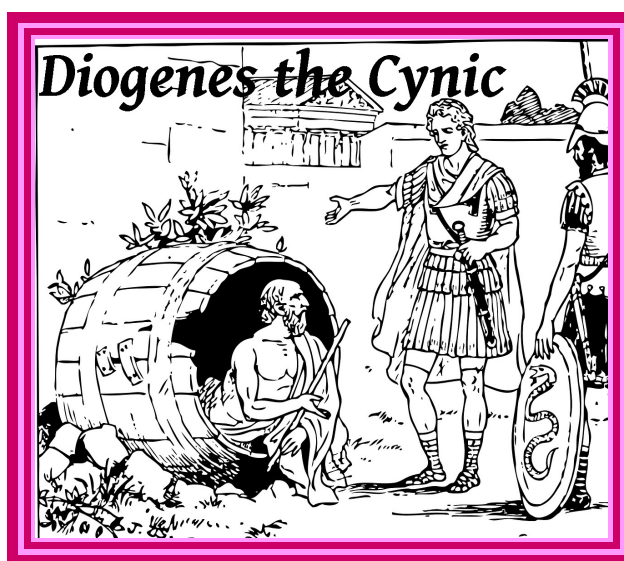


*difficile est tenere quae acceperis nisi exerceas.*¹

Classical Thought²

The Philosophies of Life 1



Next in chronological order should come Plato. But before we move on to Plato it would be good to discover how the pre-Socratic³ philosophers thought about Ethics – how should we live our lives. There are seven different philosophies of life which can be distinguished. This lesson deals with the first three.

1. The Sophists

There were many philosophers of this school. The chief were:

Protagoras, Πρωταγόρας (c. 490 – c. 420 BC) and Gorgias, Γοργίας (c. 485 – c. 380 BC)

The ideas of the Sophists were widespread and carried on in the teaching of other philosophers down to the time of Plato and after. Plato considered the sophists one of his main enemies and spent a great deal of time refuting their ideas.

Protagoras thought the truth was relative and was sceptical about whether it could be known. Gorgias went further. He said, “there is no absolute truth and if there were nobody could know it.” Following on from this idea the Sophists thought the important thing was to be successful in life. Protagoras considered that one must learn to be ones own man and let oneself be an individual. “Man is the measure of all things” is his famous statement. By this he meant that man, not gods or a higher moral law is what matters. Nowadays we would call this “humanism.” According to this philosophy you should evaluate things according to how they affect *you*. Because of this, you should accept social customs and learn to fit in because you will do better if you get on with others. This kind of self preservation he called a law of nature.

Gorgias again went further. He said it does not make any difference how you debate with people the only thing that is important is that you win the argument. Deception and manipulation he thought

1 It is difficult to retain what you may have learned unless you practice. Pliny the Elder.

2 These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnw.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

3 Before Socrates (c.470 – 399 BC)

were perfectly acceptable in logic or debate and justifiable because they were accomplishing what *you* want to accomplish. He advocated learning to get your way in society by manipulating your hearers. The Sophists would admire the kind of lawyer we would consider despicable who will take any side in a case for money. The sophists travelled round as itinerant teachers showing people how to master debate skills and rhetorical tricks.

2. Cynicism

There were many Cynics. The best known were:

Antisthenes, Ἀντισθένης (c. 445 – c. 365 BC)

Diogenes, Διογένης (c.404 - BC 323 BC) The most famous of all.⁴

Crates, Κράτης (c. 365 – c. 285 BC)

We still use the word cynical, although its meaning has changed a little. It comes from the Greek word for a dog, κῦων, because the Cynics thought that we should behave like animals such as feral dogs who did not obey a customary civilized pattern of behaviour but do as they wish. Cynic philosophers also emphasised independence, self reliance, self control and we do not mean that when we say someone is cynical today . They also thought you should be able to rely upon yourself because you can't count on anything else. They taught that the sole good for man is virtue which is the same as happiness. Happiness is to be found, they said, in an intelligent life devoted to morality. Crates, for instance, lived in poverty on the streets of Athens, having given away all his money. Personal contentment comes with independence from the world around you, said the cynics. You need to be liberated. One way to do this, since you can't control the world around you, is to control your inner world by reducing your desires to the bare necessities.

How do we get inner peace? Return to nature, said the cynics. Turn your back on all that civilization represents. Cynics particularly disliked the emphasis on the family that is found in a healthy society and also its view of learning. Defy the accepted codes of society, they said. In this they were rather like the Hippies of the 1960s. But unlike the hippies they thought that pleasures should be avoided. Crates led his life of simplicity on the streets of Athens and declared “happiness is poverty” and tradition has it that Diogenes lived in a barrel!

Cynics said that one should adjust to affliction in life with passive indifference. Just be happy. Deal with opposition by fatalistically accepting your lot in life. This idea they held in common with another very important group of philosophers: the Stoics.⁵

3. Scepticism

Sophism and Cynicism were ideas which permeated the Classical world. Scepticism was similarly widespread and continued right up to the time of the great Roman Emperors. A famous thinker who employed Sceptic ideas (along with others) was Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 BC – 43 BC), a very important figure in Latin literature, selections from whose works are often set for the IGCSE Latin exam.

Pyrrho (365-275BC) was the leading Sceptic teacher. He said that no one knows anything for sure. A sceptic could say, “look at all these brilliant minds, Anaxagoras, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides – they all come to different conclusions! Is reality all water? Is it air? Is it “the boundless”? Is reality one or many? Is there no motion? Is there nothing but motion? Is it roots, seeds, atoms!? No, the philosophers have convinced me that nobody knows!”

Scepticism has built into it its own contradiction. The sceptic knows that nobody knows! It is

⁴ Find him on your Synchronological Chart of History.

⁵ See next lesson.

therefore not a very consistent or great philosophy but the error built into it does not stop people having this attitude. When you point out to a clever sceptic the contradiction he will probably just reply “You can't even know that for sure!” People still live in that way today and it provides an excuse for intellectual laziness. Don't worry about criticism of your lifestyle because no one knows for sure what is right. Today this shows up in the attitude “what is right for you might not be right for me.” The problem with this attitude where everything is relative is that the Sceptic is left unable to say that even Hitler was wrong.

Exercise:

Classify each of these philosophers as either Sophists, Cynics or Sceptics:

Antisthenes

Crates

Diogenes

Gorgias

Protagoras

Pyrrho

Describe each of these sets of ideas as either Sophism, Cynicism or Scepticism:

Happiness is to be found in an intelligent life devoted to morality.

Control your inner world by reducing your desires to the bare necessities.

No one knows anything for sure.

What is right for you might not be right for me.

There is no absolute truth and if there were nobody could know it.

Man is the measure of all things.

Classify each of these philosophers as either Sophists, Cynics or Sceptics:

Antisthenes

Crates

Diogenes

Gorgias

Protagoras

Pyrrho

Answers on the next page.

Antisthenes	Cynic
Crates	Cynic
Diogenes	Cynic
Gorgias	Sophist
Protagoras	Sophist
Pyrrho	Sceptic

Happiness is to be found in an intelligent life devoted to morality.
Control your inner world by reducing your desires to the bare necessities.
Cynicism

No one knows anything for sure.
What is right for you might not be right for me.
Scepticism

There is no absolute truth and if there were nobody could know it.
Man is the measure of all things.
Sophism