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# Diogenes Laertius, "Lives of the Eminent Philosophers"

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**Diogenes Laertius.** *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Trans. Pamela Mensch. James Miller, ed. Oxford University Press 2018. 704 pp. \$51.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780190862176).

This is a brand-new translation of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives*, and it is long overdue. There is a real need for a new edition of this book, given the current boom of interest in ancient philosophy as a guide to living. Diogenes' biographies are an essential source for understanding the ancient practice of philosophy as a way of life, as he provides the most extensive available set of biographies of ancient philosophers. He also includes texts and doxographies that are vital to our knowledge of Pyrrhonism, Cynicism, early Stoicism, and Epicureanism, since most of the writings of these schools have been lost. Plus, these biographies are simply a lot of fun to read, as they are filled with anecdotes about the daily lives of these philosophers. These anecdotes are oftentimes wild and witty, other times inspiring, and sometimes downright shocking.

This is the first complete English translation of Diogenes' *Lives* since R.D. Hicks' translation in 1925. There are other partial translations scattered throughout various collections and anthologies, and numerous cheap, self-published editions on Amazon, but until now Hicks' translation in the Loeb Classics series has been the best option. The Loeb edition is still very readable, but its minimal (and dated) critical apparatus is not ideal for the more general reader. Most readers will benefit from having greater scholarly assistance in reading the book, since Diogenes' biographies are notoriously unreliable.

This new edition can now replace these less-than-optimal options as *the* standard English edition of Diogenes' *Lives*. Pamela Mensch's translation is based on the new authoritative Greek text, edited by Tiziano Dorandi and published by Cambridge University Press in 2013. James Miller has done excellent editorial work, with the support of seven consulting editors. The footnotes are extensive but not burdensome. I used this volume with a group of undergraduates in a senior philosophy seminar on the topic 'Philosophical Lives,' and the notes were very helpful for the students (and me) in this context.

These notes are particularly valuable because they highlight and address the many conflicting accounts in these biographies. Diogenes gives a wealth of detail about the lives of the ancient philosophers, but this wealth is admixed with a considerable amount of fools' gold. This is due to Diogenes' practice of assembling his biographies from a wide range of sources, often uncritically. As Hegel observed in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (University of Nebraska Press 1995), Diogenes 'brings forward copious evidence without much discrimination' (590). Such an assemblage of evidence can still be an invaluable resource for scholars, but *caveat lector!* Reading these lives makes for a rather different experience than reading, say, the *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch (Loeb Classical Library 1914). The text is less a composed narrative than a compilation of all the testimonies available to Diogenes.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that Diogenes is entirely uncritical in his use of sources. For example, he includes a witty exchange between Aristippus and Diogenes the Cynic—or is it Plato and Diogenes? Theodorus and Metrocles? We are privy to three different versions of the conversation, each involving different people (96, 110, 286). Diogenes includes all three



versions of the story, but in doing so he also points out the conflict himself. Moreover, he often notes disparities between divergent testimonies and will occasionally weigh evidence and sometimes take a position of his own. For instance, after surveying a host of slanderous rumors regarding Epicurus, Diogenes writes that the authors of these slanders ‘are out of their minds’ (496).

Even so, it can be difficult to know what to make of these conflicting accounts. For instance, what are the correct details about Aristotle’s death? Did he commit suicide at the age of seventy by drinking wolfsbane? Or did he die of stomach disease at sixty-three? Diogenes includes both accounts (215, 217). How many wives did Socrates have? Some sources say two: Myrto and Xanthippe. Which was the first? Some even allege that Socrates was a bigamist, married to both at the same time. Diogenes notes the conflicting accounts on this question, but leaves the reader stranded (75-76). Miller’s notes are therefore helpful in identifying these conflicts and shedding light on them, even when they cannot be fully resolved. Thus the claim that Socrates married twice appears in such later sources as Plutarch, but contemporary sources—Plato and Xenophon—only mention Xanthippe (76, n.67).

One of the problems with Diogenes’ research methods is the reliability of his sources. As James Romm points out, one of Diogenes’ preferred sources is an unknown Hellenistic writer using the name Aristippus. This Pseudo-Aristippus wrote a book entitled *On the Luxuriousness of the Ancients* (569), which is something like an ancient Greek version of *Hollywood Babylon* (Simon & Schuster 1975), but with philosophers. And much like that book of movie-star scandals, *On the Luxuriousness of the Ancients* appears to be the work of a fabulist, particularly when reporting on the sex lives of the sages. When Diogenes cites ‘Aristippus’ as his source, the anecdote should be taken with a grain of salt. The more interesting question, however, is why Diogenes shares with Pseudo-Aristippus this interest in bawdy, body humor. Romm suggests it is in keeping with the comic tradition (such as Aristophanes, Timon, and Lucian) of bringing the image of the exalted philosopher down to earth, and showing how ‘the needs and desires of the body’ have a way of undermining ‘the aspirations of the mind’ (570). This is true of the anecdotes about the sexual exploits of the eminent philosophers, as well as their foibles and failings, which are often reflected in ‘grotesque or bizarre’ deaths of the eminent philosophers (568).

Romm makes this point in an essay on ‘Corporeal Humor in Diogenes Laertius,’ which is one of sixteen essays included in the second half of this volume. Miller has done the reader a great service by collecting these essays, which amount to a second book’s worth of material. Each essay is by leading scholars, and as a whole they greatly enhance the reader’s understanding of the text.

Several essays provide historical context for the transmission and reception of Diogenes’ work. Tiziano Dorandi discusses its reading in Byzantium, where it first sparked significant interest in the ninth and tenth centuries. Readers in the West had access to partial translations into Latin from the twelfth century, and they continued to read bits and pieces until the fifteenth century, when the first complete Latin translation appeared. It was also during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that the Greek text became available (585-86).

Diogenes exerted a significant influence during the Renaissance, as Ingrid D. Rowland

shows in her essay on *School of Athens* included in this edition, where Raphael paints ‘strongly individualized portraits’ drawn from Diogenes’ biographies. Anthony Grafton shows how these biographies inspired figures such as Leon Battista Alberti, who found in these biographies a model for ‘a new kind of thinker, a secular intellectual...who lived out his life not in the seclusion of a monastery but as a walker in the city’ (546). Grafton follows the ups and downs of this text’s reception over the centuries, shifting from an inspiration during the Renaissance to an ‘annoyance’ to scholars as the methods of textual criticism dissected Diogenes’ text and exposed its flaws (553).

This was the approach of the young philologist Friedrich Nietzsche, but in time Nietzsche came to a new understanding of Diogenes and the lives of these philosophers—once again as an inspiration for a model of philosophy not merely as scholarship, but as an art of living (554; see also Glenn W. Most’s essay on Nietzsche, 620). This, it seems, is where Diogenes’ work is of particular interest in our current moment: whatever the particular facts and falsehoods in the text, the overall effect is to show how philosophy was practiced in antiquity—as a practice that informed all aspects of the philosopher’s life. This is the theme of Giuseppe Cambiano’s contribution to the volume.

Several other essays provide orientation for the reader, such as Kathryn Gutzwiller on Diogenes’ use of epigrams, Malcolm Schofield on politics in these philosophical lives, along with several other essays focusing on specific philosophers and philosophical schools: André Laks on ‘pre-Socratic’ philosophy; John Dillon on Diogenes’ doxographies of Plato; R. Bracht Branham on Cynicism; A.A. Long on Zeno as the ‘Cynic Founder of the Stoic Tradition’; and James Allen on Epicurus. There is also a detailed glossary of ancient sources by Joseph M. Lemelin, and a guide to further reading by Jay R. Elliot.

Finally, in addition to all the notable merits of this new edition of Diogenes’ *Lives*, one final point of distinction is its beauty. The book is a pleasure to read. It is a bit hefty to hold for long periods, and its size is suited to the coffee table rather than one’s back pocket, but that size is put to good use. Almost every other page has some visuals on it, from photos of ancient manuscripts and sculpture to maps and modern art. I recommend this new edition to anyone with an interest in ancient philosophy.

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