



Diogenes Searching for an Honest Man, J. Jordaens, 1642

The Cynic

*If I were not Alexander,
I should wish to be Diogenes.*

Alexander the Great, *Plutarch's Lives*

WHEN THE FABULOUSLY RICH and powerful Alexander the Great visited Diogenes the Cynic, he found him casually sunbathing in the public forum. When he asked the destitute philosopher if there was anything he could do for him, Diogenes thought for a moment and then replied indifferently, “Yes, you could stand a little to the side. You’re blocking my sun.”

Diogenes of Sinope was the most famous of the ancient Greek philosophers in the school of philosophy loosely defined as Cynicism. The objective of the Cynics was the obtainment of personal freedom through frugality, humility, integrity, honesty, self-control and self-sufficiency—in many respects the very opposite of modern ideals.

As illustrated in the story about Alexander, the most valued virtue for the Cynics was impassive non-attachment, which they described as having ‘preferred indifferents.’ Cynics mocked authority, disregarded laws and social customs, and viewed the effort to build up one’s reputation, accumulate wealth, or seek the approval of others with contempt.

To a Cynic, the appropriate response to insult and ridicule was equanimity, or better still, humor and self-deprecation.

The word *cynic* derives from the Greek *kynikos*, or *dog-like*. Scorned as ‘Diogenes the Dog,’ Diogenes took the comparison to heart, pointing out that dogs were humble, independent, faithful, and uncomplaining—indeed, exercising a degree of freedom that humans might well envy.

Critics would sometimes taunt Diogenes, throwing him bones as if to a dog. He would respond by cheerfully urinating on them.

None of Diogene's extensive writings survive, and what little we know of him is derived from anecdotes and sayings—many apocryphal—attributed to him by others.

Born in 412 BC in a colony of Greece on the Black Sea, Diogenes was banished after he and his father were caught debasing coins. He eventually made his way to Athens, where he would frequent the marketplace, sleeping and eating wherever it pleased him and criticizing through his frugal lifestyle what he saw as a corrupt, immoral society.

One day, Diogenes happened across a child drinking water from his cupped hands. Immediately, Diogenes cast away his wooden bowl, exclaiming, "A child has beaten me in plainness of living."

Rather than preach or philosophize, the Zen-like Diogenes sought to live an exemplary life, grounded in simplicity and a disdain for human folly, pretence, and hypocrisy. "Humans complicate every simple gift of the gods," he would often remark.

Diogenes regarded high-minded learning and debate with suspicion, calling Plato's lectures a waste of time. (When Plato half-jokingly defined man as a 'featherless biped', Diogenes produced a plucked chicken and exclaimed, "Behold, Plato's man!")

Plato once described Diogenes as 'a Socrates gone mad,' but ironically, it was Socrates who was charged with the 'corruption of youth' and forced to commit suicide, while Diogenes—arguably much more guilty of the charge—was not taken as seriously and therefore was easily ignored.

An exile and outcast, Diogenes regarded himself as a citizen of the world, and is credited with the first use of the word 'cosmopolitan' (*cosmopolites*), a radical concept in a time when people were identified by their place of birth.

Legend has it that Diogenes wandered Greece in search of an 'authentic' man, a lamp held out before him in broad daylight. When people laughed at him as they saw him walking backward, he said to them: "I may walk this way a short distance beneath the portico, but you walk backward along the whole path of your existence."

Ironically, modern psychology has expropriated Diogene's name to describe a mental disorder known as 'Diogenes syndrome'—a disorder marked by obsessive hoarding, uncleanliness and self-neglect, dementia, and a general withdrawal from life and society. These malign symptoms hardly describe the man whose name they dishonor, nor the noble intent behind his purposeful, if eccentric, behavior.

While on a sea voyage around the year 350 BC, Diogenes was captured by pirates and sold into slavery, but was later set free to settle in Corinth, where the possibly apocryphal story about Alexander took place. Here he passed on his philosophy to Krates, who in turn taught it to Zeno, who fashioned it into the school known as Stoicism, one of the most enduring in all of Greek—and later Roman—philosophy. The Cynics would ultimately even influence Christianity, whose founder had much in common with Diogenes.

Legend has it that both Diogenes and Alexander the Great died on the same day in 323 BC. (By some accounts, Diogenes died from the bite of a rabid dog, an exquisitely ironic but probably fictitious story.) In any case, voluntary poverty and a frugal lifestyle didn't seem to hinder him living a long life: Alexander was 33; Diogenes was 89.

Corinth apparently held Diogenes in much greater esteem than Athens. A monument stands there in his memory: a pillar on which crouches a dog carved of the finest marble.