

Diogenes of Sinope

by Ben Best

I have long been inspired by the apocryphal story that "Diogenes of Sinope" went about ancient Greece vainly searching for an honest man. But I have no interest in being his apologist. Since there is no authenticated historical documentation about him I will relate some of the tradition about his life more from the point of view of intrinsic interest than from concern for historical accuracy. A major source of information is the third century (AD) Roman doxographer Laetius Diogenes, from whom much that follows is taken.

"Cynicism" of ancient Greece and Rome derives its name from the Greek word for "Dog". Aristotle refers to Diogenes as "The Dog" and Diogenes seems to have accepted the nickname. Cynicism was not a "school of philosophy", but rather an "erratic succession of individuals" which can be said to have begun with the philosopher Antisthenes. Antisthenes, an intimate and admirer of Socrates, disclaimed refined [philosophy](#) believing that the plain man could know all there is to know. Antisthenes was probably more consciously philosophical though less clever than his pupil Diogenes. Antisthenes emphasized moral self-mastery and is said to have rejected government, property, marriage and religion. But while property was regarded as an encumbrance by Antisthenes, Diogenes was not above stealing, claiming "all things are the property of the wise".

The objective of Cynicism was self-sufficiency ("autarkeia") and the cynic virtues were the qualities through which freedom was attained. The most important virtue was callousness or apathy, which had to be attained through training. Another virtue was ruggedness or endurance. The lower animals were to be emulated insofar as they were independent of clothing, shelter and the artificial preparation of food. Cynics sought to disregard laws, customs, conventions, public opinion, reputation, honor and dishonor. The Greek satirist Lucian represents a Cynic as saying: "Scruple not to perform the deeds of darkness in broad daylight. Select your love adventures with a view to public entertainment."

Diogenes was born in Sinope, an Ionian colony on the Black Sea. His father was responsible for the minting of coins and when Diogenes took to adulterating the coins with base metals he was banished from the city. He went to Athens with his slave Manes. Soon after, Manes fled. When Diogenes was advised to chase his runaway slave he replied, "It would be absurd if Manes can live without Diogenes, but Diogenes cannot get on without Manes".

In Athens Diogenes sought Antisthenes as his mentor. Antisthenes ordered him away and eventually beat him with his staff. Diogenes is quoted as saying, "Strike, for you will find no wood hard enough to keep me away from you, so long as I think you've something to say." The persistence of Diogenes broke the resistance of Antisthenes.

The record of explicit philosophy by Diogenes is meagre. He observed that if the flute-player or athlete were to devote their efforts towards training their mind or moral conduct the results would not be unprofitable. He also noted that just as those who are accustomed to a life of pleasure feel disgust when they experience the opposite, those habituated to a lack of pleasure seem to derive more pleasure from despising pleasure. He used to call the demagogues the lackeys of the people. He said bad men obey their lusts as servants obey their masters. He called love the business of the idle and said lovers derive their pleasure from their misfortune.

Diogenes did little philosophizing, but sought to live an exemplary life of autonomy. He lived in a tub and is said to have taken enormous pleasure in all that he did. He said Plato's lectures were a waste of time. Plato had defined Man as a "featherless biped". Diogenes plucked a fowl and brought it into the lecture room with the words "Here is Plato's man." In consequence of which there was added to the definition, "having broad nails".

Insofar as Diogenes was known as "The Dog" throughout Athens, at a feast certain people kept throwing all the bones to him as they would to a dog. He played a dog's trick and urinated on them. It is said that Diogenes trampled upon Plato's carpets with the words "I trample upon the pride of Plato", who retorted, "Yes, Diogenes, with pride of another sort."

Being asked whether death was an evil thing, he replied, "How can it be evil, when in its presence we are not aware of it?" When someone declared that life is an evil, he said, "Not life itself, but living ill." To one who protested that he was ill adapted for the study of philosophy, he said, "Why then do you live, if you do not care to live well?" Seeing a youth dressing with elaborate care, he said, "If it's for men, you're a fool; if for women, a knave." Being asked what creature's bite is the worst, he said, "Of those that are wild, a sycophant's; of those that

are tame, a flatterer's".

Having been invited to dinner, he declared that he wouldn't go -- for the last time he went, his host had not expressed a proper gratitude. Someone took him into a magnificent house and warned him not to expectorate, whereupon having cleared his throat he discharged the phlegm into the man's face, being unable, he said, to find a meaner receptable.

Plato saw him washing lettuces, came up to him and quietly said to him, "Had you paid court to Dionysius you wouldn't now be washing lettuces." Diogenes with equal calmness answered, "If you had washed lettuces, you wouldn't have paid court to Dionysius."

One day he shouted out for men, and when people collected, hit out at them with his stick, saying, "It was men I called for, not scoundrels." Dio Chrysostom described Diogenes as terminating a discourse by squatting down and evacuating his bowels in the presence of his hearers. It is also said that he had no qualms about masturbating or performing other sexual acts in public.

Being asked why people give to beggars, but not to philosophers, he said, "Because they think they may one day be lame or blind, but never expect that they will turn to philosophy." He was asking alms of a bad-tempered man, who said, "Yes, if you can persuade me." "If I could have persuaded you," said Diogenes, "I would have persuaded you to hang yourself."

On a voyage to Aegina he was captured by pirates, conveyed to Crete and exposed for sale as a slave. When he was asked what he could do he replied, "Govern men." And he told the crier to give notice in case anybody wanted to purchase a master for himself. To Xenaiades who purchased him he said, "You must obey me, although I am a slave; for, if a physician or a navigator were in slavery, he would be obeyed." Xenaiades took him to Corinth, set him over his own children and entrusted his whole household to him.

Alexander once came and stood opposite him and said, "I am Alexander the great king." "And I," said he, "am Diogenes the Cynic." When someone was extolling the good fortune and splendor another had experienced in sharing the suite of Alexander, Diogenes said, "Not so, but rather ill fortune -- for he breakfasts and dines when Alexander thinks fit."

Alexander stood opposite him and asked, "Are you not afraid of me?" "Why, what are you," said Diogenes, "a good thing or a bad?" Alexander replied, "A good thing" whereupon Diogenes said, "Who, then, is afraid of the good?" At another time Diogenes was sunning himself when Alexander stood over him and said, "Ask of me any boon you like." To which he replied, "Stand out of my light."

Alexander is reported to have said, "Had I not been Alexander, I should have liked to be Diogenes." As it turned out, both Diogenes and Alexander died on the same day in 323 B.C. Alexander was 33 and Diogenes was 90.

Insofar as Diogenes symbolizes a revolt against civilization I want little part of him. But I regard honesty as a paramount virtue. The distinction between the "artificiality" of civilized behaviour & integrity and that of affectation & pretence is a paradoxical one. [Diogenes](#) holds this issue before my gaze.

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