

I Philosophy for Trolls

It was a bright warm morning in Corinth in the fourth-century BC, and everything seemed normal in the market. Shoppers eyeballed the wares of craftsmen and fishmongers. Sweat and the odour of feet gave the sea wind a sour smell. Birds cawed, waves lapped. Dogs followed each other into those places humans do not go. The day was proving to be plain in every way – until, all at once, a howl of Greek voices went up in a shared cry of anger and disgust. An empty circle formed in the crowd as shoppers began scooting back from something, or someone. It was a beggar, lying on the ground, reclining slightly against a big ceramic barrel he had apparently taken as his home. He wore only a loincloth, which he had, without announcement or concern, pulled aside as he began to pleasure himself in full view of the unfortunate patrons, who were by now shuffling away. But anyone who knew the man's identity was probably unsurprised by his act, perhaps even amused. This was no mere homeless man: this was Diogenes of Sinope, one of the most famous philosophers in all of Greece.

Most philosophers do not live in big ceramic barrels. But Diogenes was not an ordinary philosopher, and he did not intend to become one. Though he may never have written a single word of philosophy, tales of his life and knowledge of his views spread far and wide. He had no tribe or family of his own, having been exiled from his hometown for defacing currency. Diogenes had taken a vow of poverty (hence his residence in that big ceramic barrel), and spent much of his free time – which was, of course, *all* the time – heckling and spitting at passers-by, giving lectures to his dogs, and, of course, regaling his fellow citizens with public displays of onanism. He would often walk around with a lit lantern during the day, and when people would ask what he

was doing, he would say, "I'm looking for an honest man." When asked what he thought was the most beautiful thing in the world, Diogenes replied, "Freedom of speech." At the same time, it's said that he attended lectures by other luminaries of the age, including Plato, just to disrupt them by eating loudly. He was notorious for being offensive, impulsive, and downright rude. Diogenes' presence was not a safe space. Today, we would no doubt call him a "troll."

Yet despite his notoriety, or perhaps because of it, he caught the attention of a very powerful man: Alexander the Great, arguably the most powerful person in the world at the time. In fact, Alexander so admired this Greek oddity, this famed philosopher-troll, that he's reported to have said, "If I were not Alexander, I should wish to be Diogenes."¹

One day, Alexander finally paid Diogenes a visit. On the day in question, Diogenes was sunning himself in the grounds of the Craneum, a gymnasium in Corinth. Alexander approached Diogenes, flanked by what must have been an imposing retinue of bodyguards, servants, and soldiers, and fawningly expressed his admiration for this pitiful-looking homeless man wearing only a loincloth, lying on the ground before him. Then – perhaps it was on impulse, or perhaps it was by design – Alexander made Diogenes a remarkable offer: he promised to grant him any wish he desired. All Diogenes had to do was name it, and it would be done.

The air must have been thick with anticipation. How would Diogenes respond? Any offer, even a very good one, imposes an obligation on the person receiving it. This includes, at minimum, an obligation to perform one's gratefulness for having been offered anything at all, even if the offer is ultimately declined. However, even though he was a beggar, Diogenes was not really the grateful type. How, then, would he reply? Would he finally drop his trollish persona in the face of this life-changing offer? Would Diogenes ask Alexander to annul his exile from Sinope so he could return to his hometown after all these years? Or might he decline to consider Alexander's offer at all? Would the cranky philosopher-troll even bother to respond?

But Diogenes did respond. He looked up, gestured at Alexander, and barked, “Stand out of my light!”²

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, a new set of wondrous, designed forces – our information and communication technologies – has transformed human life. Our moment-to-moment experiences, our interactions with one another, the styles of our thoughts and the habits of our days now take their shapes, in large part, from the operation of these new inventions. Their inner workings are, for many of us, sufficiently obscure that they seem indistinguishable from magic; we are happy to be astonished by their novelty and power. And with our admiration comes a trust; that these inventions are, as their creators claim, built to follow *our* guiding lights, to help us navigate our lives in the ways *we* want them to go. We trust these wondrous inventions to be *on our side*.

In Alexander’s offer to Diogenes we can detect a certain imperial optimism that is familiar to us from the way these young powers of our time, our digital Alexanders, have similarly come into our lives and offered to fulfill all manner of needs and wishes. Of course, in many ways they *have* fulfilled our needs and wishes, and in many ways they *have* been on our side. They have profoundly enhanced our ability to inform ourselves, to communicate with one another, and to understand our world. Today, with a thin plastic slab the size of my hand, I can chat with my family in Seattle, instantly read any Shakespeare play, or fire off a message to my elected representatives, regardless of where in the world I am.

And yet, as these new powers have become ever more central to our thought and action, we’ve begun to realize that they, like Alexander to Diogenes, have also been standing in our light, in a sense – and in one light in particular: a light so precious and central to human flourishing that without it all their other benefits may do us little good.

That light is the light of our attention. Something deep and potentially irreversible seems to be happening to human attention

in the age of information. Responding to it well may be the biggest moral and political challenge of our time. My purpose here is to tell you why I think so – and to ask for your help in keeping this light lit.

NOTES

1 Diogenes Laertius vi. 32; Arrian VII.2.

2 Diogenes Laertius vi. 38; Arrian VII.2.