

The Cynics

Reading 3 – Antisthenes – Anecdotes & Sayings

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Reading 3

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The primary source for the following text is

Book 6 of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*.

All section numbers are part of Book 6. For example, section 3, or [3], is 6.3.

This reading comes from the Cave's

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

Antisthenes

Antisthenes – Anecdotes & Sayings

ANTISTHENES ARGUED THAT hard work, with all its toil and suffering, is something good. He did so by pointing to the examples of great Heracles and Cyrus—drawing the one from the Greeks and the other from the non-Greek barbarians.¹

[3] Antisthenes was the first to define *logos* by saying that "logos is an account that clearly explains what a thing was or what it is."

Again and again he said, "I would rather go

insane than enjoy myself with pleasure."

He also said, "We should only associate with those women who will be thankful."

An older boy from Pontus asked Antisthenes what he required to learn with him. The latter replied, "Bring a new book, a new writing utensil, and new writing tablets." He meant that he should bring and have on display a new mind.

When someone inquired what sort of wife he

should marry, he said, "If she is beautiful, you will never have her to yourself. And if she is ugly, you will pay for it dearly."

When he was told that Plato² was abusing him, he said, "It is a royal privilege to do what is noble and to hear bad things said about what I do."

[4] When Antisthenes was being initiated into the Orphic mysteries, the priest said that whoever is initiated has a share of many good things in Hades.³ In response, he said, "Why, then, don't you die?"

When he was reproached because his parents were not both freemen, he said, "Neither were they both wrestlers. Even so, I am a wrestler."

When someone asked him why he only had a few students, he replied, "Because I cast them out with a silver wand."

When he was asked why he was so sharp in admonishing his students, he declared, "Physicians are just the same with those who are ill."

One day, when he saw an adulterer running for his life, he said, "Wretched man! What a great amount of danger you might have avoided at the price of an obol."

We learn from Hecaton⁴ in his *Anecdotes and Sayings* that Antisthenes used to declare that it is better to fall in with carrion crows than with flatterers, since the one eats the dead, while the other devours the living.

[5] When someone asked him what the greatest happiness was among human beings, Antisthenes said, "To die happy."⁵

When a friend complained to him that he had lost his notes, Antisthenes said, "You should have written them on your mind instead of on paper."

"As iron is devoured by rust," he said, "so are jealous people consumed by their own jealous disposition."

He declared that those who wish to be immortal must live piously and justly.

He said that city-states are destroyed when they are unable to judge the difference between good and bad men.

Once, when he was applauded by bad men, he said, "I'm afraid that I have done something wrong."

[6] Antisthenes said that when brothers agree, no fortress is as strong as their common life.

He said that the right travelling supplies for a journey are such that, even if you are shipwrecked, you will be able to swim with them.

One day when he was reproached for keeping company with worthless men, he declared, "And physicians are also with the ill without becoming ill."

"It is odd," he said, "that we weed out certain grasses from the grain and the unfit in war, but we do not excuse worthless men from the business of the city-state."

When he was asked what result he obtained from philosophy, he said, "The ability to be in my own company and to be acquainted with myself."

When someone called on him for a song over the wine, he said, "Then you must accompany on the flute."

When Diogenes asked him for a tunic, he directed him to fold over his cloak instead.

[7] When someone asked him what sort of learning is the most necessary, Antisthenes said, "The learning that strips away anything that must be unlearned."

He advised that when men are slandered, they should bear with it more courageously than if they were pelted with stones.

He used to taunt Plato with being arrogant. Accordingly, when he once saw a spirited horse during a procession, he turned to Plato and said, "If you were a horse, you would similarly be proud and showy." He said this all the more when Plato kept praising the horse. And one day when he visited Plato, who was ill, he looked into the basin into which he had vomited and remarked, "I see the bile but not the vanity."

[8] Antisthenes used to advise the Athenians to vote that asses are horses. When they judged the proposal irrational, he said, "And yet there are generals among you who have had no training but are merely elected."

One man said to him, "The many praise you." In response, he said, "Why? What wrong have I done?"

Upon turning the torn part of his tattered cloak so

that it came into view, Socrates saw it and said, “I can see your love of fame through your tattered cloak.”

In his work *On the Socratic Philosophers*, Phantias⁶ relates how someone asked Antisthenes what he must do to be noble and good, and he said, “You must learn from those who well know that your vices must be rejected.”

When someone extolled a luxurious life, he said, “May the sons of your enemies have a luxurious life!”

[9] To the youth who was posing fantastically as an artist's model, Antisthenes said, “Tell me, if the bronze could speak, on what do you believe it would pride itself most?” The youth replied, “On its beauty.” Antisthenes said, “Are you not, then, ashamed of taking pride in the same thing as a lifeless thing?”

When a young man from Pontus promised to take good care of him as soon as his boat came in with its cargo of salt fish, Antisthenes took him and an empty sack to a flour seller's shop. He had the sack filled and moved to go away. When the woman asked for his payment, he said to her, “The young man will pay when his boatload of salt fish arrives.”

It seems that Antisthenes was responsible for the exile of Anytus and the execution of Meletus.⁷ [10] For when he encountered some youths from Pontus who had come to Athens thanks to the fame of Socrates, he led them off to Anytus, ironically declaring him to be wiser than Socrates. Those standing around Anytus were full of indignation. Therefore, they chased him out of the city.

Whenever Antisthenes saw a woman beautifully adorned, he would go to her house and direct her husband to bring out his horse and arms. Then, if a man owned these, he would say nothing more, leaving the woman's luxurious clothing and jewelry alone since the man could defend himself with his horse and arms. But if he didn't have them, then he called on him to strip her adornment.

The following teachings were pleasing to Antisthenes:

He showed that virtue can be taught.

He taught that the well-born and the virtuous are one and the same.

[11] He held that virtue was sufficient for happiness. Virtue requires nothing more than the strength of Socrates.

Antisthenes held that virtue is something you do—it's a matter of deeds. It doesn't require a stockpile of arguments or much learning.

He held that the wise man is self-sufficient since all the goods of others are his.

He believed that a bad reputation is a good thing. He believed the same about hard work.

He believed that the wise man would be guided in his public acts not by the established laws but by the law of virtue. He also believed that the wise man would marry in order to have children with those women who possess a good natural disposition. Moreover, he would love her since only the wise man knows those who are worthy of love.

[12] Diocles⁸ records the following of Antisthenes' sayings:

Nothing is strange or helpless to the wise man.

A good man is worthy of love. Excellent men—serious men of character—are friends.

Make allies of men who are at once courageous and just.

Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away.

It is better to fight with a few good men against everyone who is bad than to fight with a multitude of bad men against the few who are good.

Pay attention to your enemies, for they are the first to notice your faults.

Honor a just man more than a kinsman.

Virtue is the same for a woman as it is for a man.

Good deeds are beautiful, whereas bad deeds are shameful. Consider every worthless act foreign.

[13] Practical wisdom is a sturdy wall that will neither fall down nor be betrayed. We must build such walls by means of our own impregnable thoughts and reasonings.

DIOGENES LAERTIUS: [19] We may now move on to those Cynics and Stoics who owe their origins to Antisthenes.

So ends Reading 3. See you in the **next reading**.

NOTES

¹ The Cynics admired the Greek hero Heracles (famous for his twelve labors) and the non-Greek king of Persia Cyrus (the sixth century BC founder of the Persian empire) for their positive attitude toward toil and hardship (*ponos*).

² Plato (c. 427-347 BC) was a Greek philosopher from Athens. He is known for his many dialogues and letters. Some explore the definition of terms (such as virtue or piety), and others offer Plato's understanding of the cosmos, knowledge, the Forms or Ideas (such as the Good or Beauty), pleasure, human excellence, happiness, and political well-being.

³ The Orphic mysteries centered on the teachings of the legendary Greek poet Orpheus. They were based on the myth of Dionysus Zagreus. Initiation promised "good things in Hades," the realm of the dead.

⁴ Hecaton (or Hecato) of Rhodes was a second and first century BC Stoic philosopher and writer, who wrote about various philosophical topics (virtue and the goal of life, for example).

⁵ Compare Antisthenes' reply to what Solon famously has to say about happiness to the Lydian ruler Croesus in Herodotus, *Histories* 1.32. "O king, whoever possesses the most while passing through life and then dies agreeably is the one who, in my view, deserves to bear the name 'happy.'"

⁶ Phantias of Eresos was a fourth century BC Greek Peripatetic (Aristotelian) philosopher and writer, who collaborated with Theophrastus, the successor to Aristotle.

⁷ The Athenians Anytus and Meletus were responsible for bringing Socrates to trial on the charges of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. The trial resulted in Socrates' death in 399 BC.

⁸ Diocles of Magnesia (second or first century bc) was an ancient historian and writer of biography and summaries. He concentrated on the views, sayings, and lives of the earliest philosophers.

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