# Diogenes of Sinope: The Life of a Freethinker

*The Golden Thread · Part 4*

What is left when you take away everything a society calls valuable?

Diogenes of Sinope (born about 412 or 404 BC, died about 323 BC) answered by living it. He gave up property, home, status and shame. He slept in a large clay jar, ate in public and said what he thought to anyone, including Plato and Alexander the Great. His aim was not to shock for its own sake. He wanted to show that most of what people value is convention, and that a good life needs only nature and reason.

In The Golden Thread, a freethinker is someone who sees that a shared expectation is failing before others see it, and who gives a new picture of the whole. Diogenes did not write a theory. His life was the argument.

Almost everything we know about him comes from one late source: Book 6 of the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius, written more than five hundred years after his death. Many stories in it are anecdotes and some are legends. This essay says, for each fact, how certain it is.

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## The pattern

Diogenes' life follows one pattern:

1. A society hands out a value: money, honour, a house, good manners, a city.
2. Diogenes tests whether that value is real or only accepted.
3. He finds that it is convention, not nature.
4. He drops it, in public, and shows that he can live without it.

His motto was a play on words. The Greek phrase *paracharattein to nomisma* means "to deface the currency". But *nomisma* means both "coin" and "custom". Diogenes made it his task to deface the currency of custom.

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## The start: a coin in Sinope

Diogenes came from Sinope, a Greek city on the south coast of the Black Sea, in what is now Turkey. His father, Hicesias, was a money-changer or banker in the city.

Father and son were accused of debasing the city's coins. The ancient sources disagree on who did it: one says the father, another says Diogenes himself. That coins from Sinope were defaced in this period is confirmed by coins that have been found. The details of the story are not certain. One version says the oracle at Delphi had told Diogenes to "deface the currency", and that he took this literally. Modern scholars treat this version as a later legend.

What is certain is the result. Diogenes had to leave Sinope, either banished or as a refugee. He went to Athens.

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**Step 1: Athens and the teacher who did not want him**

According to Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes sought out Antisthenes in Athens, a pupil of Socrates. Antisthenes did not want a student and tried to send him away, but Diogenes kept coming back until he was accepted. The dates make this story doubtful; some scholars think Diogenes knew Antisthenes only from his writings. The link with Socrates, through Antisthenes, is therefore a probable trace, not a certain one.

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**Step 2: The jar, the lamp and the plucked chicken**

In Athens, Diogenes lived without a house. He slept in a large clay storage jar, a *pithos*. The later image of a wooden barrel is a Latin reinterpretation. He owned a cloak, a staff and a bag.

Three stories show his method. They are anecdotes, reported by Diogenes Laertius and repeated in many later sources.

- **The lamp.** He walked through the marketplace in broad daylight with a lit lamp. Asked what he was doing, he said: "I am looking for a human being."
- **The chicken.** Plato had defined a human being as "a featherless animal on two legs". Diogenes plucked a chicken, brought it to Plato's school and said: "Here is Plato's human being." Plato then added "with broad nails" to his definition.
- **The dog.** People called him *kyon*, "dog", because he lived in the open and ignored shame. He accepted the name. From it came the name of his school: the Cynics, the "dog-like" ones.

Plato is reported to have called Diogenes "a Socrates gone mad". The phrase is apt. Diogenes took Socrates' question, how should one live, and answered it with his whole body.

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**Step 3: Citizen of the world**

When someone asked Diogenes where he came from, he answered: *kosmopolitēs*, "I am a citizen of the world". The word is attributed to him. In a world where a person's identity was his city, he refused to belong to one. He placed himself under the order of nature, not under the laws of a single city.

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**Step 4: Stand out of my light (Corinth)**

Diogenes spent part of his life in Corinth. One story says that pirates captured him and sold him as a slave in Crete. When the auctioneer asked what he could do, he told him to sell him to someone who needed a master. A Corinthian, Xeniades, bought him, and Diogenes taught his sons. Scholars think this story is probably invented.

The most famous story also takes place in Corinth. Alexander the Great came to see Diogenes, who was lying in the sun, and asked him what he could do for him. Diogenes answered: "Stand a little out of my sun." Alexander is said to have remarked afterwards: "If I were not Alexander, I would want to be Diogenes." The story is reported by Plutarch and by Diogenes Laertius. Whether it happened is uncertain. What it shows is clear: the most powerful man in the world had nothing that Diogenes needed.

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**Step 5: The end, and the line that followed**

Diogenes died in or near Corinth, around 323 BC, probably of old age. Ancient sources give his age as about 81 or about 90. Several stories about his death circulate: that he held his breath, ate a raw octopus or was bitten by a dog. One legend says he died on the same day as Alexander, in June 323 BC. That is almost certainly a later invention.

His line did not end with him. The next two sections follow it in both directions: back to what inspired him, and forward to the people he inspired.

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**The ideas in plain words**

| Idea | Greek | What it means |
|---|---|---|
| Nature over convention | *physis* against *nomos* | What is natural is good; much of what society demands is only agreed, not necessary |

| Idea | Greek | What it means |
|---|---|---|
| Self-sufficiency | *autarkeia* | Need as little as possible, so that nothing and no one can control you |
| Training | *askēsis* | Practise hardship, so that fortune cannot break you |
| Frank speech | *parrhēsia* | Say the truth, also to the powerful |
| Shamelessness | *anaideia* | What is not wrong in private is not wrong in public |
| World citizenship | *kosmopolitēs* | Belong to the order of the world, not to one city |

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**The question behind the pattern**

| Value offered by society | What Diogenes did | What remained |
|---|---|---|
| Money and coin | “Deface the currency” | The question what is real value |
| House and property | Lived in a jar | Nature, a cloak and a staff |
| Philosophical definitions | Plucked chicken for Plato | A living person, not a definition |
| Belonging to a city | “Citizen of the world” | The order of the cosmos |
| Power | “Stand out of my sun” | Freedom without needs |
| Shame and manners | Lived in public like a dog | Reason as the only guide |

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**The thread backwards: what inspired Diogenes**

Most freethinkers in this series stand on a line of books and teachers. Diogenes stands on a short line of people, one hero from myth, and above all on what he saw around him. His sources were a mouse, a child and a dog as much as any philosopher.

*Socrates.* Socrates was not an ascetic, but he praised virtue, did not care about wealth and paid no attention to popular opinion. These traits are named as the most direct influence on the Cynic school. Diogenes took over Socrates' method of questioning people who claimed to be wise, and his aim of turning others to philosophy. His methods were far rougher. That is why Plato, according to the tradition, called him "a Socrates gone mad".

*Antisthenes.* Antisthenes was a pupil of Socrates and is traditionally counted as the first Cynic. He was reportedly the first philosopher to wear the cloak and carry the staff and the bag that became the signs of the Cynics. According to Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes sought him out in Athens, was sent away and kept coming back until he was accepted. Diogenes clearly adopted many of Antisthenes' ideas. But the dates are difficult, and it is not certain that the two ever met. Some scholars think Diogenes knew Antisthenes only from his writings.

*Heracles.* The Cynics took Heracles as their hero. He was celebrated for his endurance in hardship. His club returns in the Cynic's staff. Tradition says that Diogenes was especially drawn to the labour in which Heracles brought the dog Cerberus up from the underworld.

*The mouse.* One anecdote tells how Diogenes found his way of life. He watched a mouse running about and saw that it needed none of the things people think they need. From the mouse he learned the value of a simple life.

*The child.* Another anecdote: Diogenes saw a boy drinking water from his hands. He threw away the cup he carried and said that he had not realised that nature had already given him a cup.

*The dog.* People called him *kyon*, dog, because he lived in the open and without shame. He took the name as his own. He said that he fawned on those who gave him something and barked at those who gave him nothing. The dog became the sign of his school.

*The oracle.* According to a legend, an oracle told him to "deface the currency", and he took it literally. Scholars regard the story as a later invention. Even so, it gives the whole life its motto.

In the language of this series, the line back from Diogenes is short in persons and long in nature. He did not take over knowledge from a teacher. He took over what he saw with his own eyes.

## The thread forwards: whom Diogenes inspired

The line forwards is long, and it comes back again and again. It moves through four waves.

*First wave: the pupils.* Crates of Thebes was his pupil and successor. He continued the Cynic way of life. Crates taught Zeno of Citium, and Zeno founded Stoicism. According to the scholar Eric Brown, the Stoics secured the lasting influence of Cynicism. Some of them adopted the Cynic way of life, but they replaced its "short, rough road" with intellectual training.

*Second wave: the Romans and their Greek world.* In the first and second centuries AD, the Stoic Epictetus wrote a whole discourse on the calling of the Cynic (*Discourses* 3.22). He drew a sharp line between those who only wear the uniform of the Cynic and those who really are Cynics. In the same period the orator Dio Chrysostom made Diogenes the ideal philosopher and the model for a true king in his speeches 4, 6 and 8 to 10. He wrote that only Diogenes the Cynic is free. In the fourth century the emperor Julian, in his sixth and seventh orations, presented Diogenes as a moral example next to Socrates. He attacked the Cynics of his own day for copying the outward signs without the inner discipline. He told anyone who wanted to be a Cynic to "first take himself in hand like Diogenes and Crates".

*Third wave: the Enlightenment.* In the eighteenth century the Cynic returned in the salons of Europe. The literary historian Louisa Shea calls this the Cynic Enlightenment. In 1770 the German writer Christoph Martin Wieland published *Sokrates Mainomenos oder die Dialogen des Diogenes von Sinope*, a novel in the form of dialogues by Diogenes. The title takes up Plato's phrase "a Socrates gone mad".

*Fourth wave: the modern critics.* In *The Gay Science* (1882, section 125), Friedrich Nietzsche wrote about a madman who lit a lantern in broad daylight, ran into the marketplace and cried that he was looking for God. The scene takes up Diogenes' lamp, with which he looked for a human being. With Nietzsche it becomes the scene of the death of God. In 1983 the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk published *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*. He described the modern cynic as someone with an enlightened false consciousness: someone who knows better and does it anyway. Against this he set the old Cynicism of Diogenes, with its bodily, laughing protest. In 1983 and 1984 Michel Foucault gave lectures in Berkeley and at the Collège de France on *parrhesia*, frank speech: telling the truth to power at one's own risk. He gave much attention to the Cynics as people whose way of life was itself a form of telling the truth.

*The pattern in the line.* One thing returns in almost every wave. The followers of each period found that the followers of their own time copied the outward signs, the cloak, the staff and the bag, without the discipline. Epictetus said it. Julian said it. It is the same pattern that *The*

*History of Knowing* describes for direct knowing: the form is taken over and the content is lost. And each time someone goes back to Diogenes himself.

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**The knots**

Not every link is a direct influence. The series uses two kinds:

- A **trace** is a documented link: a teacher, a letter, a book that was read.
- An **echo** is a shared idea without proof that one person learned it from the other.

| Direction | Person or source | Link to Diogenes | Kind |
|---|---|---|---|
| Back | Socrates | Questioning those who claim wisdom; indifference to wealth; "a Socrates gone mad" | Trace through Antisthenes (probable) |
| Back | Antisthenes | Cloak, staff and bag; many of his ideas; meeting not certain | Trace (disputed) |
| Back | Heracles | Hero of endurance; the staff as club; Cerberus | Trace (model of the school) |
| Back | The mouse | The value of a simple life | Anecdote |
| Back | The child | Threw away his cup | Anecdote |
| Back | The dog | His name and the name of the school | Reported |
| Back | The oracle | "Deface the currency" | Legend |

| Direction | Person or source | Link to Diogenes | Kind |
|---|---|---|---|
| Same time | Plato | Opponent; the plucked chicken | Trace (anecdote) |
| Same time | Alexander the Great | “Stand out of my sun” | Trace (anecdote) |
| Forward | Crates of Thebes | Pupil and successor | Trace |
| Forward | Zeno of Citium and the Stoics | Pupil of Crates; secured the lasting influence of Cynicism | Trace |
| Forward | Epictetus | *Discourses* 3.22, on the calling of the Cynic | Trace |
| Forward | Dio Chrysostom | Speeches 4, 6, 8–10; “only Diogenes is free” | Trace |
| Forward | Emperor Julian | Orations 6 and 7; Diogenes next to Socrates | Trace |
| Forward | Wieland | *Sokrates Mainomenos* (1770) | Trace |
| Forward | Nietzsche | The madman with the lantern (1882) | Trace |
| Forward | Sloterdijk | *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (1983) | Trace |
| Forward | Foucault | Lectures on *parrhesia* (1983–84) | Trace |

| Direction | Person or source | Link to Diogenes | Kind |
|---|---|---|---|
| Across | Spinoza | Living according to nature and reason; freedom through understanding | Echo |
| Across | Krishnamurti | Refused the offices and values of his society in public | Echo |

Diogenes stands at the beginning of the series in time, next to Socrates. He is the first freethinker who made his whole life the test of the shared expectation. Krishnamurti, more than two thousand years later, did the same with one institution: he received its highest office and gave it back. Diogenes did it with all of them.

Diogenes also stands at right angles to the earlier stories. Spinoza, Rosen, Turing and Krishnamurti ask how mind, form or truth relates to matter, and how it can be known. Diogenes asks what something is worth, and how to live. His thread goes back to nature and forward to everyone who tests the values of their own time.

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**The expectations that failed**

1. **That wealth and status are the measure of a good life.** Diogenes lived without either and showed that freedom was larger without them.
2. **That a person belongs to a city.** He called himself a citizen of the world.
3. **That philosophy is made of definitions.** He answered Plato's definition with a plucked chicken.
4. **That power is what everyone wants.** He asked the most powerful man in the world to step out of his sun.

The golden thread in Diogenes' life is the test of value: every value that a society hands out is checked against nature and reason, and what fails the test is dropped in public. He did not argue against convention. He lived without it. That is what makes him a freethinker.

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