Smash the Cup: A Discussion on Chreiai of Diogenes

One of the ways in which the legacies of ancient Greek thinkers has been preserved is through *chreiai*, or short and witty didactic tales. An exemplary subject of many chreiai is Diogenes of Sinope, one of the most prominent figures of Cynicism. Given Diogenes' lifestyle, there is no shortage of material that captures profound and ridiculous events. Even among the absurdity of his life, there are many valuable insights to be had which are preserved in his stories. In this paper, I will introduce and briefly analyze chreiai written about Diogenes that pertain to self-sufficiency and poverty. I will layout challenges to the usefulness and value of these chreiai and then provide a response to each challenge. The meaning and significance of these chreiai is not lost on contemporary readers despite the centuries that have passed since their writing.

Throughout the chreiai presented in this paper, themes of poverty, self-sufficiency, and simplicity begin to emerge. One of the most famous stories about Diogenes is about an encounter he has with a boy who is even more poor than him: "For a time he used a wooden cup for drinking, but on seeing a boy drinking from the hollow of his hand, he smashed his cup on the ground, saying, 'I hadn't realized that nature had provided me with a cup'" (Hard, §12a). Many ask why Diogenes destroys the cup instead of giving it to the boy. One argument is that Diogenes did not want to inculcate dependency on material goods within the boy (this is a rather contentious view, especially if one exists in a poverty wherein their basic needs are not sufficiently met).

One of the hallmarks of cynicism is a lifestyle that is internally and externally scarce. Diogenes did not only live with little but was even indifferent to money and material wealth.

This is made evident in this anecdote: “During the night a thief attempted to pull his money-bag from under his head; and on becoming aware of this, he said, ‘Take it, you wretch, and allow me to get some sleep!’” (Hard, §22). This chreia demonstrates the lack of attachment to materials as well as a privileging of the care of the body over other external affairs. This chreia is also continuous with Diogenes’ emphasis on self sufficiency (Hard, §17, §13a).

Diogenes’ lifestyle and choices which are praised in the chreiai, if taken seriously, are still susceptible to a reductio ad absurdum argument. If one can survive without the cup, then why not discard the staff, the barrel, and the wallet? This style of argument is almost humorous when applied in this context given that Diogenes already lived an extreme life, but even still there is room for objection. Self-sufficiency can also be taken to this extreme; even if one is no longer dependent on other individuals, there is no escaping the fact that earth materials are a necessary condition for life. Self-sufficiency, though coveted, must be in the service of something higher. Namely, to eliminate distractions that detract from virtue. It is worth briefly noting that Diogenes was likely not opposed to dependence on earth materials given his desire to return to an animalistic existence.

Another common challenge to the Cynic school that is relevant to these chreiai is the autarkeia paradox. A simple distillation of the paradox is this: it wouldn’t be possible or feasible for every member in a society to be “autonomous” since this is dependent on other members of society affording the very possibility of cynic autonomy. One cannot receive a handout if there is no one to hand it out. Even the individual who adorns the double folded cloak is still wearing an article of clothing made by someone else. The ground of possibility for cynic autonomy is dependent on an interconnected society in which products are assembled, traded, distributed, and

discarded. Taken from another angle, one could argue that it is possible to be completely autonomous and self-sufficient while still enjoying the particular luxuries Diogenes was averse to. Furthermore, it could be possible that one can indulge in particular luxuries without being completely dependent on them. Views such as this are seen among descendants of the cynic school, specifically among "soft" Stoics.

The aforementioned concerns are worthy of attention but will be put at ease once we further explore Diogenes' own motivations. Beginning with self-sufficiency and modesty, there is a reasonable justification for Diogenes perspective and approach (though it is deployed strangely). Even if an individual were to achieve a luxurious self-sufficiency that did not entail ruinous temptation, it is likely the case that most people (if following the cynic program) ought to strive toward a lifestyle of simplicity and modesty. Thinkers such as Aristotle noted that the disposition of most humans leans toward particular vices and thus ought to be overcorrected in action. Most often, humans err on the side of luxury, so much so that it becomes ruinous to the self and others. One need not adopt a radical lifestyle to understand or internalize the message of these particular chreiai. Diogenes through his words and actions embodies a particular radicality; this in itself may be a shortcut to encourage (rather abruptly) critical thinking and reflection of one's own lifestyle.

These particular chreiai also prompt the reevaluation and potential rearrangement of one's own priorities in life. These stories challenge the reader to think about what they can and cannot live without. The use of one's hands for drinking water, the double folding of a cloak (Hard, §11), the lack of emphasis on money, and other anecdotes all suggest an attunement with one's own body, with nature, and with a value system that is not subservient to the whims of

fortune, taste, and other ephemera. In the spirit of many chreiai, the life and message of Diogenes is strange, funny, and thought provoking. One would do well to take these stories seriously and smash their own cup, whatever that may look like.

Word Count: 993/1,000
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Bibliography

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