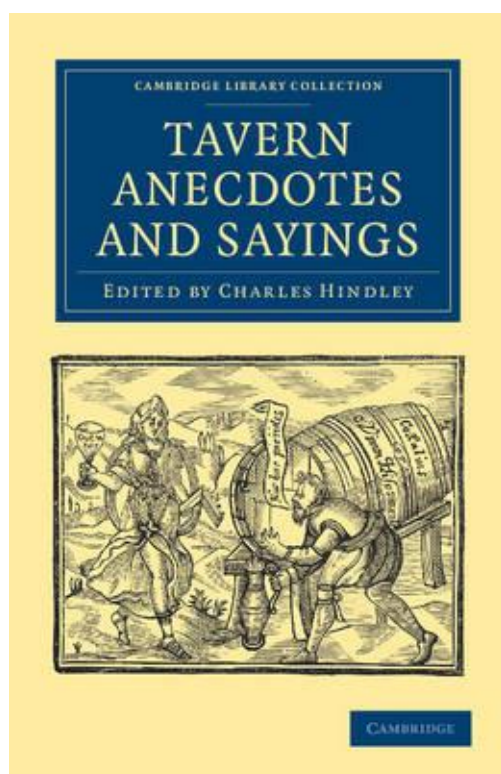


## Irfan Ajvazi

Diogenes's Sayings and Anecdotes: With Other Popular Moralists: An Introduction to Cynicism and Cynic philosophy

Tesla Academy of Sciences

---



Diogenes's Sayings and Anecdotes: With Other Popular Moralists: An Introduction to Cynicism and Cynic philosophy

Cynicism is a unique philosophy. You could even say that they took their principles a little too far, perhaps. Diogenes' core idea was that Man should live in accordance with nature, as simply as possible. He along with his students were missionaries of a sort, traveling city-to-city preaching about the life of simplicity. To Diogenes, material things like money and lavish accessories corrupted nature. Not only did he despise concrete things, but he also disapproved of social conventions. Like every philosopher in the Hellenistic period, Diogenes believed that virtue was the highest good. Virtue was the rejection of desires and the pursuit of goods earned by the individual, according to Diogenes. What he meant by goods earned by the individual was that things granted by other people and nature happen purely by chance. Diogenes said that everything we own should come from ourselves: confidence, happiness, et cetera.

Diogenes said that everything we own should come from ourselves: confidence, happiness, et cetera. Two of the key principles of Cynicism were freedom (*eleutheria*, ελευθερία) and free speech (*parrhesia*, παρρησία). To be a Cynic, you must be free from society's and life's constraints and you must also speak without fear. Desires of wealth and reputation were unnatural and made us less human, property and social classes dehumanized us, and conventional, man-made norms limited our freedom. We can even draw a connection between Diogenes and twentieth-century existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre when both figures speak of "authenticity." Sartre and Diogenes claimed most of us live inauthentic lives—lives not fully developed by ourselves, rather they are

formed after someone else. In this way, Diogenes is almost like an existentialist telling us to live our own life under the domain of nature.

Like every philosopher in the Hellenistic period, Diogenes believed that virtue was the highest good. Virtue was the rejection of desires and the pursuit of goods earned by the individual, according to Diogenes. What he meant by goods earned by the individual was that things granted by other people and nature happen purely by chance. Diogenes said that everything we own should come from ourselves: confidence, happiness, et cetera. Two of the key principles of Cynicism were freedom (*eleutheria*, ελευθερία) and free speech (*parrhesia*, παρρησία). To be a Cynic, you must be free from society's and life's constraints and you must also speak without fear.

Diogenes was made the butt of many satires and was criticized by later philosophers and public figures. Lucian of Samosata, a Roman satirist, portrayed Diogenes in his famous short story *Philosophers for Sale* as a scruffy and cranky old man wearing nothing but a cloak. Interestingly, Diogenes was the inspiration for the image of the stereotypical philosopher throughout history, as explained in my blog *What is a Philosopher?* Remember that the archetypal philosopher is a hoary, rough, and mysterious figure who contemplates life in a mere shaggy cloak. Another interesting aspect of this is that Diogenes technically led to the downfall of Greek philosophy: this stereotypical representation of the philosopher was easy to imitate, which meant that charlatans, or frauds (*goes*, γόης), could further ruin the reputation of philosophy.

Diogenes would most likely be found creating chaos in the market. He and his students Crates and Hipparchia, husband and wife, would flaunt their total freedom no matter where they were. The Cynics were the best at not caring what others thought. The Cynic trio would make love, relieve themselves, and perform other actions that should best be kept to one's self. Like any normal person, though he was far from normal, Diogenes ate and drank just like you and me. Diogenes preferred the mendicant life, and when he was not busy castigating people, he was begging; most of his food came from begging. His favorite meal was bread and water; hey, Epicurus had the same thing! One story says that after Diogenes saw a young child use his hands to drink water and use a piece of bread to eat his soup, Diogenes was beat, saying, "That child has beaten me in simplicity."

The similarities between Diogenes and Socrates are hard to ignore. Diogenes advocates a care for virtue and the state of one's soul, resists false piety and conventional attitudes toward reputation and value, and remains unflappable in perilous situations. Diogenes is also known for fearless truth-telling, improvisational responses as well as indelible performances, an embrace of poverty and so-called "shamelessness", and a tenacious ethical resilience. This leads some of his contemporaries to view him as a hyperbolic version of Socrates, or, as Plato would say, a "Socrates gone mad". He undoubtedly offers a fiercer version of ethics than Socrates, but, to tritely paraphrase Polonius, there is method in Diogenes' madness.

Diogenes' philosophical position is as a first and paradigmatic Cynic. The word in antiquity differs considerably from current usage; *κυνικός*, transliterated as *kunikos* or *kynikos*, simply means "dog-like". Though there are varying accounts of its transference this association, it adheres to the chosen life of unconventional philosophers known for their poverty, freedom, virtue, and fearless laughter. They had no formal school or locus, unlike Plato's Academy or Zeno's Stoa, practicing philosophy in public and leading lives that were exemplary of their philosophical commitments. According to the stories about Diogenes, he is preceded by Antisthenes, who may have been the first to be called "Cynic". Though Antisthenes was a close companion of Socrates and figures as a prominent interlocutor in Xenophon's Socratic dialogues, his influence is eclipsed by that of Diogenes.

Diogenes held that training the body simultaneously strengthened the mind and cultivated a suppleness necessary for virtue or *aretē*. He praises the skill that athletes and flute players acquire, but remarks that "if these men had shifted their attention to the training of the mind, their efforts would not have been useless and incomplete" (DL 6.70). In addition to adjusting his desires so that they conformed to nature, Diogenes also demonstrated that conventions were often foolish, rarely rational, and, worse still, carried the potential for moral corruption.

Religious hypocrisy and superstition are frequent targets of his wit and scorn. “One day, noticing the temple magistrates leading away a steward who had filched a votive bowl, he said ‘The big thieves are leading away the little one’” (DL 6.45). At the shrine of Asclepius, the god of healing, those praying for good health would sacrifice a cock (see, for instance, Socrates’ last words in Plato’s *Phaedo*). Diogenes, however, offers a gamecock, one described in the Greek as a “brawler”, so that when the worshippers would fall down to prostrate themselves, Diogenes’ rooster ran at and attacked them. The humour in these two instances reveals two of the ways in which Diogenes’ wit operates: in the first, it is a spontaneous response to the incongruity of magistrates punishing lesser infractions than their own; in the second, he challenges the practice of sacrificing roosters to Asclepius by letting loose a belligerent rooster on suppliants in a display more akin to performance art than improv.

Diogenes similarly ridicules athletic competitions, sophistry, business enterprises, travel, and marriage, saying with regard to the last item that no union should count as a marriage “but that of a man and a woman who have persuaded each other” (DL 6.72). Some of the more memorable accounts of Diogenes’ subversion of convention employ his own body as the location of the humour. He would argue that if it was not absurd to take breakfast, then it was not absurd to take it in the marketplace. This was not his only display in the agora: “When masturbating in the marketplace, he said, ‘If only one could relieve hunger by rubbing one’s belly’” (DL 6.46). Bodily desires are part of having a body, and standards regarding proper locations for their satisfaction are issued by custom, not nature. To accept convention as one’s master is to relinquish one’s freedom.

Freedom plays an absolutely central role in Diogenes’ life and moral philosophy and takes on three forms: *autarkeia*, freedom in the sense of self-sufficiency; *eleutheria*, meaning freedom or liberty, often understood as negative freedom or “freedom from”; and *parrhēsia*, or freedom of speech. Though they can and ought to be distinguished, these virtues intertwine and are on display most forcefully in Diogenes’ responses to politics and power.

Alexander the Great has the occasion to interact with Diogenes and each instance serves as an intensification of Diogenes’ freedom to be and speak as he sees fit. To set the scene, the most famous exchange between Diogenes and Alexander occurs at the Craenum, a hill in Corinth. Diogenes apparently ends up in Corinth when he is sold into slavery. “On a voyage to Aegina he was captured by pirates under Scirpalus’ command, transported to Crete, and put up for sale. And when the herald asked him what he was good at, he replied, “Ruling over men”. Pointing to an affluent Corinthian, the above mentioned Xeniadēs, he said, “Sell me to him; he needs a master” (DL 6.74). Diogenes inverts the function of slavery and Xeniadēs becomes his grateful “master”, putting Diogenes in charge of his sons and remarking that a kindly deity, or, more literally, a good *daimōn*, had entered his house.

Cynics withdrew from politics and the chase for wealth that characterizes many people’s lives. Like the Stoics, Cynics believed that too many desires cause problems, but they took it a step further. Cynics didn’t even see the point of having personal possessions, because we can’t keep them when we die, and they cause us stress when we try to get more of them or prevent ourselves from losing them. This anxiety prevents us from fully enjoying life.

This is how [Epictetus](#) explained the Cynic’s role:

“It is his duty then to be able to say with a loud voice... like blind people you are wandering up and down: you are going by another road, and have left the true road: you seek for prosperity and happiness where they are not, and if another shows you where they are, you do not believe him. Why do you seek it without?”

The word ‘without’ in this context means in external things, which is where most people seek happiness, as opposed to how a good Cynic or Stoic gets their happiness from within.

The solution of the Stoics for avoiding anxiety and excessive desire was to train one’s mind to perceive things in a more rational manner. Anxiety can be relieved by accepting that a negative outcome might happen, and that this is out of our control. [Marcus Aurelius](#) once said, “Today I escaped anxiety. Or no, I discarded it, because it was within me, in my own perceptions — not outside.”

Some of the most critical aspects of Stoicism can be summed up by a quote from Epictetus:

“Practice, therefore, to say frankly to every harsh appearance: ‘You are just an appearance, and not at all what you appear to be’. Next, examine it and test it by the measures you have, first and chiefly whether it concerns the things that are within our control or the things that are not within our

control. And if it concerns the things that are not within our control, be prepared to say: 'it is nothing to me'."

As you can see, the key to Stoic practice is the mind. There is no need to live in poverty to avoid the fear of losing money, because a Stoic can accept losing money, whereas most people would be distraught. [Stoicism](#) has the same to say about most good appearances as well, classifying them as "indifferents". If one can train their mind to not view wealth or status as particularly pleasant, there won't be the unbalanced striving towards these things. Thus, a skillful Stoic does not need to withdraw from political life or the business world because they will not fall into the traps that most people do, the traps which cause them to be stressed out and unhappy.

There was no overt recommendation to an ascetic lifestyle, but when [Zeno](#) claimed that the sole good in life is virtue, following his teachings ruled out the enjoyment of many luxuries, which are often gotten immorally or sought after so enthusiastically that they detract from virtue.

However, [Zeno](#) was his own philosopher, and did not continue the Cynic tradition of advising that one live in poverty to best agree with nature's will for us.

Seneca added:

There is this difference between ourselves and the other school: our ideal wise man feels his troubles, but overcomes them; their wise man does not even feel them.

Ultimately, Cynicism was an anti-society philosophy and was not one that everyone—or even a significant fraction of people—could follow if society was to properly function. In Cynic times, there was a problem with people dressing like Cynics and performing indecent acts, using the philosophy to disguise their malicious intentions. This is why Cynicism fell way to Stoicism as it is disruptive to society and not everyone can live the way Cynics do.

Cynicism is a philosophy for outsiders, whereas Stoicism can be used by anyone to live a more rational and virtuous life.

This explains the very different fates of Stoicism and Cynicism. Stoicism went on to be an influential Roman philosophy that was popular until 300 AD and is making a major resurgence in today's world. Cynicism was replaced by Stoicism for the most part and is now a philosophy that is rarely practiced by people who know of its origins. While occasional rebellion against society can be meaningful and defying social norms can be thought-provoking, liberating, and enjoyable, it falls short of the comprehensive operating system offered by Stoicism.

For Foucault there is a central, curious paradox in Cynicism. It is commonplace and scandalous, familiar and strange, ordinary and unacceptable. Established, traditional philosophers recognised themselves in it but also rejected it. Foucault uses the metaphor of a 'broken mirror' in which philosophers recognised what philosophy is but at same time offered a 'grimace', something ugly and violent (232), a series of breaking points.

With the Cynics parrhēsia is not just about frankness, telling the truth, it involves living that truth, displaying it. Cynicism constantly both urges and manifests the question: 'what can the form of life be such that it practices truth telling?'

Placing in a much wider context, Foucault suggests that the Cynicism offers the possibility of an other life (un vie autre), whereas Platonism poses questions regarding an other world (un monde autre). Platonism contemplates the mirror of the soul, the pure world of truth, whereas Cynicism leads to how life must be lived in the truth, aiming ultimately, through encouraging others to lead a true life, to shake up and the change the world itself, actually to make an other world.

Foucault then briefly looks at possible later manifestations of Cynicism which might be taken up in future research. He mentions forms of asceticism in the Christian monastic tradition, nineteenth century revolutionary politics and certain forms of modern art.

Foucault, M. (2008)[1984] *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France (1983/4)* trans. G Burchell. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

[i] Lecture 7 March 1984

Foucault returns to the history of Cynicism which he suggests is difficult to capture as it takes a range of forms. EG Contrasting portrayals of it at two extremes: marginal, ostentatious vagabond, insolent on one hand, and man of culture, simple life, eloquent on the other. There are also different attitudes to it, positive and negative. Its origins seem to go back into early antiquity, something at its core that is universal. On the other hand, wanders, on fringes of society. General view ends up that some aspects are seen as deplorable and should be rejected whilst other parts

are worth cherishing, preserving following. There is very little knowledge, theory, doctrine involved. It was popular and addressed widely to the public and not just an elite. Was it popular because simple or was it simple because it was popular?

Dio Chrysostom describes 3 categories of philosophers: those who remained silent as though public would not grasp it; those who taught a body of knowledge to pass on to a select group in schools; and the Cynics who went around openly seeking the most vulnerable to engage. But above all Cynicism was not about passing on knowledge; it was about moral and intellectual training in what was useful to be independent, to endure, to battle, an 'armature for existence' 205. Seen in Seneca – better to know a few simple precepts thoroughly.

A notion of two ways to virtue: (1) that which takes time, is easy, no great effort and achieve virtue through logos/discourse and (2) the short way which is difficult, full of obstacles, requiring silence, practice, exercise, endurance and destitution.

Rather than theory, put forward anecdotes, models, examples. Foucault describes it as a 'traditionality of existence' rather than a 'traditionality of doctrine'. Restoring memory v restoring moral strength/courage. Traditionally history of philosophy about doctrines rather than forms of life, styles of life.

To go back, what interests Foucault in the Cynics is how *parrhēsia* emerges in the life of a person, the speaking of truth emerges in the 'manifestation of existence', a testimony of truth, or truth in the form of life. The theme of the true life was important in ancient philosophy, in Christian spirituality and much later in political ethics. This is his on-going focus: subject/truth and the history of the relationship....

The Cynics take things to extreme and make traditional notions of the true life grimace- a 'carnavalesque continuity' of themes rather than a break with traditional philosophical values....

Traditional philosophers found a 'scandalous banality' in Cynicism.

Foucault tries to capture this by using term 'eclecticism with reverse effect'. It takes up a range of traditional features of philosophy of the time but not to draw a consensus rather to offer a 'shocking practice, something strange, hostile even war like.. The commonest features are drawn together to form a series of unacceptable breaking points for philosophy.

To go back to the leading theme of the whole series of lectures, courage of truth, he has described political bravery, Socratic irony, both involved risking one's life for telling the truth but here with the Cynics it is *not* just telling the truth, it's living it, displaying it. Foucault then argues that this question has been progressively marginalised, forgotten to extent disappeared today because:

- (1) Religion and spirituality and its institutions have taken up the question of the true life (confiscation of the problem of the true life)
- (2) Science and its institutions assert that scientific practice leads to the truth (invalidation of the problem of the true life).

So in Western thought this question has become increasingly 'worn out, eliminated'

So this is why Cynicism fascinates him – it is the point of departure of this great 'extermination of the problem'. 237.

So the Cynic life takes up four different principles of traditional philosophy but puts them in practice in an extreme form, takes them on literally to their limit of expression in life: (1) unconcealed life; (2) independent life, (3) straight life and (4) the sovereign life (master of itself). By taking them on fully and displaying them, these themes clashed with some of the basic values of Greek-Roman society.:

(1) unconcealed life – Plato commended in terms of true love, Seneca saw it enacted through the examination of a friend, in letters, Epictetus evoked the internal gaze of God. But for cynics IE Diogenes, this unconcealed life is dramatized in public, visible – but this clashed with conventional values of 'propriety' which traditional philosophy accepted, endorsed.

(2) independent, unalloyed life. Again traditional themes in say Plato but here taken to mean a life of poverty, of living the most wretched existence. But this clashed with deep-seated notions of the best and the crowd. It is not just a question (EG Seneca, a very wealthy man) of not being absorbed by wealth and preparing for life without such trappings but actually living a life of absolute poverty. It is not a virtual exercise; it is real. It is even more than living a humble life (EG Socrates), it is unlimited and ends up humiliated, dependent, ugly – which again clashes with values of beauty, posture etc. The same with begging, slavery and no care of reputation. These were unacceptable to Greeks and Romans and clashed with values of honour etc.

(3) straight life – about following laws, a certain logos, but Cynics followed what they saw as 'natural laws'. To conform to such laws means for example overturning ban on incest and cannibalism and generally giving a positive value to animalism – obvious clash..

21 March 1084

(4) Sovereign life is a life in possession of itself, belonging to oneself (Seneca) but this also open to relationship to others either in teacher-student mode or friendship mode. One must be useful to others a guide etc. \_ But again with cynics this is taken up but pushed to limits, accentuated, dramatized with the arrogant assertion that the Cynic is King. An aspect of Platonism in guidance to king's soul but here Cynic is the King and at the same time in relation to actual kings that sit on thrones, he is anti-king. He bursts their pretentions.

Cynicism is a battle against desires and passions but also against customs, conventions, and institutions. He does not simply pass on or encourage a beneficial sovereign life, independent, self-sufficient, based on care of self (Seneca) he manifest a wretched kingship, harsh tests, struggle with self and others.

It is a 'militant life' despite anachronism. A form of life that is important in the history of ethics: 'combatant-soldier who endures poverty, hardship, derision for the benefit of all, to shake up the world, to change it – militancy in and against the world.