

A DOG'S LIFE

Philosophy

Diogenes was a Cynic, a group of philosophers in Hellenistic times (c. 323-146 BCE) that dropped out of conventional society much like modern-day hippies. The origin of the word 'cynic' comes from the Greek (via Latin) for 'dog', and has the same root as the English word 'canine'. In this story we explore the notion of freedom and happiness and its relationship to material gain or wealth. Many feel that happiness is best achieved through having the means to attain what you want and thereby the ability to satisfy your desires. This could be seen as best achieved through wealth but it could equally be seen from the flip side of the coin: by wanting only simple things. In other words: if all I want is some bread and water then it would be relatively easy (on the whole) to get bread and water and therefore easier to be happy. But then, one could argue that someone like Diogenes has responsibilities that follow from his wealth, such as the welfare of his family and servants and the good that could be done with his wealth. So, from this perspective Diogenes is being selfish in his decision to renounce his material wealth: maybe, according to this view, what he needs to do is mature in his attitude towards his wealth.

The Stimulus

This story begins some considerable years before Diogenes with the Greek philosopher Socrates. Socrates was said to have gone to the marketplace and, having taken one look at all the things on sale in the stalls, was said to have famously declared: 'look at all these things I don't need!'

Some time later somewhere else in Greece a man called Diogenes lived in a large house filled with beautiful things and was waited upon by many servants, but Diogenes noticed how unhappy he was. There were always people asking him for money, there were things to be done, buildings to be mended and so on. He never seemed to have any time to himself to think, and thinking was one thing Diogenes liked to do very much.

One day Diogenes saw a dog loose on the streets doing exactly what it wanted to do when it wanted to do it, and he noticed that the dog owned nothing yet seemed very happy. He thought that maybe this was the reason why the dog was happy. He recalled the story of Socrates that had been told to him as a child and, looking at his house and his riches, he thought to himself "I don't need any of this stuff. In fact, I think I'd be better off without it." So, he decided to hold a big party to which he invited all his friends and then, at the party, he announced that he was going to give all his things away, to the astonishment of his guests. He told everyone to help themselves to anything they wanted from his accumulated stuff, he even invited his servants to help themselves, and he told them that they were, from that day on, free to leave and to do as they would. Some of them ran off into the wide world happy to be free at last, but others moaned because they had nowhere to go, and now, nowhere to stay either. Once all Diogenes' stuff had gone he kept for himself the bare essentials, a stick, a cloak and a cup and he wandered off to live a life as simple as a dog's life, finally having all the time in the world to think.

Eventually, Diogenes found his way to Athens and he became a famous citizen, known as 'the Cynic', which meant: 'he who is like a dog'. He became famous because he had no great house or servants; all he had was his cloak, his stick, his cup, and... a barrel in which he lived, to keep the rain and sun from his head. He became so famous that word of his teachings and his ideas reached all the way to Alexander the Great. Alexander was the Emperor of the largest empire that had ever existed up to that time. Although Alexander was a great military leader he had in his youth been taught by the famous philosopher Aristotle who in turn had been taught by Plato, who in turn was taught by Socrates, who – if you remember – had stood in the market place of Athens and said, "Look at all these things I don't need".

When Alexander the Great heard about Diogenes the Cynic he wished to visit him and pay his respects. So, he travelled all the way to Athens, where the people heard of his coming and prepared a lavish welcome for him. But when he arrived Alexander wasn't interested in their grand gestures, he went straight to Diogenes' barrel and said to Diogenes: "I am Alexander The Great, the most powerful man in all the world and out of respect for your strange teachings I would like to offer you anything you want. Name it and it shall be yours."

Diogenes looked up at Alexander, smiled and said: "there is one thing you can do for me."

To which Alexander said, "Name it."

"Could you move a little to the left," said Diogenes, "because you are blocking out the sun."

Upon hearing such insolence one of Alexander's guards raised his spear to execute Diogenes for insulting the great emperor, but Alexander lifted his hand to stop the guard, and said, "Do not harm this man, for, if Alexander the Great were anybody else, he would be Diogenes the Cynic."

How to approach stories for thinking – Comprehension Time

This tale is not a thought-experiment, it's just a story. It is often a good idea with stories like this where there is a lot to take in, before embarking on Task Questions and enquiries, to simply spend some time making sense of it all. Always allow 'Comprehension Time' after finishing a story, sometimes you may even want to read it twice, though this is not usually necessary. The first task you could ask of the children is for them to retell the story as a group. The first person says what they can remember or until you stop them, and then you simply ask the others if they can add something that has not been said already (this is important or it will take far too long and will lose the children's interest). After a few contributions you usually have a pretty comprehensive overview of the events in the story. Sometimes the enquiry discussion will simply follow naturally from the Comprehension Time, but if not then move on to the prepared Task Question in the chapter.

Allow for first thoughts and Comprehension Time following the reading of the story. Listen out for the concerns and directions of thought from the children and set the most appropriate Task Question that relates to their own concerns.

Task Questions:

- ✓ Do you think that you would be happier with more stuff, or less stuff?
- ✓ What did Socrates mean when he said 'Look at all these things I don't need'?
- ✓ Do you think you would be more free/happy with just a cloak, a stick, a cup and a barrel, or less free/happy? (Stick with either the word 'free' or 'happy')
- ✓ If you had to choose, would you be Alexander the Great or Diogenes the Cynic? Why?
- ✓ Is your own happiness important or are there more important things?

Nested questions:

- ✓ What do you need to be happy?
- ✓ What is freedom?
- ✓ What is happiness?