

The Cynics

Reading 10 – The Discourses of Teles the Cynic

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave's mission?** Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"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)

The Classics Cave • www.theclassicscave.com

Reading 10

Thanks for supporting The Classics Cave.

Please visit and support our sponsors.

This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of the Cynics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Ancient Cynics.

The Discourses of Teles the Cynic

1. ON APPEARING AND BEING

SOME PEOPLE SAY that appearing to be just is better than actually being just. And yet appearing to be good is not better than actually being good—is it?

Of course not.

Tell me, then, do men play their parts well because they appear to be good actors or because they actually are good?

Because they actually are.

And do men play the lyre well because they appear to be good lyre players or because they actually are good?

Because they actually are.

And, generally, do men do well in all other things because they appear to be good or because they actually are good?

Because they actually are.

Accordingly, living well is better than not living well. Being good, then, is better than appearing good, for the just man is good—not the man who appears just.

And what about the other things that human beings imagine goods?¹ Would you rather . . . possess them or appear to possess them? For instance, would you prefer to see or to appear to see? [4] To be healthy

or to appear so? To be strong or to appear so? To be well-off and have friends or to appear so? Again, regarding the goods of the soul, would you prefer to understand and be wise or to appear so? To be without pain and sorrow or to appear so? To be confident, to be without fear, to be courageous or to appear so? Yet when it comes to justice, would you rather appear to be just rather than actually being just?

Well, I would rather appear to be courageous than to actually be courageous.

But is not the courageous man also the one who is actually fearless and free from any pain and grief? Why do you wish to appear courageous?

Because people will honor me.

They will! But they will also position you as the right-hand man in battle. And they will call on you to engage in single combat. . . . Then what do you imagine will happen since you are actually a coward and in danger? . . .

And now, even if you speak the truth, you will not be believed. . . . See how much you will receive by appearing to be courageous and capable of endurance? But you pretend and hide the truth just like politicians do.²

2. ON SELF-SUFFICIENCY

[5] Just as a good actor must contend well for the victory with the mask and role that the playwright gives him, so also must a good man compete with the one that Fortune gives him. For Bion says that Fortune, like a playwright, sometimes gives the mask and role of a first-speaker and sometimes that of a second-speaker.³ And sometimes a king, and sometimes a wandering beggar. So, when you are a second-speaker, do not wish for the mask and role of a first-speaker. [6] Otherwise, you will do something unsuitable.

[6] *Bion says that we may rule or be ruled well; lead many or only one; be well-off and give freely, or poor and receive things boldly. We may make good use of many things or just a few. The key is moderation and a lack of vanity.*

[7] And Poverty would say to the man who brought a charge against her, “Why do you battle me? Do I rob you of anything good? I don’t, do I? Not of moderation. Not of justice. Not of courage—do I? Are you lacking anything necessary for life? Are not the roads full of vegetables and the springs full of water? Do I not furnish you with as many beds as the earth does? As well as leaves for bedding? Or is it not possible to delight in me? Or don’t you see old women eating cheap barley cakes and talking away? Or don’t I provide you with hunger—a season that costs nothing and is not effeminate? Or is it not the case that a hungry person most enjoys eating and least misses the seasoning?—and that the thirsty person most enjoys drinking and least awaits the drink that is not by his side? [8] Or is anyone hungry for a sweet cake and thirsty for wine from Chios? Instead, don’t human beings seek these things thanks to extravagance and lust? Or don’t I furnish you with housing that is a gift? In winter there are the baths, in summer the holy places. ‘For what kind of summer dwelling place do you have,’ Diogenes says, ‘such as I have in the Parthenon, sweet smelling and very costly?’”

If Poverty said these things to you, how would you respond? As for me, I suppose I would fall silent.

And yet we blame everything else more than we do our own irritability and unhappiness. We blame old age, poverty, chance encounters, the day, the season, the place. . . . [9] Many mad men lay the blame on circumstances rather than on themselves. Bion puts it this way: just as when you catch a wild animal, you may be bitten, so too if you take hold of a snake by the middle, you’ll be bitten, but if you do so by the throat, then nothing will happen. It’s the same with circumstances, he says. If you take them one way, you may experience distress. Yet if you take them in the same way as Socrates, you will not suffer. But if in any other way, then you will feel distress, not because of circumstances but because of your own character and your own false views.

[10] Accordingly, one should not attempt to change circumstances; rather, one should get ready for them as they are. Do this as sailors do. They don’t try to change the winds and the sea. Instead, they

ready themselves so that they are able to respond to these things. The wind is still, the sea is calm? Fine—they move along by means of the oars. The wind is behind the ship? They raise the sails. The wind is blowing against the ship? They lower them and let go.

And you? Take a look at your present circumstances and do what is necessary. You have become old—then do not seek the things of a young person. Again, you have become weak—then do not seek to take on the loads of a strong person. . . . [11] Again, you have become a person without means—then do not seek the way of life of a rich man. Rather, as you respond to the air temperature (you loosen your garments in fair weather and tighten them up in the cold), do so as well relative to the means of living (loosen up with abundance and tighten up with scarcity).

We are not able to be content with our present circumstances when we devote ourselves excessively to luxury and when we judge work a misfortune and death the worst of evils. If you become someone who looks down on pleasure, and someone who doesn't set himself against hard work, and someone who considers equal both good and bad reputation, and someone who doesn't fear death, then it will be possible for you to do whatever you wish without suffering distress. [12] Accordingly, as I say, I do not see how circumstances themselves involve anything troublesome—neither old age nor poverty nor if one is foreign.

[12-13] *We know that circumstances are not troublesome in themselves given the different human responses, positive and negative, to the same circumstances. Teles repeats the observation of Antisthenes found in Xenophon, that two brothers with the same wealth will respond to it in different ways—one distressed and one content. And he offers the example of Diogenes, who showed that a city—Athens in this case—is either very expensive or cheap depending on how one approaches living in it.*

[13] It is not the city that is cheap or very expensive; rather, if one lives one way it is very expensive, and

if one lives another way it is cheap. So it is with circumstances. If someone makes use of them in one way, they appear favorable and easy. But if in another way, unmanageable, annoying. . . .

[14] *How is poverty annoying or painful? Did not Crates and Diogenes easily carry on when they gave up arrogance and became beggars and developed the ability to make use of a cheap and simple way of life.*

[14-15] *We tend to respond to things—to old age, wealth, poverty—according to our character. We should willingly leave life when nature calls on us to leave, as though leaving a festal gathering or a drinking party.*

[16] As the good actor performs the prologue well, and the middle part well, and the conclusion well, so also does the good man live the first part of life well, and the middle part well, and the end well.

[16-20] *In the end, Teles admonishes, we should leave life aside just as we do an old cloak. This is how Socrates behaved when he was given the hemlock. He drank it boldly, cheerfully, and contentedly. Moreover, he put up with his difficult wife. She was no more of a bother to him than a wild goose might be—as was demonstrated by his dinner engagements with Alcibiades that were upset on one occasion by his wife and on another by a bird.*

3. ON EXILE

[21-25] *Exile is not bad if we think of it in terms of skills. One's flute playing, for example, or ability to act or give counsel is not any worse for being in a foreign land.*

Stilpon (of Megara)⁴ himself denies that exile robs us of any goods. What soul goods go missing? Courage, justice, or any other virtue? No. And bodily goods? Health, strength, sharp eyesight or hearing? No. What about externals? Again, no.

But some say that exiles don't rule. Nor do they have freedom of speech. Yes, but some are given power. Think of Lycinus, Hippomedon the Spartan, and the Athenians Chremonides and Glaucon.⁵ But exiles don't rule in their own homeland. Yes, but consider women and young boys and other young men. None of them rule, and yet they are

not annoyed. Not only that but both rulers and private individuals rule—it is just that the number of those they rule are different. Besides, there is use in both.

But you won't be able to enter your own homeland. Yes, but even now I can't go everywhere—into the Thesmo-phorion⁶ or the gymnasium (sometimes) or my own homeland. And women cannot go into the temple of Enyalios⁷ and other places.

[25] *Regardless, just as I am able to transfer from one ship to another and have a comparably good voyage, so I am able to move from one city to another and be equally happy. The only problem is dwelling with worthless men.*

But isn't it crazy to be exiled by inferiors? [26-32] Yes, but it is better than by noble or just men. And the blame belongs to those who vote for these men. And isn't it better to know what your homeland is really like?

But it seems a great thing to be in the land of one's birth and upbringing? Yes, but would you always stay in your house if it is falling down? Or in a small boat if a larger one were available?

But many reproach metics, those who come from another city. Yes, and yet you admire Cadmus and Heracles,⁸ who both settled in a city not their own. For the Spartans, it is not the citizenship that matters but whether or not one shares in their way of life.

But what if it is not possible to be buried in one's own land? Really, though, what difference is there? The road to Hades is the same regardless. And why should you even care if you're not buried. "The struggle over burial," says Bion, "has made many tragedies." The land of your fathers or a foreign land; buried or not; burned by fire or eaten by a dog or carrion-crows, above ground or by worms below—what's the difference or big deal? Or if you have your eyelids closed? Does someone close the eyelids of those who die at sea or in battle? Rather, this seems childish.

4A. A COMPARISON OF POVERTY AND WEALTH

[33] *It seems to me that the acquisition of wealth releases one from scarcity and need.*

And how is that? Don't you see that some people have acquired much—as appearances go, anyway—

and yet they don't use it because of stinginess and meanness.

[33-35] *Teles cites the examples of Priam, Laertes, and Tantalus.⁹ The point: though they long for things, many wealthy individuals do not experience their wealth thanks to stinginess and a certain failure to hope. Such a man may enjoy himself at another man's house but not his own.*

[35] *The ancients put it well: if a thing doesn't free a man from insatiate desire and stinginess and false pretension, then neither does it free him from need and scarcity. [36] But no amount of wealth frees a man from insatiate desire and stinginess and false pretension since it does not change his character or his habits. For instance, not even poverty will change the character of those who are moderate if they become poor after being rich. It seems to me someone could sooner say that the acquisition of wealth changes skin color, body size, or appearance than it does character. But so long as this man is insatiable, stingy, pretentious, and wretched, he will experience need and scarcity.*

[37-38] *To possess wealth without the ability to use it is the same as not having it. So it is with bankers and the daughters of Phorcys.¹⁰ Or to have food without the ability to taste it.*

[38] *Therefore, in response to the man who asked, "What will it mean for me to do philosophy?" Crates said, "You will easily be able to open your bag and freely give from it rather than, as now, writhing and irresolute and shaking as men do with disabled hands. . . . If you notice that your bag is empty, you will not suffer distress. . . . You will live satisfied with what you have, neither desiring what is absent nor [39] being displeased with whatever comes your way.*

[39-40] *Do not attempt to cure scarcity and need with wealth. Doing so, says Bion, is like trying to cure a man who has dropsy, or edema, with whole rivers of water. This will never relieve the thirst he experiences due to the*

dropsy. Similarly, giving a man wealth will never relieve him of his yearning as long as he's insatiable and wants to be popular and is superstitious. So, if you want to cure your son, send him not to gain power or wealth with the ruler Ptolemy or other rulers, but to study philosophy with Crates and the other Cynics. The school is important.

Even the Cynic Metrocles said that, when he studied at certain schools, he felt like he had to have the right shoes, clothes, servants, house, food, wine, and entertainment. [41] But when he switched over to Crates, there was none of these things. Rather, he became simple in his character and habits, satisfied with a tattered cloak and barley bread and vegetables, neither yearning after his earlier way of life nor vexed by the present. He learned to make due with a doubled-over cloak, previously used bathing oil, simple food, and public shelters. His own satisfaction meant he had no need for servants.

[42] Such is not the case for the pretentious, superstitious, popularity-seeking, and insatiable—even the one with much wealth. As long as this man remains the same, he is neither satisfied nor content. Rather, he will keep his desires and appetites for big things like this. As a result, he will experience need and scarcity.

[42-44] He'll never desire to be the age he is or who he is. When old, he wants to be young; when young, old. If a slave, he wants to be free. But even freedom won't be enough. He'll need a slave or two, a house, some land, and Athenian citizenship. And more. He'll want to rule, to be a king, to be Alexander himself! He'll want to become immortal! And if it were possible, Zeus himself! How is this not the same as being in a condition of perpetual need? What amount of wealth releases one from these desires? Kings never have enough. They'd be better off stepping down or living simply, frugally. As Crates said, the leather bag has great power—that of the lupine bean and anxiety about nothing. It is also a great thing to forget about the need to flatter and be flattered.

4B. A COMPARISON OF POVERTY AND WEALTH

[45] It is not accurate to say that poverty hinders one from doing philosophy whereas wealth is useful. For how many men do you suppose have been kept from the leisure necessary for philosophy thanks to an

abundance of wealth as compared to those lacking wealth?

[45-48] In contrast to wealthy men who are always busy thanks to all they have, poor beggars are much more likely to do philosophy. The truth is those in need are forced to practice endurance, whereas those who are rich don't have to. Such men have no interest in hard work or philosophical inquiry; rather, their wish is for every pleasure.

According to Zeno (of Citium),¹¹ Crates of Thebes told a shoemaker that he had more of an opportunity to practice philosophy than Themison, the Cyprian king, because the shoemaker could listen to a reading about philosophy while stitching shoes whereas the king could hardly do this despite his great riches. So it is that the simple man, and even the household slave, is better off than the free and rich man who has to worry about many things (as he does, for example, during a war).

As for honor, sometimes even the poor are honored more than the rich. Consider the very poor Athenian man Aristeides, who was given great financial responsibility since he was just, versus the very rich man Callias, whom the Athenians appointed his aid. Or think about the highly honored Spartan Lysander, who didn't even have enough to provide a dowry for his daughters. There are many more examples, of course, of those who are poor yet held in great honor.

5. ON PLEASURE NOT BEING THE GOAL OF LIFE

[49] If the happy life must be measured by the yardstick of excessive pleasure, then no one, says Crates, will be judged happy. Rather, if anyone wishes to weigh every stage in the whole of life, he will discover that there is a far greater quantity of pain and suffering.¹²

[49-51] For one, we're asleep half the time. As for the stages of life, we move through the stages of childhood dissatisfied with one thing or another and controlled and even beaten by various teachers. As we move on, we fear various men and have to engage in unpleasant duties, always busy, paying for one thing or another. The older we get, the younger we wish to be. The old man wants to be a youth

again, though he's treated more like a very young child.

[51] So then, I do not see how someone will live a happy life if he really must measure it by an excess of pleasure.

6. ON CIRCUMSTANCES

[52] Fortune, as though a playwright, makes up roles of every kind: a shipwrecked man, a beggar, an exile, a well-regarded man, and one disreputable. A good man should, therefore, contend well with whatever role that Fortune gives him. You have become shipwrecked—play the shipwreck well. From being well-off you have become poor—play the poor man well. . . . Be satisfied with any clothing, food, and service that happen to come along, as was Laertes . . . [53] For these things are enough for living suitably and healthily, unless someone wishes to live luxuriously. *But luxury is not necessarily beneficial.*

Regardless, we should make use of circumstances as sailors make use of the wind and other circumstances. It's the same when there's a military campaign—the man who has a horse contends as a horseman, the man with arms struggles as a hoplite, [54] and the man without armor fights as one bare of armor. And as when the enemy press upon you, hurling their weapons, you retreat to camp since you are fighting bare of armor, so when a war-like fight presses upon you at times—a lack of resources, a poor state of health—retreat to one meal per day, to self-service, to a tattered cloak, and, finally, to Hades.

7. ON FREEDOM FROM PASSION

[55] *People are not called "painless" or "fearless" in the same way that they are called "chestless" or "mindless." The latter merely have a bad chest or mind whereas the former are beyond pain and fear.*

[56] In this way, the happy man will also be free from

passion and trouble. But whoever is in distress and pain and fear—how could such a one be satisfied with life? And if not satisfied, how could such a one be happy? Or if pain touches him, how could fear and anguish and anger and pity not do so? For when these things exist, human beings feel pain and distress. *So too with feelings of suspicion, hate, jealousy, envy, and malicious exultation.*

To be free from passion is the very thing that a blessed man should be so that he does not feel grief over the death of a friend or a child [57] or even over the end his own life.

[57-61] *Courage meets death nobly and boldly—like Socrates, who was not vexed. Or like Spartan women, who are pleased when their sons, even though they die, do well in battle, whereas Athenian women merely want their sons to return safely. There was one Spartan woman who even pulled up her clothes when her son retreated from battle and asked, Where are you going? Do you want to return to where you came from? Spartan men are born to be useful and helpful, she said, not merely to survive. Nor should we stop living when a loved one has died. But we should go on. Why do we imagine ourselves unfortunate because someone has died but not fortunate because he has lived?*

[61] Yes, *you say*, but he will no longer exist.

Nor did he exist ten thousand years ago! Nor in Trojan times! Nor even in the time of your great-grandfathers! And yet you are not grieved by this; rather, you are displeased that he will not exist in times to come.

Since I have been robbed of the intimate friendship I had with him. . . .

[61-62] Yes, *but so it was when he was away from you in other circumstances—when serving in the military or as an ambassador, for instance.*

The point, Teles concludes, is to be a man—not a stupid man.

So ends Reading 10. See you in the **next reading**.

NOTES

- ¹ For the three kinds of goods (goods of the body, external goods, and internal goods or goods of the soul), see Teles' extended comments in his discourse *On Exile*.
- ² The ending seems abrupt, perhaps indicating a missing portion of the discourse.
- ³ The distinction is between a leading role and a supporting role.
- ⁴ Stilpon (Stilpo) of Megara was a fourth century BC Greek philosopher. He was part of the Megarian school, which was founded by Euclides (or Euclid) of Megara, a student of Socrates.
- ⁵ Lycinus was an exile from Italy, possibly Tarentum. Hippomedon was the son of the Spartan king Agesilaus. When his father was exiled in 241 BC, Hippomedon joined him in exile. The third century BC brothers Chremonides and Glaucon were the sons of the Athenian man Eteocles. Both were exiled from Athens after the Chremonidean War (c. 267-261), during which the Macedonians retook Athens.
- ⁶ The Thesmophorion was a fall festival for women in honor of Demeter. It was meant to secure an abundant crop. Edward O'Neil argues that the Thesmophorion mentioned here was that of Megara (see *Teles: The Cynic Teacher*).
- ⁷ Enyalios was the son of Ares, the Greek god of war.
- ⁸ Cadmus (Kadmos) was the founder of Thebes. The hero and demigod Heracles wandered about the Greek world (and beyond) and lived in many places.
- ⁹ Priam was the ruler of Troy during the Trojan War. Among many others, his sons were the heroes Paris (who ran off with Helen) and Hector. Laertes was the father of the hero Odysseus. For Tantalus, the king of Sipylus in Lydia, who betrayed the gods and thus suffered thirst and hunger in Hades, see Homer, *Odyssey* 11.582 ff.
- ¹⁰ The three Graiai, the daughters of Phorcys, shared one eye and one tooth between them. See Apollodorus, *Library* 2.4.2.
- ¹¹ Zeno of Citium (c. 334-262 BC) initially practiced philosophy, or a life of radical virtue, with the Cynic Crates of Thebes. He went on to found his own school, Stoicism, named after a covered colonnade (*stoa*) in Athens. Zeno taught that all of reality consists of matter and mind, or divine reason, which makes, orders, and governs that which is natural. To live well is to live naturally, which is to say rationally or virtuously.
- ¹² Depending on how we count and label them, the stages are the three of childhood (babyhood, what we might call an elementary schooler, and an advanced schooler); that of youthhood, the *ephēbos*, the age of one's youthful prime, from 18 up to 20; that of being twenty (*eikosi*) and the years following; that of being in full bloom or in the prime of life (*akmazō*), what we might call a full-bloomer, a full-on man or woman; and, finally, that of edging just past prime and moving toward old age (*gēras*), or an old man.

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave's mission?** Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"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)

The Classics Cave ▪ www.theclassicscave.com



THE CLASSICS CAVE
The earliest light for a brighter life
www.theclassicscave.com

