These ideas ran counter to the prevailing philosophy emerging from Athens and were considered both exotic and quixotic by the most influential thinkers of the day. As Athens skulked into defeat and steady decline, however, many of its citizenry found Hedonism—and Epicurus’s refinement of it, Epicureanism—quite to their liking.

FURTHER READING

Durant, Will. *The Story of Philosophy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967.