

The Cynics

Reading 4 – Diogenes – Life & Accomplishments

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"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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Reading 4

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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 21, or [21], is 6.21.

This reading comes from the Cave's

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

Diogenes

Life & Accomplishments

Diogenes Laertius writes:

DIOGENES OF SINOPE was the son of Hicesias, who was a banker and money-changer.

CONTROVERSY AND EXILE FROM SINOPE

Diocles¹ relates that Diogenes went into exile because his father was entrusted with the public money of the state and subsequently debased the coinage. But in

his book on Diogenes, Eubulides² says that Diogenes himself did this and was forced to leave his home along with his father. Moreover, Diogenes himself actually confesses in his *Pordalus* that he debased the coinage.

Others say that Diogenes had been appointed to supervise the mint artisans, who persuaded him to debase the coinage. In order to learn whether or not he should do what he was urged to do, he went to Delphi³ or to the Delian oracle in his own land. When

the god gave him permission to alter the “political currency,” Diogenes did not exactly understand what this meant—that he could alter the political customs. Instead, he adulterated the smaller coins. When his act was discovered, some say that Diogenes was exiled, while others say that he voluntarily fled the city in fear.

[21] Some say that Diogenes himself corrupted the money when he took over the coinage operation from his father. As a result, his father was imprisoned and died. Meanwhile, Diogenes fled the city and came to Delphi, hoping not to learn whether he should debase the coinage but what he should do to acquire the greatest reputation—and that’s when he received the oracle.

TURN TO PHILOSOPHY AND A SIMPLE LIFE

When Diogenes came to Athens, he approached Antisthenes. The latter sent him away since he did not accept students. Still, he wore Antisthenes down by his sheer persistence.

One day, when Antisthenes raised his staff against him, the student offered his head to him and said, “Strike it!—you will find no wood hard enough to keep me away from you as long as I think you have something to say.”

From that moment on, Diogenes was Antisthenes’ student. And being an exile, he set out to live a simple and frugal life.

[22] Theophrastus⁴ declares in his work the *Megarian* that it was by watching a mouse—how it didn’t long for a marriage bed, and how it didn’t care about the dark, and how it didn’t long for things that have a reputation for causing pleasure—that Diogenes discovered the means of adapting himself to circumstances.

Some say that Diogenes was the first to fold over his cloak. This was necessary because he slept in it. He carried a leather bag that held his food. He used any place for any purpose—eating, sleeping, and talking with others. And pointing at the colonnade of Zeus and the building that housed the sacred processional vessels, he would say that the people of Athens had furnished him with places to live.

[23] Diogenes did not use a staff until he was sick and weak. After he recovered, however, he carried the staff everywhere. He didn’t carry it in the city, though. He only had it when he was out walking along a road with his leather bag. That’s what Olympiodorus, a former magistrate in Athens, says, as well as Polyeuctus, the orator, and Lysanias, the son of Aeschrio.

Diogenes wrote a letter to someone asking him to provide a small house for him. He himself explains in his letters that, when the man delayed, he took for his abode a large wine-jar in the Temple of Cybele.

In summertime, Diogenes used to roll in his wine-jar house over hot sand. And in wintertime, he used to hug statues of men covered with snow. He practiced endurance in every way.

DIOGENES ENSLAVED

[74] When Diogenes was sold as a slave, he endured it most nobly. He was captured by pirates under the command of Scirpalus when on a voyage to Aegina. They carried him off to Crete and put him up for sale. When the herald asked him what he knew how to do, he said, “I know how to rule men.” Having said this, Diogenes pointed to a certain Corinthian man, one whose garment had a fine purple border, a man named Xenaiades . . . , and he said, “Sell me to this man—he needs a master.”

So it was that Xenaiades came to buy him. He then took him to Corinth and set him over his own children and entrusted his whole household to him. Diogenes managed his property in such a manner that Xenaiades used to go around saying, “A good man possessed by a god has come into my house.”

[75] In his work *On Pedagogues*, Cleomenes⁵ says that the friends of Diogenes wanted to ransom him. But he told them that they were silly. “Lions are not the slaves of those who feed them,” he said. “Rather, those who feed them are enslaved to the lions. Slaves fear men, whereas men fear wild animals.”

And again, [29] in his *Sale of Diogenes*, Menippus⁶ tells us how Diogenes was asked what he could do when he was captured and put up for sale. In reply

he said, “I govern men.” Consequently, the man said to the crier, “Announce this man—he’s good if someone wants to buy a master for himself.” When he was prevented from sitting down, he said, “It makes no difference—for fish are sold in whatever position they are.”

[30] Diogenes marveled that before we buy a pot or a dish we test it to see whether it rings true, but if it is a man, we are content merely to look at him.

When Xeniades purchased him, Diogenes said to him, “You must obey me even though I am a slave. For if a physician or a helmsman were slaves, they would be obeyed.”

And again, [36] When Xeniades purchased him, Diogenes said to him, “Come, do what you are ordered to do.” And when Xeniades quoted the line, “Tributary streams flow backwards, up and away from rivers,” Diogenes asked him, “If you had been sick and had purchased a physician, would have you then, instead of obeying him, said, ‘Tributary streams flow backwards, up and away from rivers.’”

DIOGENES THE PEDAGOGUE AND TEACHER

[30] In his book *The Sale of Diogenes*, Eubulus tells us that Diogenes trained the sons of Xeniades in the following manner. After their other studies, he taught them to ride, to shoot with the bow, to sling stones, and to hurl javelins. Later, when in the wrestling school, he would not allow the physical trainer to train them like athletes, but only enough to keep them looking healthy and to train them in good habits.

[31] The boys used to memorize many passages from poets and prose writers and from the writings of Diogenes himself. And he would make them practice various short cuts and approaches to make these passages easier to remember.

Diogenes used to teach the boys in his care to supply their own needs, and to be content with simple food and water to drink. He further accustomed them to cutting their hair close to the skin, and to shun fashionable adornments, and to go out with fewer clothes on and no shoes, and to walk along the way

silently and without looking around. He also used to take them out hunting with the dogs.

As for the boys, they had a great regard for Diogenes and always paid attention to him, speaking fondly of him to their parents.

[75] It is true that Diogenes had an amazing gift of persuasion. He could easily conquer anyone with words. It is said that a certain man from Aegina named Onesicritus sent Androstenes, one of his two sons, to Athens. And when he listened to Diogenes, he stayed there. Eventually, the father sent his older son, Philiscus, the one I’ve already mentioned, to Athens in order to search for Androstenes.⁷ But he was kept there in the same way. [76] Finally, when the father himself arrived, he was equally attracted to the pursuit of philosophy, just as his sons were. And so he joined his sons—so magical was the charm in Diogenes’ words.

Among those who listened to him, there was Phocion, surnamed the Honest, and Stilpon the Megarian,⁸ and many other men involved in public life.

DEATH AND BURIAL

[31] The same Eubulus relates that Diogenes grew old in the house of Xeniades. And that when he died, he was buried by his sons. And that while he was still living with him, Xeniades once asked him how he wished to be buried. To this query he replied, “On my face.” [32] When he asked why, he said, “Because in a little while everything will be turned upside down.” He said this because the Macedonians were already attaining power. From a low position, they had risen high.

[76] Diogenes is said to have been nearly ninety years old when he died. Regarding his death there are several different accounts:

One is that he was seized with colic after eating raw octopus. And so he died.

Another is that he died voluntarily by holding his breath. This account was followed by Cercidas of Megalopolis,⁹ or of Crete, who, in his meliambics writes:

No more is the man who was from Sinope—the famous one

who carried a staff, doubled over his cloak, and lived in the open air. [77] But pressing his lips against his teeth and holding his breath, he departed. He was rightly called Diogenes, the offspring of Zeus, and the heaven-dwelling dog.

Another version is that, while Diogenes was trying to divide an octopus among the dogs, he was so severely bitten through the tendon of his foot that it caused his death.

His friends, however, according to Antisthenes in his *Successions of Philosophers*, speculated that it was due to the retention of his breath. At the time, he happened to be living in the Craneum, the gymnasium at the gates of Corinth.¹⁰ When his friends came to him, as was their habit, and found him all wrapped up, they guessed he was sleeping, even though they knew he was not in the habit of giving himself over to drowsiness and sleep. Thereafter, they drew aside his cloak and found that he was dead. They supposed that he had done this on purpose in order escape from the rest of his life.

[78] And so a quarrel arose among his friends as to who should bury Diogenes. They even came to blows over it! Nevertheless, when their fathers and other men of influence arrived, he was buried under their direction beside the gate that leads into the Isthmus. They set up a pillar over his grave, with a dog in Parian marble topping it.¹¹

Later on, his fellow citizens honored him with bronze statues, on which the following was inscribed:

Time makes even bronze grow old. But your glory, Diogenes, will endure through every age. You alone revealed to mortal men the teaching that self-sufficient living is a way of life that is not burdensome.

[79] I too have written him an epigram in the

proceleusmatic meter:

- A. Diogenes, come tell me what fate took you to Hades.
- B. It was the bite of a wild dog.

But some say that when he was dying, Diogenes left instructions that they should throw him out unburied so that every wild animal might feed on him. Or they should toss him into a ditch and sprinkle a little dust over it. According to others, however, his instructions were that they should throw him into the Ilissus so that he might be useful to his brothers.

Demetrius,¹² in his work *On Men of the Same Name*, asserts that Diogenes died in Corinth on the same day that Alexander died in Babylon. He was already an old man by the time of the 113th Olympiad.

WRITINGS

[80] The following books are attributed to Diogenes.

Dialogues: the *Cephalion*; the *Ichthyas*; the *Jackdaw*; the *Leopard*, the *Athenian People*; the *Republic*; the *Art of Ethics*; *On Wealth*; the *Love Matters*; the *Theodorus*; the *Hypsias*; the *Aristarchus*; *On Death*; the *Letters*.

Seven tragedies: the *Helen*; the *Thyestes*; the *Heraclides*; the *Achilles*; the *Medea*; the *Chrysippus*; the *Oedipus*.

Sosicrates,¹³ in the first book of his *Philosophers' Successors*, and Satyrus, in the fourth book of his *Lives*, allege that Diogenes left nothing in writing. Satyrus declares that the tragedies are by Philiscus, his friend from Aegina. Sotion,¹⁴ in his seventh book, declares that the following alone are the genuine works of Diogenes: *On Virtue*; *On the Good*; the *Love Matters*; the *Beggar*; the *Tolmaeus*; the *Leopard*; the *Casandrus*; the *Cephalion*; the *Philiscus*; the *Aristarchus*; the *Sisyphus*; the *Ganymede*; the *Anecdotes and Sayings*; and the *Letters*.

So ends Reading 4. See you in the **next reading**.

NOTES

¹ 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.

² Some have identified this Eubulides with Eubulides of Miletus, who was a fourth century BC student of Euclides (also Euclid) of Megara. That said, aside from the information that Diogenes Laertius provides, that this Eubulides wrote a life of Diogenes of Sinope, we know nothing with any certainty.

³ That is, to the Greek Oracle of Delphi, or the Temple of Apollo, where the god Apollo offered responses to visitors' queries.

⁴ Theophrastus of Eresos was a fourth and early third century BC philosopher, researcher, and writer. He was Aristotle's successor as the head of the Peripatetic school. Diogenes Laertius (*Lives* 5.43) reports that he wrote a compendium of the writings of Diogenes.

⁵ Cleomenes was a fourth and third century BC Cynic philosopher. He was the student of Crates of Thebes.

⁶ Menippus was a third century BC Cynic who wrote satires.

⁷ For more on Onesicritus and Philiscus, see Chapter 6 in this volume or Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.84.

⁸ Stilpon (Stilpo) of Megara was a fourth century BC Greek philosopher. He was part of the Megarian school, which was founded by Euclides (also Euclid) of Megara, a student of Socrates.

⁹ Cercidas of Megalopolis was a third century BC Greek poet, statesman, and lawgiver.

¹⁰ The Craneum was a grove of cypress trees just outside Corinth. It was, as Diogenes Laertius puts it, "at the gates."

¹¹ "Parian marble" was a very fine white marble that was quarried on the Greek island of Paros.

¹² Demetrius of Magnesia was a first century BC biographer.

¹³ Sosicrates was a second century BC writer who concentrated on the various schools of philosophy, their founders, and the founders' successors.

¹⁴ Sotion of Alexandria was a third and second century BC Peripatetic, who wrote about the succession of philosophers in each school of philosophy.

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