

The Cynics

Reading 11 – Diogenes’ Contest—from Dio Chrysostom’s *Oration 8*

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 11

Diogenes’ Contest—from Dio Chrysostom’s *Oration 8*

Reading 11

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 translation that follows is a modified version of J.W. Cohoon’s 1932 translation of Dio’s eighth oration, *Diogenes*, or *On Virtue* (8.1-36).

WHEN DIOGENES WAS exiled from his native Si-
nope, he came to Athens looking like a beggar.
He found there many companions of Socrates,
namely Plato, Aristippus, Aeschylus, Antisthenes,
and Euclides of Megara.¹ As for Xenophon, he was in
exile on account of his campaign with Cyrus.

Now it was not long before Diogenes looked
down on them all—all but for Antisthenes. He turned
to him not so much because he approved of the man
himself as much as he approved of the words he

spoke. He held these sayings to be the only true ones,
the ones most capable of benefiting mankind.

[2] When he contrasted the man Antisthenes with
his words, he sometimes made the criticism that the
man himself was much weaker. And so in reproach,
Diogenes would call him a trumpet because Antis-
thenes failed to hear himself no matter how much
noise he made.

Antisthenes tolerated this banter since he greatly
admired the man’s nature. [3] And so, in response to

being called a trumpet, he used to say that Diogenes was like a wasp, the buzz of whose wings is slight but whose sting is very sharp. Therefore, he took delight in the outspokenness of Diogenes, just as horsemen, when they get a horse that is high-strung and yet courageous and willing to work, do not object to the difficult temper of the animal, but dislike and have no use for one that is lazy and slow. [4] Sometimes, therefore, he used to stretch and excite Diogenes, while at other times he tried to relax him, letting him down, just as those who twist strings for musical instruments stretch the strings, taking care, however, not to break them.

After Antisthenes' death, Diogenes moved to Corinth since he considered none of the others worth associating with. And there he lived without renting a house or staying with a friend, but camping out in the Craneum.² [5] He did this because he observed that large numbers gathered at Corinth on account of the harbors and the prostitutes, and because the city was situated, as it were, at the crossroads of Greece. Accordingly, just as the good physician should go and offer his services where the sick are most numerous, so, he said, the man of wisdom should take up his abode where fools are found in great numbers in order to convict them of their folly and correct them.

[6] So, when the time for the Isthmian games³ arrived and everyone was in the Isthmus, he went down also. He did this because it was his custom at the great assemblies to make a study of the pursuits and ambitions of men, of their reasons for being abroad, and of the things on which they prided themselves. [7] He also gave his time to anyone who wished to talk with him, remarking that he was surprised by the fact that if he had claimed to be a physician for the teeth, everybody would flock to him who needed to have a tooth pulled. Yes, and by Zeus, if he had professed to treat the eyes, all who were suffering from sore eyes would present themselves. And similarly, if he had claimed to know of a medicine for diseases of the spleen or for gout or for a runny nose. [8] But when he declared that all who followed his treatment would be relieved of ignorance, wickedness, and licentiousness, not one man would listen to

him or seek to be cured by him—no matter how much richer he might become thereby. It was as though they were less inconvenienced by these spiritual complaints than by the other kind. Or as though it were worse for them to suffer from an enlarged spleen or a decayed tooth than from a soul that is foolish, ignorant, cowardly, rash, pleasure-loving, unfree, prone to anger, unkind, and wicked—in fact, utterly corrupt.

[9] That was the time, too, when one could hear crowds of miserable sophists⁴ around Poseidon's temple shouting and reviling one another, and their disciples, as they were called, fighting with one another. And there were many writers reading aloud their senseless works; many poets reciting their poems, while others applauded them; many jugglers showing their tricks; many fortune-tellers interpreting fortunes; countless lawyers perverting judgment; and not a few peddlers selling whatever they happened to have.

[10] Straightaway, a crowd naturally also gathered around Diogenes. There were no Corinthians, however, for they did not think it would be at all worth their time since they were accustomed to see him every day in Corinth. The crowd that gathered was composed of strangers. And each of these, after speaking or listening for a short time, went his way, fearing his refutation of their views.

[11] Just for that reason, Diogenes said he was like the Laconian dogs.⁵ There were plenty of men to pat them and play with them when they were shown at the general assemblies, but no one was willing to buy one because he did not know how to deal with them.

And when a certain man asked whether Diogenes had also come to see the contest, he responded, "No, but to take part."

Then when the man laughed and asked him who his competitors were, [12] he said with that customary glance of his, "The toughest there are and the hardest to beat—men whom no Greek can look straight in the eye. They are not competitors, however, who sprint or wrestle or jump, or those who box and throw the spear and hurl the discus, but those that correct and chasten a man."

[13] "Tell me, who are they?" the other asked.

"Hardships," he replied, "that are very severe and impossible to overcome for gluttonous and folly-stricken men who feast all day long and snore at night, but which yield to thin, spare men, whose waists are more pinched in than those of wasps. [14] Or do you think those big bellied men are good for anything?—those creatures whom sensible people ought to lead around, submit to the ceremony of purification, and then thrust beyond the borders. Or, rather, they should kill and quarter and use them as food just as people do with the flesh of large fish, you know, boiling it in brine and melting out the fat, the way our people at home in Pontus do with the lard of pigs when they want to anoint themselves. For I think these men have less soul than hogs have.

[15] "But the noble and excellent man believes that his hardships are his greatest opponents, and always wants to battle with them day and night—not to win a sprig of parsley, as so many goats might do, nor for a bit of wild olive, or of pine, but to win happiness and virtue throughout all the days of his life, and not merely when the Eleans make proclamation, or the Corinthians, or the Thessalian assembly. He is afraid of none of those opponents nor does he pray to draw another, [16] but he challenges them one after another, grappling with hunger and cold, withstanding thirst, and disclosing no weakness even though he must endure the lash or give his body to be cut or burned. Poverty, exile, loss of reputation, and the like have no terrors for him. No, he holds them as mere trifles, and while in their grip, the perfect man is often as sportive as boys with their dice and their colored balls.

[17] "Of course," he continued, "these antagonists do seem terrible and invincible to all who are bad men. But if you treat them with contempt and meet them boldly, you will find them cowardly and unable to master strong men. In this way, these opponents very much resemble dogs that pursue and bite people who run away from them, while some they seize and tear to pieces. On the other hand, they fear and slink away from men who face them and show them a fight, eventually wagging their tails when they come

to know them. [18] Most people, however, are in mortal terror of these opponents, always avoiding them by flight and never looking them in the face. It is no different from skillful boxers. They are not hit at all when they anticipate their opponents; rather, they often actually end up winning the match themselves. On the contrary, if they give ground through fear, they receive the heaviest blow. In the same way, if we accept our hardships in a spirit of contempt for them and approach them cheerfully, they avail very little against us. But if we hang back and give way, they appear altogether greater and stronger. [19] You can see that the same thing also applies to fire. If you attack it most vigorously, you put it out; but if you do so with caution and fear, you get badly burned, just as children do when in sport they sometimes try to put out a fire with their tongues. The adversaries of this class are a good deal like the all-fighters who engage in pankration, the ones who strike, choke, tear apart, and occasionally kill.

[20] "And yet there is another battle even more terrible, a struggle that is no small thing, but much greater and more dangerous than the former. I mean the fight against pleasure. Nor is it like that battle Homer speaks of when he says,

Fiercely, then, around the ships the struggle was renewed ...
They fought with common axes and with sharp battle-axes
and with mighty swords and two-edged spear.⁶

[21] No, it is no such battle—for pleasure uses no open force but deceives and casts a spell with baneful drugs, just as Homer says Circe drugged the comrades of Odysseus, and some straightaway became swine, some wolves, and some other kinds of beasts.⁷ Yes, such is this thing pleasure, which hatches no single plot but all kinds of plots, and aims to undo men through sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, [22] with food too, and drink and sexual lust, tempting alike those awake and those asleep. It is not possible to station guards and then lie down to sleep as in ordinary warfare. No, it is just then of all times that pleasure makes her attack [23]—at one time weakening and enslaving the soul by means of sleep itself, at

another sending mischievous and insidious dreams that bring her to mind.

"Now pain and hardship come by means of touch for the most part and continue in that way, [24] but pleasure assails a man through each and every sense that he has. And while he must face and grapple with pain and hardship, he should flee from pleasure as far as possible and only have unavoidable dealings with her. Here the strongest man is more or less the most excellent man, the one who is able to flee the greatest distance away from pleasure—for it is impossible to dwell with pleasure or even to linger with her for any length of time without being wholly conquered and enslaved. Therefore, when she gains dominion and overpowers the soul by means of her charms, her enchanted drugs, the rest of Circe's sorcery at once follows. [25] With a stroke of her wand, pleasure coolly drives her victim into a sort of pigsty and pens him up. And now, from that time on, the man goes on living as a pig or a wolf.

[26] "Pleasure also brings diverse and deadly vipers into being, and other crawling things that are always with her as they stand by her doors. And though yearning for pleasure and serving her, they nevertheless suffer countless hardships and suffering all in vain. For pleasure, after overpowering and taking possession of her victims, delivers them over to the most hateful and most difficult hardships.

[27] "This is the contest which I steadfastly maintain, and in which I risk my life against pleasure and hardship, yet not a single wretched human being turns his attention to me—but only to the jumpers and runners and dancers. Neither, however, did men really look at the struggles and hardships of Heracles or have any interest in them. Still, perhaps even then they were admiring certain athletes such as Zetes, Kalais, Peleus⁸ and other like runners and wrestlers. And some they would admire for their beauty and others for their wealth—as, for example, Jason⁹ and Cinyras.¹⁰ [28] About Pelops,¹¹ too, the story ran that he had an ivory shoulder, as if there were any use in a man having a golden or ivory hand or eyes of diamond or malachite. But men did not notice the kind of soul he possessed. As for Heracles, they pitied him while he toiled and

struggled in hardship and called him "the one who struggles most," which is to say the most wretched and miserable of human beings. In fact, this is why they gave the name "struggles" or "contests" to his toil and hardships, as though a toilsome life were wretched. But now that he is dead, they honor him beyond all others, name him a god, and declare Hebe¹² is his wife, and they all pray to him [29] so that they may not themselves be wretched—to him who in his hardships suffered wretchedness exceedingly great.

"They have the idea, too, that Eurystheus had him in his power and ordered him around¹³—Eurystheus, whom they considered a worthless fellow and to whom no one ever prayed or sacrificed. Heracles, however, roved all over Europe and Asia, [30] even though he did not look at all like any of these athletes. For where could he have advanced, had he carried so much flesh, or required so much meat or drink, or fell into such depths of sleep? No, he was alert and lean like a lion, with sharp eyes and sensitive ears. He didn't worry about when it was hot or cold, and he had no use for a bed, or a shawl, or a rug. He was clad in a dirty skin, with an air of hunger about him, as he helped the good and punished the bad.

[31] "And Diomedes the Thracian?¹⁴ Because he wore such fine clothing and sat on a throne drinking all day long in luxury, and treated his guests without justice as well as his own people, and kept a large stable of horses, Heracles struck him with his club and smashed him as if he had been an old wine-jar. Then there was Geryones,¹⁵ who had many cattle and was the richest of all lords in the west, where the sun sets, and the most arrogant. Heracles killed him along with his brothers, and he drove his cattle away.

[32] "And when he found Busiris¹⁶ very diligently training, eating all day long, and exceedingly proud of his wrestling, Heracles burst him open like an over-filled sack by dashing him to the ground. He loosened the girdle of the Amazon,¹⁷ who flirted with him and thought to master him by means of her beauty. But after having sex with her, he made her understand that he could never be overcome by beauty and would never tarry far away from his own possessions for the sake of a woman.

[33] “And Prometheus,¹⁸ whom I take to have been a sort of sophist, he found being destroyed by popular opinion since his liver swelled and grew whenever he was praised and shriveled up when he was censured. So Heracles took pity on him, frightened off the smoke-like eagle, and thus relieved him of his vanity and inordinate ambition. And straightway he disappeared after making him whole.

“Now in all those exploits he was not doing a favor to Eurystheus at all. [34] As for the golden apples that he got and brought back—I mean those of the Hesperides—he gave them to him since he had no use for them himself. He explained that apples of gold are not useful to men, nor were they to the Hesperides.¹⁹

“Then, at the very end, when he was becoming slower and weaker, he—from fear that he would not be able to live as before, I suppose, and also because he was attacked by some disease—he made the best

provision that was humanly possible for himself. He stacked a pyre of the driest wood in the courtyard and showed very little concern for the fiery heat.

[35] “But before that, to avoid creating the opinion that he did only impressive and mighty deeds, he went and cleaned out the dung in the Augean stables, that immense accumulation of many years.²⁰ For he thought that he should fight stubbornly and war against opinion as much as against wild beasts and wicked men.”

[36] While Diogenes spoke in this manner, many stood around and listened to his words with great pleasure. Then—possibly with this thought of Heracles in his mind—he stopped speaking and, squatting on the ground, he performed an inglorious act. Seeing this, the crowd straightway scorned him and called him crazy.

And again the sophists²¹ raised their din—like frogs in a pond that do not see a water-snake.

So ends Reading 11. See you in the **next reading**.

NOTES

¹ Plato, the philosopher; Aristippus, the founder of the Cyrenaic school of philosophy; Aeschylus, in this case, was not the playwright, but a philosopher, a student of Socrates; Antisthenes, the Cynic philosopher; Euclides, the founder of the Megarian school of philosophy.

² The Craneum was a grove of cypress trees just outside Corinth, as Diogenes Laertius puts it, “at the gates.”

³ The Isthmian games were held at Corinth every two years in honor of the god Poseidon.

⁴ The sophists were Presocratic philosophers and itinerant teachers from all over the Greek world who offered instruction for pay.

⁵ Laconian or Spartan dogs were powerful hunting dogs.

⁶ Homer, *Iliad* 15.696, 711.

⁷ For Circe and Odysseus' men, see Homer, *Odyssey* 10.210 ff.

⁸ Zetes, Kalais, and Peleus were Argonauts, men who took part in Jason's expedition on the Argo to find the Golden Fleece. Peleus was Achilles' father.

⁹ Jason was the leader of the Argonautic expedition to find the Golden Fleece.

¹⁰ Cinyras was traditionally identified as a son of Apollo and the first king of Cyprus.

¹¹ Pelops was the son of Tantalus, who cooked and served his son to the gods. When the gods restored Pelops to life, they gave him an ivory shoulder.

¹² The daughter of Zeus and Hera, the goddess Hebe is the personification of youth (*hēbē*).

¹³ Eurystheus was the king of Mycenae, who assigned the twelve labors to Heracles. Dio mentions a number of the labors in what follows.

¹⁴ Diomedes the Thracian possessed four wild mares that fed on human flesh. They were captured by Heracles as one of his twelve labours.

¹⁵ Geryones was a three-headed monster. He was a king in the far west.

¹⁶ Busiris was a king of Egypt. According to legend, he sacrificed every stranger who visited his country.

¹⁷ The Amazon was Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons.

¹⁸ For Prometheus, who attempted to trick Zeus (regarding the portions of the sacrifice) and stole fire for human beings, and whom was punished by Zeus, see Hesiod, *Theogony* 521-561, and *Works and Days* 47-89.

¹⁹ The Hesperides were the guardians of the golden apples that Heracles had to retrieve as one of his labors.

²⁰ Augeas (Augias) had a herd of cattle whose stalls were left uncleaned for decades. Heracles cleaned them out in one day as one of his labors.

²¹ For the sophists, see the note above.

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

