

2. *Character of Commentators.*—The spirit of commentation, as has already been suggested, turns to questions of taste, of metaphysics, of morals, with far more avidity than to physics. Accordingly, critics and grammarians were peculiarly the growth of this school; and, though the commentators sometimes chose works of mathematical or physical science for their subject (as Proclus, who commented on Euclid's Geometry, and Simplicius, on Aristotle's Physics), these commentaries were, in fact, rather metaphysical than mathematical. It does not appear that the commentators have, in any instance, illustrated the author by bringing his assertions of facts to the test of experiment. Thus, when Simplicius comments on the passage concerning a vacuum, which we formerly adduced, he notices the argument which went upon the assertion, that a vessel full of ashes would contain as much water as an empty vessel; and he mentions various opinions of different authors, but no trial of the fact. Eudemus had said, that the ashes contained something hot, as quicklime does, and that by means of this, a part of the water was evaporated; others supposed the water to be condensed, and so on.³

The Commentator's professed object is to explain, to enforce, to illustrate doctrines assumed as true. He endeavors to adapt the work on which he employs himself to the state of information and of opinion in his own time; to elucidate obscurities and technicalities; to supply steps omitted in the reasoning; but he does not seek to obtain additional truths or new generalizations. He undertakes only to give what is virtually contained in his author; to develop, but not to create. He is a cultivator of the thoughts of others: his labor is not spent on a field of his own; he ploughs but to enrich the granary of another man. Thus he does not work as a freeman, but as one in a servile condition; or rather, his is a menial, and not a productive service: his office is to adorn the appearance of his master, not to increase his wealth.

Yet though the Commentator's employment is thus subordinate and dependent, he is easily led to attribute to it the greatest importance and dignity. To elucidate good books is, indeed, a useful task; and when those who undertake this work execute it well, it would be most unreasonable to find fault with them for not doing more. But the critic, long and earnestly employed on one author, may easily under-rate the relative value of other kinds of mental exertion. He may

³ Simplicius, p. 170.