

14.3. Diogenes Laërtius / On Zeno

Diogenes Laërtius wrote about philosophy and philosophers in the 3rd century CE. Book 7 deals with the Stoics, who believed in flourishing by means of living an ethical life; naturally he began with Zeno, founder of the movement. Stoicism was very influential in the Hellenistic world and also among the Romans, as it appealed to their traditional sense of austerity.

Diog. Laert. 7.19. Source: Diogenes Laërtius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C.D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Sons, 1895).

If he reproved any one, he did it with brevity and without exaggeration, and as it were, at a distance. I allude, for instance, to the way in which he spoke of a man who took exceeding pains in setting himself off, for as he was crossing a gutter with great hesitation, he said, "He is right to look down upon the mud, for he cannot see himself in it." And when some Cynic one day said that he had no oil in his cresset, and asked him for some, he refused to give him any, but bade him go away and consider which of the two was the more impudent. He was very much in love with Chremonides; and once, when he and Cleanthes were both sitting by him, he got up; and as Cleanthes wondered at this, he said, "I hear from skilful physicians that the best thing for some tumours is rest." Once, when two people were sitting above him at table at a banquet, and the one next him kept kicking the other with his foot, he himself kicked him with his knee; and when he turned round upon him for doing so, he said, "Why then do you think that your other neighbour is to be treated in this way by you?"

On one occasion he said to a man who was very fond of young boys, that "Schoolmasters who were always associating with boys had no more intellect than the boys themselves." He used also to say that the discourses of those men who were careful to avoid solecisms, and to adhere to the strictest rules of composition, were like Alexandrine money, they were pleasing to the eye and well-formed like the coin, but were nothing the better for that; but those who were not so particular he likened to the Attic tessedrachmas, which were struck at random and without any great nicety, and so he said that their [266>] discourses often outweighed the more polished styles of the others. And when Ariston, his disciple, had been holding forth a good deal without much wit, but still in some points with a good deal of readiness and confidence, he said to him, "It would be impossible for you to speak thus, if your father had not been drunk when he begat you;" and for the same reason he nicknamed him the chatterer, as he himself was very concise in his speeches. Once, when he was in company with an epicure who usually left nothing for his messmates, and when a large fish was set before him, he took it all as if he could eat the whole of it; and when the others looked at him with astonishment, he said, "What then do you think that your companions feel every day, if you cannot bear with my gluttony for one day?"

On one occasion, when a youth was asking him questions with a pertinacity unsuited to his age, he led him to a looking-glass and bade him look at himself, and then asked him whether such questions appeared suitable to the face he saw there. And

when a man said before him once, that in most points he did not agree with the doctrines of Antisthenes, he quoted to him an apophthegm of Sophocles, and asked him whether he thought there was much sense in that, and when he said that he did not know, "Are you not then ashamed," said he, "to pick out and recollect anything bad which may have been said by Antisthenes, but not to regard or remember what ever is said that is good?" A man once said, that the sayings of the philosophers appeared to him very trivial; "You say true," replied Zeno, "and their syllables too ought to be short, if that is possible." When some one spoke to him of Polemo, and said that he proposed one question for discussion and then argued another, he became angry, and said, "At what value did he estimate the subject that had been proposed?" And he said that a man who was to discuss a question ought to have a loud voice and great energy, like the actors, but not to open his mouth too wide, which those who speak a great deal but only talk nonsense usually do. And he used to say that there was no need for those who argued well to leave their hearers room to look about them, as good workmen do, who want to have their work seen; but that, on the contrary, those who are listening to them ought to be so attentive to all that is said as to have no leisure to take notes.

[267>] Once when a young man was talking a great deal, he said, "Your ears have run down into your tongue." On one occasion a very handsome man was saying that a wise man did not appear to him likely to fall in love; "Then," said he, "I cannot imagine anything that will be more miserable than you good-looking fellows." He also used often to say that most philosophers were wise in great things, but ignorant of petty subjects and chance details; and he used to cite the saying of Caphesius, who, when one of his pupils was labouring hard to be able to blow very powerfully, gave him a slap, and said, that excellence did not depend upon greatness, but greatness on excellence. Once, when a young man was arguing very confidently, he said, "I should not like to say, O youth, all that occurs to me." And once, when a handsome and wealthy Rhodian, but one who had no other qualification, was pressing him to take him as a pupil, he, as he was not inclined to receive him, first of all made him sit on the dusty seats that he might dirt his cloak, then he put him down in the place of the poor that he might rub against their rags, and at last the young man went away. One of his sayings used to be, that vanity was the most unbecoming of all things, and especially so in the young. Another was, that one ought not to try and recollect the exact words and expressions of a discourse, but to fix all one's attention on the arrangement of the arguments, instead of treating it as if it were a piece of boiled meat, or some delicate eatable. He used also to say that young men ought to maintain the most scrupulous reserve in their walking, their gait, and their dress; and he was constantly quoting the lines of Euripides on Capaneus, that—

His wealth was ample.
But yet no pride did mingle with his state,
Nor had he haughty thought, or arrogance
More than the poorest man.

And one of his sayings used to be, that nothing was more unfriendly to the comprehension of the accurate sciences than poetry; and that there was nothing that we stood in so much need of as time. When he was asked what a friend was, he replied, "Another I." They say that he was once scourging a slave whom he had detected in theft; and when he said to him, "It was fated that I should steal;" he rejoined, "Yes, and that you should be beaten." He used to call beauty the [268>] flower of the voice; but some report this as if he had said that the voice is the flower of beauty. On one occasion, when he saw a slave belonging to one of his friends severely bruised, he said to his friend, "I see the footsteps of your anger." He once accosted a man who was all over unguents and perfumes, "Who is this who smells like a woman?" When Dionysius Metathemenus asked him why he was the only person whom he did not correct, he replied, "Because I have no confidence in you." A young man was talking a great deal of nonsense, and he said to him, "This

is the reason why we have two ears and only one mouth, that we may hear more and speak less."

Once, when he was at an entertainment and remained wholly silent, he was asked what the reason was; and so he bade the person who found fault with him tell the king that there was a man in the room who knew how to hold his tongue; now the people who asked him this were ambassadors who had come from Ptolemy, and who wished to know what report they were to make of him to the king. He was once asked how he felt when people abused him, and he said, "As an ambassador feels when he is sent away without an answer." Apollonius of Tyre tells us, that when Crates dragged him by the cloak away from Stilpo, he said. "O Crates, the proper way to take hold of philosophers is by the ears; so now do you convince me and drag me by them; but if you use force towards me, my body may be with you, but my mind with Stilpo."