

One World & Diogenes

Diogenes ([Greek: Διογένης της Σινώπης](#)) "the [Cynic](#)", [Greek philosopher](#), was born in Sinope (in modern day Sinop, [Turkey](#)) about [412 BC](#) (according to other sources [399 BC](#)), and died in [323 BC](#) at [Corinth](#). Details of his life come in the form of anecdotes (*chreia*) from [Diogenes Laërtius](#), in his book *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.

One of the most important early anecdotes about Diogenes suggests that he was exiled from Sinope for "adulterating the coinage". In his new home, [Athens](#), Diogenes' mission became the metaphorical adulterating/debasing the "coinage" of custom. Custom, he alleged, was the false coin of human morality. Instead of being troubled by what is really evil, people make a big fuss over what is merely conventional misbehavior. This distinction between nature ([physis](#)) and custom ([nomos](#)) is a favorite theme of ancient Greek philosophy, and one that Plato takes up in [The Republic](#).

Diogenes is alleged to have gone to Athens with an attendant named Manes who abandoned him shortly thereafter. With characteristic humor, Diogenes dismissed this ill fortune, saying, "If Manes can live without Diogenes, why not Diogenes without Manes?" While it is unknown whether Diogenes either had a [slave](#) or later became one himself, Diogenes would be consistent in making fun of such a relation of extreme dependency. He would particularly find the master, who could do nothing for himself, contemptibly helpless.

Attracted by the [ascetic](#) teaching of [Antisthenes](#), a student of Socrates, Diogenes became his pupil, despite initial rebuffs, and rapidly surpassed his master both in reputation and in the austerity of his life. Unlike the other citizens of Athens, he avoided earthly pleasures. This attitude was grounded in a great disdain for what he perceived as the folly, pretense, vanity, social climbing, self-deception, and artificiality of much human conduct.

On a voyage to [Aegina](#), he was captured by [pirates](#) and sold as a [slave](#) in [Crete](#) to a [Corinthian](#) named Xenias. Being asked his trade, he replied that he knew no trade but that of governing men, and that he wished to be sold to a man who needed a master. As tutor to Xenias' two sons, he lived in Corinth for the rest of his life, which he devoted entirely to preaching the doctrines of virtuous self-control.

At the [Isthmian Games](#), he lectured to large audiences, who turned to him from his one-time teacher Antisthenes. It was probably at one of these festivals that he met [Alexander the Great](#). The story goes that

Alexander, thrilled to meet the famous philosopher (in his “tub”, a kind of dugout in which he took residence), asked if there was any favor he might do for him. Diogenes replied, "Could you move—you're standing in my light." Alexander still declared, "If I were not Alexander, then I should wish to be Diogenes." (In another account, Alexander found the philosopher rummaging through a pile of human bones. Diogenes explained, "I am searching for the bones of your father but cannot distinguish them from those of a slave.") To express such disrespect for the most powerful man of his age was quintessential Diogenes—he was a fearless iconoclast in a class of his own.

There are numerous contradictory accounts of Diogenes' death. He is alleged variously to have held his breath until he expired, to have become ill from eating raw octopus, and to have suffered an infected dog bite. When asked how he wished to be buried, he left instructions to be thrown outside the city wall so wild animals could feast on his body. When asked if he really wished this, he said, "Not at all, as long as you provide me with a stick to chase the creatures away!" At the end, Diogenes made fun of people's excessive concern with the "proper" treatment of the dead. The Corinthians erected to his memory a pillar on which rested a dog of [Parian marble](#), symbolizing Diogenes' curious identification with the dog (see following).

Background and influences

As noted, Diogenes of Sinope is said to have been a disciple of [Antisthenes](#). Son of a lower-class Athenian father and either a Thracian or Phrygian-slave mother, Antisthenes (c.445-365 B.C.) was the founder of what became known as the Cynic school of Greek philosophy. In one account, the name of his school was derived from the building in which he taught, the Cynosarges, for Cynic philosophy bears no relation to the modern meaning of cynicism in which human values or moral scruples are held in contempt. He was originally a disciple of Gorgias, the sophist, who came to Athens in 427 B.C. Later he became one of the most faithful pupils of Socrates, trampling five miles each day to the city in order to listen to his master's words. He was present when Socrates drank the cup of hemlock.

After the death of Socrates, his disciples opened schools with the intention of continuing the teaching of their master. But with the exception of Plato, who represents the Major School of Socrates, the others are said to have fallen short of fully grasping the meaning of the Socratic concept. Hence these, including the school of the Cynics, are called Minor Socratic Schools. Antisthenes taught that knowledge (cognition) could not pass beyond the data of the senses, and since every

sensation is individual, he concluded that only the individual is real. Moreover, as every individual has his own essence and no other, Antisthenes inferred that error is impossible and finally every definition is impossible. Antisthenes was opposed to Plato's doctrine of ideas and to Aristippus' philosophy of pleasure. He interpreted the teachings of Socrates as the doctrine of virtue which can be taught with disregard of feelings, independence of judgment, contempt for conventional opinions, and discrimination between social status, birth and wealth.

Beliefs held, concepts advocated

Along with [Antisthenes](#), [Crates of Thebes](#), and Zeno, Diogenes is considered one of the founders of [Cynicism](#).

While Cynicism originates in the philosophical schools of ancient Greece that claim a Socratic lineage, to call the Cynics a “school” though, immediately raises a difficulty for so unconventional and anti-theoretical a group. Their primary interests are ethical, but they conceive of ethics more as a way of living than as a doctrine in need of explication. As such, *askēsis*—a Greek word meaning a kind of training of the self or practice—is fundamental. The Cynics, as well as the [Stoics](#) who followed them, characterize the Cynic way of life as a “shortcut to virtue” (see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Book 6, Chapter 104 and Book 7, Chapter 122). Though they often suggest that they have discovered the quickest, and perhaps surest, path to the virtuous life, they recognize the difficulty of this route.

The colorfulness of the Cynic way of life presents certain problems. The triumph of the Cynic as a philosophical and literary character complicates discussions of the historical individuals, a complication further troubled by a lack of sources. The evidence regarding the Cynics is limited to apothegms, aphorisms, and ancient hearsay; none of the many Cynic texts have survived. The tradition records the tenets of Cynicism via their lives. It is through their practices, the selves and lives that they cultivated, that we come to know the particular Cynic *ēthos*.

The ideas of Diogenes, like those of most other Cynics, must be arrived at indirectly. No writings of Diogenes survived even though he is reported to have authored a number of books. Cynic ideas are inseparable from Cynic practice; therefore what we know about Diogenes is contained in anecdotes concerning his life and sayings attributed to him in a number of scattered classical sources. None of these sources is definitive and all contribute to a "tradition" that should not be confused with factual biography.

It is not known, for example, whether Diogenes made a virtue out of necessity or whether he really preferred poverty and homelessness. In any case, Diogenes did "make a case" for benefits of a reduced lifestyle. He apparently proved to the satisfaction of the Stoics who came after him that happiness has nothing whatever to do with a person's material circumstances. The Stoics developed this theme, but made it benign rather than contemptuously anti-social. [Epictetus](#), for example, preached the virtue of modesty and inoffensiveness, but maintained that misfortune is good for the development of strong character.

Diogenes maintained that all the artificial growths of society were incompatible with happiness and that morality implies a return to the simplicity of nature. So great was his austerity and simplicity that the [Stoics](#) would later claim him to be a wise man or *sophos*. In his words, "Man has complicated every simple gift of the gods."

Many anecdotes of Diogenes refer to his doglike behavior, and his praise of a dog's virtues. It is not known whether Diogenes was insulted with the epithet "doggish" and made a virtue of it, or whether he first took up the dog theme himself. The modern terms [cynic](#) and *cynical* may derive from the Greek word *kynikos*, the adjective form of *kyon*, meaning dog (the precise etymology of the words are not known).

Diogenes believed human beings live artificially and hypocritically and would do well to study the dog. Besides performing natural bodily functions in public without unease, a dog will eat anything, and make no fuss about where to sleep. Dogs live in the present without anxiety, and have no use for the pretensions of abstract philosophy. In addition to these virtues, dogs are thought to know instinctively who is friend and who is foe. Unlike human beings who either dupe others or are duped, dogs will give an honest bark at the truth.

Diogenes was a self-appointed "public scold" whose mission was to demonstrate to the ancient Greeks that civilization is regressive. He taught by living example that wisdom and happiness belong to the man who is independent of society. Diogenes scorned not only family and political social organization, but property rights and reputation.

The most shocking feature of his philosophy is his rejection of normal ideas about human decency. Performance artist, exhibitionist and philosopher, Diogenes is said to have eaten in the marketplace, peed on the man who insulted him, defecated in the [amphitheatre](#), and pointed at people with his [middle finger](#). Sympathizers considered him a devotee of reason and an exemplar of honesty. Detractors have said he was an obnoxious rag picker and an offensive churl.

Despite having apparently nothing but disdain for [Plato](#) and his abstract philosophy, Diogenes bears striking resemblance to the character of [Socrates](#). He shared Socrates' belief that he could function as "doctor" to men's souls and improve them morally, while at the same time holding contempt for their obtuseness ("a-tuphos"). When Plato gave Socrates's [definition of man](#) as "featherless bipeds" and was much praised for the definition, Diogenes plucked a [cock](#) and brought it into Plato's [Academy](#), saying, "This is Plato's man." After this incident, "with broad flat nails" was added to Plato's definition.

The stories told of Diogenes illustrate the logical consistency of his character. He inured himself to the vicissitudes of weather by living in a tub belonging to the temple of [Cybele](#). He destroyed the single wooden bowl he possessed on seeing a peasant boy drink from the hollow of his hands. When asked how to avoid the temptation to lust of the flesh, Diogenes began [masturbating](#). When rebuked for doing so, he replied, "If only I could soothe my hunger by rubbing my belly."

He used to stroll through the [Agora](#) at full daylight with a torch (or, as legend sometimes has it, a lantern). When asked what he was doing, he would answer, "I am just looking for an honest man." Diogenes looked for an honest man, and reputedly found nothing but rascals and scoundrels.

Behind such provocative conduct was an ethical theory. Since the full articulation of it has not survived, philosopher/scholars have attempted to infer it as follows: Virtue is not a means to attaining good, but is the good itself. As virtue is the only good, so vice is the sole evil. But in what does virtue consist? In autarchy, i.e., in the possession of one's own reason, that which tells us that pleasures, riches, and everything which is called the civilization of a people is vice, because it is evil to feel the need of them. The Cynic, hence, went apart from society to live as a primitive man with few things, and these few supplied by nature itself.

Between nature and society as we know it, with all the comforts of life, there is the same difference as between virtue and vice. To live according to nature understood thus -- such is the model of the Cynic's life. Diogenes of Sinope became its most famous (and notorious) exemplar. Clearly, Cynicism also has political implications, as a reaction of the poorer classes against the Athenian aristocracy; the reaction was made in the name of nature.

Diogenes and the roots of cosmopolitanism

The Cynics are not always given credit when it comes to the notion of cosmopolitanism, for the origin of this term is at times ascribed to Stoicism. Moreover, when it is attributed to Cynicism, it is often characterized as a negative tenet that gains content only once it is transplanted into Stoic doctrine. However, cosmopolitanism can be fully understood within its Cynic context if it is taken as more than an oxymoron or a pithy retort: “Asked where he came from, [Diogenes of Sinope] said, ‘I am a citizen of the world [*kosmopolitēs*]’” (Diogenes Laertius, Book 6, Chapter 63). In this last quote, Diogenes is responding to a question calling for him to state his origin with what seems to be a neologism. To be a *politēs* is to belong to a *polis*, to be a member of a specific society with all of the benefits and commitments such membership entails. By not responding with the expected “Sinope,” Diogenes is renouncing his duty to Sinopeans as well as his right to be aided by them. It is important to note that Diogenes does not say that he is *apolis*, that is, without a polis; he claims allegiance to the *kosmos*, or the universe.

The Cynics, then, cast the notion of citizenship in a new light. To the Greek male of the Classical and Hellenistic period, citizenship was of utmost value. The restrictions on citizenship made it a privilege and these exclusions are, to the Cynic, absurd. Under cosmopolitanism, the Cynic challenges the civic affiliation of the few by opening the privilege to all.

Finally, cosmopolitanism revises the traditional conception of the political duties of an individual. As such, the Cynic is freed to live according to nature and not according to the laws and conventions of the *polis*. The conventional *polis* is not just rejected but replaced. This has important ethical connections to the notion of living in accord with nature, and can likewise be seen as an important precursor to the Stoic understanding of *physis*, or nature, as identical to the *kosmos*, or universe.

Diogenes is the first person known to have said, "I am a citizen of the whole world". This was a radical assertion in a world where a man's identity was intimately tied to his citizenship in a particular city state. An exile and an outcast, a man who chose not to celebrate or even claim a social identity, Diogenes made a mark on his contemporaries. His story, however uncertain the details, continues to fascinate students of human nature, and provides cosmopolitans and global citizens with the first forebear in their lineage.

References

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