

Aristippus of Cyrene, in

Diogenes Laertius, Lives and Sayings of Famous Philosophers

Book I.65-85, chapter 8
tr. D. S. Hutchinson, c. 2000

(65) Aristippus was Cyrenaic by birth and was drawn to Athens by the fame of Socrates, as Aeschines says. He taught philosophy to students, according to the Peripatetic Phantias of Eresus, and was the first of the students of Socrates to charge fees and send money to his teacher. And once 50 *minas* which he had sent to Socrates was returned to him, because Socrates said that his divine sign would not allow him to accept it; in fact he was annoyed by the offer.

Xenophon was hostile to him; and that's why he has Socrates direct against Aristippus the argument against pleasure.¹ And indeed Theodorus also, in his work On the Sects, vilified him, as did Plato in his work On the Soul, as has been said elsewhere.²

(66) He had an ability to fit in, to the place, the time, and the person, and to play a fitting part in every circumstance; and that's why he found more favour than anyone else at the court of Dionysius, because he could always turn the situation to good account. He enjoyed the pleasure that he found in what was to hand, and didn't take any trouble for the sake of enjoying what was not to hand.

And for this reason Diogenes called him a "royal dog".³ And Timon slandered him for being self-indulgent, writing in these terms: "Such is the effeminate nature of Aristippus, who fondles a false one."⁴

They say he once ordered a partridge to be bought at a cost of 50 *drachmas*; and when somebody criticized him he replied, "Wouldn't you have spent an *obol* for it?" Being answered in the affirmative, he said, "The 50 *drachmas* are worth as much as an *obol* to me."

(67) When Dionysius once asked him to take his pick of three courtesans, he took away all three of them, saying, "Not even Paris could get away with preferring one girl." But they say that he took them as far as his front door and let them go. He took to such extremes his choosing and disdaining.

And for that reason they say that Strato (or Plato, according to others) said to him, "You alone have the gift to look good in rags as well as robes."

¹ Memoirs of Socrates II.1.

² the reference is to D.L. iii.36: "Plato was on bad terms with Aristippus. In the work On the Soul, anyway, he slanders him by saying that he was not there when Socrates died, but in Aegina, not at all far away." The more common title in antiquity for Plato's Phaedo was On the Soul.

³ probably a double-entendre for "king's lapdog" and "royal cynic"; Diogenes of Sinope was called *kuvos* (*kunos*) a "dog", an insulting label which he accepted. Hence "Cynicism" as the name of his version of Socratic philosophy.

⁴ Timon's slander combines a reference to Aristippus's doctrine of sensation, as kind of internal touch, with a reference to his allegedly wimpish habits of self-indulgence, especially his enthusiasm for sex.

When Dionysius spat on him, he bore it patiently; and when he was criticized for this he said, "If fishermen let themselves be drenched by salt water in order to catch a sardine, shouldn't I let myself be sprinkled with spittle in order to catch a tuna?"⁵

(68) Once when Diogenes was washing vegetables and saw Aristippus, he mocked him and said, "If you had learned to get used to these, you would not have patronized the courts of kings." And he said, "If you knew how to keep company with human beings, you wouldn't be washing vegetables."

He was asked what he got out of philosophy, and said, "Being able to talk with anybody, cheerfully."

He was once reproached for his extravagant lifestyle, and said, "If it were wrong to be extravagant, it wouldn't happen during the festivals of the gods."

He was once asked what advantage philosophers had, and said, "If all laws were to be repealed, we would carry on living in the same way."

(69) He was asked by Dionysius why philosophers frequent the houses of rich men, whereas rich men no longer frequented the houses of philosophers, and said, "The former know what they need, but the latter don't."

He was once reproached for his extravagant way of life by Plato, and said, "do you think that Dionysius is a good man?" When Plato agreed, he said, "And yet he lives more extravagantly than I do; so there's nothing to stop a man from living both extravagantly and well."

He was asked what the difference is between educated and uneducated men, and said, "The same difference as between trained and untrained horses."

Once he was going into a brothel and one of the lads with him blushed, and he said, "Going in is not the problem; the problem is not being able to get out."

(70) Somebody brought him a knotty problem and asked him to provide a solution, and he said, "Why do you want to untie it, you fool, if it causes us trouble enough when it's tied up?"

He said that it's better to be a beggar than a fool; the former need money, but the latter need to become human.

Once when abuse was being heaped on him he slipped away; but the other fellow ran after him and asked, "Why are you running away?" He replied, "You've got the right to speak critically of me, but I've got the right not to listen to it."

When someone said that he always saw philosophers at the doors of the rich, he said, "Yes indeed, doctors too are at the doors of the sick; but that's no reason to prefer being sick to being a doctor."

(71) Once he was sailing to Corinth when a storm came upon them, and he got all upset about it. Someone said, "We ordinary guys aren't worried, but you philosophers are cowards!" He replied, "That's because the lives at stake in the two cases are not comparable."

When someone prided himself on his wide learning, he said, "Those who eat the most and train the hardest are not healthier than those who restrict themselves to what they need, and likewise it's not those who learn lots of things but those who learn what's useful who are good."

⁵ it is not exactly clear what two species of fish the Greek words refer to, but the point seems to be this: if it is worth a large amount of liquid to get a small fish, it would be worth a small amount of liquid to get a large fish, like a tuna, or the generosity of Dionysius.

A lawyer pleaded a lawsuit for him and won the case, and then asked, "What good did Socrates do you?" He replied, "This: what you said about me in your speeches is true."

(72) [He gave his daughter Arete the best advice and trained her to despise excess.]⁶

He was asked by someone in what way his son would be better for being educated <sc. by Aristippus>, and replied, "If nothing else, at least when he goes to the theatre he won't sit down on the stone <seats> like a stone."

When someone brought his son to him he asked a fee of 50 *drachmas*, and when the father objected, "For that much I can buy a slave!" he replied, "Go ahead; and then you'll have two."

He said that he didn't take money from his acquaintances for his own use, but so as they would know what to spend their money on.

Once he was criticized for hiring an orator when he had a lawsuit, and he said, "When I have a dinner party, I hire a cook."

(73) Once when he was being forced by Dionysius to talk about one of his philosophical ideas, he said, "It would be ridiculous for you to learn from me what to say, and yet teach me when to say it." Dionysius took offence at this and made him sit at the far end of the table, and he said, "You must have wanted to make that spot a place of honour."

When someone was boasting of his ability to dive, he said, "Aren't you embarrassed to be bragging about what a dolphin does?"

(74) To someone who accused him of living with a prostitute, he said, "Really? Does it make any difference whether the house you rent has been rented before by lots of other people or by nobody?" "No." "Does it make any difference whether the ship you sail in has been sailed in before by thousands of people or by nobody?" "None." "Then it makes no difference whether the woman you have sex with has had lots of men or none."

To someone who accused him of taking money even though he was a student of Socrates, he replied, "Yes of course, for even Socrates, when people sent him grain and wine, took a little and sent the rest back; and he had the leading men of Athens to do his bidding, whereas I have my servant Eutychides."⁷

Lais the courtesan was his girlfriend, as Sotion says in the second book of his *Philosophical Schools*. (75) To those who castigated him for this, he replied, "I'm having it off with her, not being had by her; look, the best thing is not to do without pleasures, but to have control over pleasures without being controlled by them."

To someone who criticized him for extravagant catering, he said, "Wouldn't you have bought all this for three *obols*?" "Yes." "Well then, in that case I'm not a pleasure-lover; you're a money-lover."

Once when Simos, the steward of Dionysius, was showing him fancy houses with mosaic stonework floors (he was a Phrygian and a scoundrel) Aristippus coughed up phlegm and spat in his face; when Simos flew into a rage, he said, "I couldn't find a more suitable place."

⁶ this report about Arete breaks the pattern of anecdotes, and appears to have been imported to this place from another sort of doxography, by a later scholar (perhaps Diogenes Laertius himself), attracted by the anecdotes in (72) about the education of sons.

⁷ "Mr. Good-luck" i.e. not the name of an actual servant of Aristippus, but a way of saying that he lived by his own wits and the luck of the draw.

(76) When Charondas (or Phaedo, as others say) said, "Who's that all perfumed up?", he said, "'Tis I, miserable wretch, and the still more miserable wretch the king of Persia!⁸ But since none of the other animals are any the worse off for it, wouldn't it be the same for human beings? Damnation to those pansies who criticize the smells that we find nice!"

When he was asked how Socrates died, he replied, "As I would wish to die."

Once Polyxenus the sophist came into his place and found girls there and fancy dishes of food on the table, and then criticized him for it; a little later Aristippus asked him, "Can you join us later on today?" (77) And when Polyxenus agreed, he said, "So what's the problem? You seem to be criticizing the outlay, not the food."

When his servant was carrying money on a voyage and finding it heavy, as Bion says in his Harangues, he said, "Throw away most of it and carry only as much as you can."

Once he was on board ship and then discovered that the vessel was manned by pirates, so he took out his money and counted it; and then, as if by accident, let the money fall into the sea and loudly lamented his loss. But others say that he then said, "Better for the money to perish because of Aristippus than vice versa."

Dionysius once asked him what his purpose was in coming, and he said it was to impart what he had and obtain what he didn't have. (78) But some said this was his answer: "When I needed wisdom I went to Socrates; now that I need money I've come to you."

He used to complain about people that when they buy pottery in the market they tap it to make a sound, whereas when it comes to various ways of life, they have random opinions. But others attribute this remark to Diogenes.

And once when Dionysius, in his cups, commanded everybody to put on a set of purple robes and dance, Plato declined, quoting this line: "I could not stoop to put on women's clothes."⁹ But Aristippus put on the robes and, as he was about to dance, tossed off this riposte: "Even amid the Bacchic revelry / True modesty will not be put to shame."¹⁰

(79) He once <requested something> for a friend from Dionysius and when he was not successful he fell at his feet; when someone ridiculed him for that, he said, "It's not my fault, but Dionysius's; he's got his ears in his feet."

He was staying in Asia and was taken prisoner by Artaphernes the satrap, and someone said to him, "Can you be cheerful under these circumstances?" "Yes, you fool, for when should I be more cheerful than now, when I am about to talk with Artaphernes?"

Those who went through the whole curriculum but stopped short of philosophy he compared to the suitors of Penelope; for though they got to enjoy Melantho, Polydora, and the rest of the servants, they were entirely unsuccessful at sleeping with the mistress of the house herself.

(80) Now when Aristippus was asked which subjects fine young boys ought to learn, he said, "Subjects that will be useful to them as men."

To the person who criticized him for proceeding from Socrates to Dionysius, he said, "Yes, but I came to Socrates for education and to Dionysius for recreation."

When he had made money by teaching, Socrates asked, "Where did you get so much money?" "Where you got so little."

⁸ a sarcastic riposte to the argument at Gorgias 470d ++ that even tyrants in the full grip of power and with unrestricted self-indulgence will be "miserable wretches" if they are not men of justice.

⁹ Euripides, Bacchae 836.

¹⁰ *ibid.* 317.

(81) When a prostitute told him, "You got me pregnant," he said, "You no more know that than if, after running through bullrushes, you said, 'I was pricked by that one.'"

When someone accused him of exposing his child to die as if it wasn't his own offspring, he said, "We know that phlegm and parasites come from us, but since they're useless we pitch them as far away as possible."

When he received from Dionysius a sum of money and Plato took away a book, and Aristippus was criticized for this, he said, "I need money; Plato needs books."

When someone asked him why he allowed himself to be refuted by Dionysius, he said, "For the same reason as the others refute him."

(82) He asked Dionysius for money, who said, "No; you said that the wise man would never be at a loss."¹¹ To this he replied, "Give me the money and we'll discuss the question." When he was paid, he said, "See? I wasn't at a loss."

When Dionysius quoted these lines to him -- "Whoever enters into the court of a tyrant / Becomes his slave, though free of birth," he replied, "He's not a slave who comes in freedom."¹² Diocles tells this story in his Lives of the Philosophers, but others attach the story to Plato.

After getting angry with Aeschines, he said to him after a short time, "Shouldn't we make it up and stop this nonsense? Or are you waiting for someone to reconcile us over the wine bowl?" Aeschines said, "Fine." (83) Aristippus said, "So remember that I made the first approach, though I'm the elder." And Aeschines said, "Well done, by Hera! "You're right; you're a much better man than I: I started the animosity, but you started the friendliness."

These stories are ascribed to Aristippus.

There have been four men called Aristippus: 1) our present subject; 2) the author of a book about Arcadia; 3) the grandson of the first Aristippus, the son of his daughter, who was called Aristippus Metrodidaktos;¹³ a philosopher of the New Academy.

The following books by the Cyrenaic philosopher are in circulation: a history of Libya in 3 Books, dedicated to Dionysius; one work containing 25 dialogues, some written in Attic, some in Doric, as follows: (84) Artabazus; To the Shipwrecked; To the Exiles; To a Beggar; To Lais; To Porus; To Lais, concerning the Mirror; Hermias; A Dream; To the Master of Ceremonies; Philomelus; To his Intimate Friends; Against those who blame him for his love of prostitutes and old wine; Against those who blame him for his extravagant catering; Letter to his daughter Arete; To someone getting into training for the Olympics; Cross-examination; another Cross-examination; Maxims, to Dionysius; Another set <of maxims>, on the statue; Another set <of maxims>, on the daughter of Dionysius; To someone who felt himself insulted; To someone who was trying to be a city counsellor. Some people also say that he wrote 6 books of Essays; but others, including Sosicrates of Rhodes,¹⁴ say that he wrote none at all.

(85) According to Sotion (in his second book) and Panaetius, the following books are his: On Education; On Virtue; Protrepticus (Exhortation to Philosophy); Artabazus; The Shipwrecked; The Exiles; 6 books of Essays; 3 books of Maxims; To Lais; To Porus; To Socrates; On Fortune.

¹¹ the Greek means both "be at your wit's end" and "be poverty-stricken."

¹² both Dionysius and Aristippus were quoting from lost tragedies.

¹³ i.e. the one who was taught by his mother (Arete, daughter of Aristippus).

¹⁴ presumably in his work called Diadoche <i.e. Philosophical Schools>.