

CHAPTER II.

THE GREEK SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY.

Sect. 1.—The general Foundation of the Greek School Philosophy.

THE physical philosophy of the Greek Schools was formed by looking at the material world through the medium of that common language which men employ to answer the common occasions of life; and by adopting, arbitrarily, as the grounds of comparison of facts, and of inference from them, notions more abstract and large than those with which men are practically familiar, but not less vague and obscure. Such a philosophy, however much it might be systematized, by classifying and analyzing the conceptions which it involves, could not overcome the vices of its fundamental principle. But before speaking of these defects, we must give some indications of its character.

The propensity to seek for principles in the common usages of language may be discerned at a very early period. Thus we have an example of it in a saying which is reported of Thales, the founder of Greek philosophy.¹ When he was asked, "What is the *greatest* thing?" he replied, "*Place*; for all other things are *in* the world, but the world is *in* it." In Aristotle we have the consummation of this mode of speculation. The usual point from which he starts in his inquiries is, that *we say* thus or thus in common language. Thus, when he has to discuss the question, whether there be, in any part of the universe, a Void, or space in which there is nothing, he inquires first in how many senses we say that one thing is *in* another. He enumerates many of these;² we say the part is in the whole, as the finger is *in* the hand; again we say, the species is in the genus, as man is included *in* animal; again, the government of Greece is *in* the king; and various other senses are described or exemplified, but of all these *the most proper* is when we say a thing is *in* a vessel, and generally, *in place*. He next examines what *place* is, and comes to this conclusion, that "if about a body there be another body including it, it is in place, and if not, not." A body *moves* when it changes its place; but

¹ Plut. *Conv. Sept. Sap.* Diog. Laert. i. 35.² *Physic. Ausc.* iv. 3.