

The Cynics

Reading 16 – The Cynic, a Dialogue – from Lucian of Samosata

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"Cynicism is . . . a match for the most excellent kind of philosophy." — Julian, the Roman emperor

"The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue. Some have said that Cynicism is a shortcut upon the path of virtue." — Anonymous (reported by Diogenes Laertius)

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This reading comes from the Cave's

The Best of the Cynics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Ancient Cynics

The translation that follows is a modified version of H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler's
1905 version from *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*.

LYCINUS. GIVE AN account of yourself, my man. You wear a beard and let your hair grow. You eschew shirts, exhibit your skin, and your feet are bare. You choose a wandering, outcast, beastly life. Unlike other people, you make your own body the object of your severities. You go from place to place sleeping on the hard ground where chance finds you, with the result that your old cloak, neither light nor soft nor anything to look at to begin with, is loaded down with filth. Why?

Cynic. It meets my needs. It was easy to come by, and it gives its owner no trouble. It is sufficient for me. [2] Tell me, do you not call extravagance a vice?

Ly. Oh, yes.

Cy. And frugality a virtue?

Ly. Yes, again.

Cy. Then, if you find me living frugally, and others extravagantly, why blame me instead of them?

Ly. I do not call your life more frugal than other people's. I call it more destitute—destitution and want, that is what it is. You are no better than the poor who beg for their daily bread.

Cy. [3] That brings us to a few questions. What is want or lacking? And what is sufficiency? Shall we try to find the answers?

Ly. If you like, yes.

Cy. A man's sufficiency is that which meets his needs or is sufficient for what he requires—will that do?

Ly. I'll accept that.

Cy. And want or lacking occurs when the supply falls short of need and does not satisfy what is needful.

Ly. Yes.

Cy. Very well, then, I am lacking nothing—I am not in want. Everything I have is lined up with what I require.

Ly. [4] How do you draw that conclusion?

Cy. Well, consider the purpose of anything we require. The purpose of a house is protection, right?

Ly. Yes.

Cy. Clothing—what is that for? Protection too, I think.

Ly. Yes.

Cy. But now, tell me, what in turn is the purpose of the protection? It is the better condition of the protected, I presume.

Ly. I agree.

Cy. Then do you think my feet are in a worse condition than yours?

Ly. I cannot say.

Cy. Oh, yes you can. Look at it this way: what do feet do? What is their function or work?

Ly. It is to walk—they walk.

Cy. And do you think my feet walk worse than yours, or worse than the average man's?

Ly. I doubt it.

Cy. Then they are not in a worse condition—if, that is, they perform their function as well.

Ly. That may be so.

Cy. So it appears that, as far as feet go, I am in no worse condition than other people.

Ly. No, I do not think you are.

Cy. Well, what about the rest of my body, then? If it is in worse condition, it must be weaker, strength being the virtue of the body. Is mine weaker?

Ly. Not that I see.

Cy. Consequently, neither my feet nor the rest of my body need protection, it seems. If they did, they would be in a bad condition since want is always an evil and worsens the thing concerned. But again, there is no sign, either, of my body's being nourished any worse even though its nourishment is of a common sort.

Ly. None at all.

Cy. It would not be healthy, if it were badly nourished, since bad food injures the body.

Ly. That's true.

Cy. [5] If it is true, then it is up to you to explain why you castigate me and denigrate my life and call it miserable.

Ly. That's easy to explain. Nature, which you honor, and the gods have given us the earth and have brought all sorts of good things out of it, providing us with abundance—not merely for our necessities but for our pleasures. Nevertheless, you abstain from all or nearly all of it, and utilize these good things no more than the beasts. Your drink is water, just like theirs. Like a dog, you eat what you pick up. And the dog's bed is as good as yours—straw is enough for either of you. Then your clothes are no more presentable than a beggar's. Now, if this sort of contentment is to pass for wisdom, God must have been all wrong in making sheep woolly, filling grapes with wine, and providing all our infinite variety of oil, honey, and the rest, that we might have food of every sort, pleasant drink, money, soft beds, fine houses—all the wonderful paraphernalia of civilization, in fact, since the productions of art are God's gifts to us too. To live without all these would be miserable enough even if one could not help it, as prisoners cannot, for instance. It is far more so if the abstention is forced on a man by himself. Then it is sheer madness.

Cy. [6] You may be right. But consider this. A rich man, indulging hospitable and kindly instincts, entertains at a feast all sorts and conditions of men. Some of them are sick. Others are healthy. And the dishes provided are as diverse as the guests. Sitting there is one man to whom nothing comes contrary to his wish. He has his finger in every dish—not only the ones within easy reach but those at a distance that were intended for the sick guests—and this even though he is in good health and has no more than one stomach and requires little to nourish him and is likely to be upset by the excess. What is your opinion of this man? Is he wise—a sensible man?

Ly. Not to me.

Cy. Is he moderate?

Ly. Not that either.

Cy. [7] And what about this? There is another guest at the same table. He seems not to care about all the variety of foods. Rather, selecting some dish close by that is sufficient for his need, he eats of it as a decent, well-behaved man would, restricting himself to it without a glance at the rest. Do you not believe he is a more moderate and better man than the other?

Ly. I do.

Cy. Do you get it, or must I explain?

Ly. What?

Cy. That the good and noble host is god, who provides this variety of all kinds so that each man may have something to suit him. This dish is for the healthy, that one for the sick. This dish is for the strong, that one for the weak. It is not all for each one of us. Each man is to take what is within reach, and of that only what he most needs.

[8] Now you others are like the greedy, unrestrained person who grabs everything. Local productions will not do for you—the world must be your storehouse. Your homeland and its seas are insufficient, so you purchase your pleasures from the ends of the earth, preferring the exotic to that which is home grown, the costly to the cheap, the rare to the common. In fact, you would rather have troubles and complications than avoid them.

Most of the precious instruments of happiness that you so pride yourselves on are won only with unhappiness and hardships. Give a moment's thought, if you will, to the gold you all pray for, to the silver, the costly houses, the elaborate clothing. And do not forget all the trouble and toil and danger they cost—the blood and death and ruin. Not only do large numbers of men perish at sea on their account, but many endure miseries in producing them. Moreover, they're very likely to be fought for—the desire for them makes friends plot against friends, children against parents, wives against husbands.

[9] How pointless it all is! Embroidered clothes have no more warmth in them than others. Gilded houses do not do better in keeping out the rain. A drink is no sweeter out of a silver cup—or a gold one for that matter. An ivory bed makes sleep no softer; on the contrary, your fortunate man on his ivory bed between his delicate sheets constantly finds himself calling on sleep in vain. And as to the elaborate preparation of food, I hardly need to say that instead of aiding nutrition it injures the body and produces diseases in it.

[10] And what is to be said about sex—about the many activities men do and suffer thanks to those things belonging to Aphrodite? This longing is easy to take care of unless a kind of licentious indulgence is the goal. And yet in this business, frenzied passion and moral corruption do not seem to be enough for these men. But these days, men pervert the use of everything they have, using it for unnatural purposes. Take the man who, rather than using a carriage, chooses to use a bed as though it were a carriage.

Ly. Is there such a person?

Cy. Yes—he is you. You for whom men are beasts of burden—you who make them shoulder your bed-carriages, slouching up there in luxury, driving your men along like so many mules, calling on them to turn this way and not that. This is one of the outward and visible signs of your blessed happiness.

[11] Again, when people use edible things not for food but to get dye out of them. Take the murex-dyers, those who deal in purple, for instance. Are they not making use of the arrangements and devices of god in a way that is contrary to nature?

Ly. Certainly not. The flesh of the murex can provide a pigment as well as food.

Cy. But it wasn't made—it didn't come into being—for that. You can force a bowl made for mixing water with wine into use as a pitcher, but that is not what it exists for.

Even so, it is impossible to detail the whole of the unhappiness of these people. It is big, though. And because I will not join them, you reproach me. My life is that of the decent, well-behaved man I described. I enjoy what comes to hand, use what is cheap, and have no desire for the elaborate and exotic.

[12] Moreover, if you think I live the life of an animal just because I need and use only a few things, that argument leads you to the conclusion that the gods are even lower than the beasts since the gods have no needs at all. But to clear your ideas on the comparative merits of great and small needs, you have only to reflect that children have more needs than adults, women more than men, the sick more than the well, and, generally, the inferior more than the superior. Accordingly, the gods have no needs, and those men who have the fewest needs are nearest the gods.

[13] Take Heracles, the best man that ever lived, a divine man, and rightly considered a god. Was it unhappiness that made him go around in nothing but a lion's skin, insensible to all the needs you feel? No, he was not unhappy, the man who relieved the misfortunes of others. He was not poor, he who ruled land and sea. Wherever he went, he was master. He never met his superior or his equal as long as he lived. Do you suppose, then, that he could not get coverings or clothes or shoes, and that's why he went around as he did? We cannot draw this conclusion. Rather, he possessed self-control and was able to endure. His will was to be powerful, strong; his wish wasn't for luxury.

And his disciple Theseus, who was king of all the Athenians, son of Poseidon, as people say, and the best of his generation—[14] he too chose to go without shoes and to be naked. He was content to let his hair and beard grow. He was not the only one; rather, all those of old who lived when he lived were satisfied in this way. They were better men than you and would no more have let you shave them than a lion would. Soft, smooth flesh was fine for women, they thought. As for them, however, they were men, and they wanted to look like men. They acknowledged the beard was man's adornment—like the horse's or the

lion's mane, to whom god had added a certain grace of splendor and adornment just as he added the beard to men. So it is that I admire the men of old and want to imitate them. As for today's men, I do not admire them for their "amazing" happiness caught up in eating and clothing and smooth bodies—every part!—the hair forbidden to grow wherever nature meant it to grow.

[15] I pray that my feet might be hoofs, like Chiron's in the story.¹ And that I might need bedding no more than the lion, and costly food no more than the dog. Let my sufficient bed be the whole earth, my house this cosmos, and my chosen food the easiest to get. May I have no need—I nor any that I call friend—for gold and silver. For every human misfortune is generated by a longing for these—civil strife and wars, conspiracies and slaughters. The fountain of them all is a longing for more. That's not me. May I bear with less rather than desiring more and more.

[16] Such are our aspirations—they are considerably different from other people's. It is no wonder that our outfit is different since the peculiarity of our underlying principle is so different. I cannot understand why you allow a harpist his proper attire, as well as the fluteplayer and tragic actor, but you will not be consistent and recognize an outfit or uniform for a good man. The good man must be like everyone else, of course, regardless of the fact that everyone else is all wrong. Well, if good men are to have a uniform of their own, there can be none better than that which a licentious man will consider most improper and will decisively reject for himself.

[17] Now my uniform consists of a rough hairy skin, a threadbare cloak, long hair, and bare feet, whereas yours is that of a catamite. There is not much difference between you—the colors, the soft texture, the number of garments you are swathed in, the shoes, the slick hair, your smell. For the happier you are, the more you smell of perfume. What value can one give to a man who smells like a catamite? Accordingly, you can tolerate no more toil or hardship than they can, and you are just as much a slave to pleasure as they are. You feed like them, sleep like them, walk like them—rather, you do not wish to

walk any more than they do, but are carried like luggage, some by human beings, some by herds of animals.

As for me, my feet take me anywhere I want to go. I can put up with cold and heat and I am not displeased with the works of the gods—such a miserable wretch am I. By contrast, thanks to your happiness, you all are displeased with everything that happens and grumble without ceasing. What is, is intolerable. What is not, you pine for. In winter you want summer; in summer, winter. In heat you pine for cold; in cold, for heat. You're as fastidious and peevish as invalids are—only their reason is to be found in their illness, whereas yours is in your way of life.

[18] And then, because we occasionally make mistakes in practice, you advise us to change our plan and correct our principles, when in fact you behave randomly in your own affairs, never acting as a result of deliberation or reason, but always thanks to habit and longing.

You are no better than people washed around by a flood. They drift with the current, and you with your longings. There is a story of a man on a vicious horse that describes your situation. The horse ran away with him, and at the pace it was going, he could not get off. A man in the way asked him where he was off to. "Wherever this animal takes me," he said. So if one asked you where you were going, if you cared to tell the truth, you would say, generally speaking, wherever your longings decide to go. Or, more specifically, you would say, wherever your pleasure decides to go. Or at times greed. Or anger. Or fear. Or at other times some other thing appears to carry you off. You're not just on one horse. No, you're mounted on many that carry you. And they're all mad with passion! They carry you toward pits and cliffs, but you do not realize that you are bound for a fall until the fall itself comes.

[19] The tattered cloak, the shaggy hair, the whole outfit that you ridicule has the effect that it enables me to live a quiet life, doing what I want and keeping the company I wish to keep. No ignorant, uneducated person will have anything to say to one dressed like this. And the ones who live softly turn the other

way as soon as I come into view. But refined and reasonable men approach me, those who long for virtue. These are attached to me most of all since I delight in these kinds of men. I don't hang out at the doors of the so-called happy men. Rather, I judge their gold crowns and purple vanity and laugh at these men.

[20] There's something else to know about my outfit. It is not only fitting for good men but for the gods—even though it is ludicrous to you. You'll learn this if

you take a look at the statues of the gods to see whether they look like you or me. And not only Greek statues, but inspect those found in non-Greek temples too. See whether they let their hair grow long and grow a beard or their sculptors and painters shave them. And, to be sure, you will see that they are just like me insofar as they have no *extra* tunic. So then how do you still dare to say that my outfit is pathetic when it seems like it is fitting enough for the gods?

So ends Reading 16. See you in the **next reading**.

NOTES

¹ The son of Kronos (in the form of a horse) and Philyra, Chiron (or Cheiron) was a centaur (part human and part horse), who dwelled in a cave on Mount Pelion. Among others, Chiron brought up and educated the heroes Jason and Achilles, and the god Asclepius.

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