Philosophy Could Have Been a Lot More Fun

Two recent biographies, of Plato and Diogenes, show the divergent path Western thought could have taken.

By Kieran Setiya
Diogenes of Sinope, a beggar who lived on the streets of Athens in the fourth century B.C.E., has been hailed as the progenitor of performance art, an inspiration for the Occupy movement, and, by the novelist Joyce Carol Oates, “the first, some might claim the best, stand-up comic.”

He was also a noted philosopher. Yet his legacy doesn't lie in his written work—almost none of which survives—but in colorful anecdotes about his life recorded by contemporaries and compiled most prominently by his namesake, Diogenes Laërtius, about 600 years later in Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers. Diogenes’s reputation rests on a gift for one-liners in the spirit of Groucho Marx. Flouting social norms, Diogenes was said to masturbate in the marketplace, responding to side-eyed glances with bemusement: “If only one could do away hunger by rubbing one’s stomach.” Admonished for drinking in a bar, Diogenes shot back, “I also get my hair cut in a barbershop.” Captured and sold into slavery, Diogenes was asked to list his skills. He replied, “Ruling over men,” and told the herald, “Spread the word in case anyone wants to buy himself a master.”
Philosophy is notoriously difficult to define, but you may wonder if this really counts. When we think about the birth of Western philosophy, we tend to think of Diogenes’s contemporary, Plato, a systematic theorist who founded an academy and whose written dialogues, clocking in at more than half a million words, have been preserved in full. Plato was wealthy and well connected. He did not live in a large ceramic jar, owning no more than a cloak, a stick, and a knapsack, as Diogenes is said to have done. (When he saw a boy drinking from the hollow of his own hand, Diogenes threw away his cup: It was superfluous.)

How could Western philosophy, in its infancy, encompass such divergent figures: on one side, a scholar of metaphysics who was a member of the Athenian 1 percent, and on the other, a mendicant gadfly without political capital, a street performer known for his verbal wit, an activist who dismissed Plato’s discourse as a “waste of time”? Newly published books about the lives of Plato and Diogenes send us back to a time when philosophy did not know what it would grow up to be.

A remarkable fact about Robin Waterfield’s *Plato of Athens* is that it’s the first full-length biography of Plato ever published. The reasons for this neglect are partly historiographic: Though Plato’s dialogues survive, they barely mention him. We have no official Athenian records of his life, and the earliest (short) biographies were set down centuries later. But that’s not the whole story. We also know very little about Diogenes of Sinope, yet he’s had three biographers to date. The problem with Plato is that he was not much fun. Plato’s life, like the life of most career academics, was relatively dull. The exception is a series of misadventures in international politics described at length in a Platonic letter most scholars now regard
as apocryphal. Waterfield’s life of Plato gains vitality by arguing that this letter is in fact authentic.

Plato of Athens: A Life In Philosophy
By Robin Waterfield

We’ll come back to the political intrigue, but apart from that, Waterfield’s portrait of Plato is traditional. He was born around 424–3, during the Peloponnesian War, but was too young to fight in it. When the war ended, the victorious Spartans imposed on Athens the rulership of the Thirty Tyrants, with Plato’s relative Critias—like him, an admirer of Socrates—among them. The regime was ruthless and unstable. It was overthrown within eight months, and Athenian democracy was restored.

Four years later, Socrates was executed for impiety and Plato withdrew from public life. He had toyed with becoming a poet before committing to philosophy, traveling to Megara to visit the Socratic philosopher Euclides around 396. On his return to Athens, Plato likely fought in the Corinthian War (395–86). In the peace that followed, he visited Pythagoreans in what is now Southern Italy and met political leaders in Syracuse before founding the Academy in a park on the outskirts of Athens in 383. There he taught until his death in 348–7.

Read: Live like the ancient cynics
What you think you know about Plato’s philosophy is probably right. He is famous for believing in abstract, immaterial “forms”: ideals of justice, beauty, and the good that exist outside of space and time. For Plato, the material world was second-rate and the soul was immortal. Like every Socratic philosopher, Plato held that living well is more about the virtues of justice, temperance, and courage than honor or pleasure or wealth.

By the time he founded the Academy, Plato was already well-known. But he was not a “public philosopher.” Waterfield finds evidence of two popular appearances, one a reading of Plato’s dialogue, *Phaedo*, during which, we’re told, “the rest of the audience drifted away and only Aristotle remained to the end.” The other was a lecture on the good. It did not go well:

The audience for the lecture came in the expectation that Plato would talk about human goods such as health, wealth, and status, and would give them a recipe for the good life; instead they were treated to abstract and perplexing talk about “mathematics, numbers, geometry, astronomy, and finally the argument that the good is one.”

Waterfield leaps to Plato’s defense, discounting the dig about the dialogue as “malicious gossip” and complaining that, for Plato, the good is not just a moral but a metaphysical concept, “the transcendent source of all value in the world … [and] the ultimate cause of all things.” One cannot comprehend how one should live without
engaging in abstruse metaphysics. But it’s easy to sympathize with an audience who wanted a TED Talk and got a textbook instead.

Despite this cold reception, Plato “invented what we call the discipline of philosophy,” Waterfield writes. He did not do this alone. Despite their disagreements, the Socratics “flooded the market with their books, writing scores of philosophical works in the forty or so years after Socrates’s death … attempting to sweep aside anyone else’s claim to be an educator.”

Waterfield’s narrative is compelling. But is it true? Was Plato Socrates’s heir apparent? They were very different people. Socrates was not wealthy; he wrote nothing; and he did not establish a school. Instead, he conversed in the marketplace, often with satirical wit—the quintessential public philosopher. When we adopt a wider lens, the history looks different too. The pre-Socratics were metaphysicians, arguing that all is flux, or that all is one, or that all is made of water. For Socrates, the urgent question was not metaphysical but ethical: “How ought we to live?” Plato inherited this question but argued that we need metaphysics to answer it, synthesizing Socrates with the pre-Socratic tradition. The result was philosophy as it has come down to us today: dense, discursive, theoretical.
But this wasn’t predetermined. The most important Socratic philosopher beside Plato was Antisthenes. Waterfield presents him as a fellow traveler, but his critique of Platonic philosophy was hardly affable: The title of his lost dialogue, Sathôn, meaning “prick,” is a filthy riff on Plato’s name (Platôn). According to tradition, Antisthenes taught Diogenes. They were the original Cynics—after kynikos, or “doglike,” on account of their shameless behavior: shitting, pissing, and masturbating in public. Seen in this light, Diogenes’s performative philosophy, his willful demolition of social norms, was a plea for the grounded pragmatism of Socrates over Plato’s airy theorizing. If the most important thing in life is the pursuit of virtue, Diogenes screams, why don’t we act like it?

Like every mythic hero, Diogenes has an origin story that may or may not be true. As told in the French Classicist Jean-Manuel Roubineau’s biography, *The Dangerous Life and Ideas of Diogenes the Cynic*—newly translated by Malcolm DeBevoise—the oracle of Apollo cryptically instructed Diogenes to “debase” the currency. He returned to Sinope and, with his father, Hicesias, an official money changer, did just that: One or both were involved in financial fraud. Fleeing prosecution, Diogenes was exiled from Sinope. With the benefit of hindsight, he saw that only fools take oracles literally: His philosophical task was to debase the currency of convention by living in accord with human nature.

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**The Dangerous Life and Ideas of Diogenes the Cynic**

By Jean-Manuel Roubineau
Diogenes likely washed up in Athens in the mid-360s, around the same time as a teenage Aristotle. At this point, Plato was nearly 60 and Antisthenes around 80—if, indeed, he was still alive. (Diogenes was influenced by Antisthenes, but may have arrived too late to meet him.) What we know of Diogenes’s philosophy has been preserved in stories about his life. His philosophical interactions were often comic. When Plato defined man as the featherless biped—so it’s said—Diogenes brought a plucked chicken to the door of the Academy. While a philosopher was arguing that motion is unreal, Diogenes got up and walked away.

Performances like these are essentially critical: Philosophy and comedy share a disruptive spirit. But Diogenes had convictions too. What he stood for, at heart, was the aspiration to live as the Socratics claimed to believe one should. For Socrates, famously, the unexamined life was not worth living. Diogenes went one step further: “To manage our lives properly,” he said, “we need either reason or a rope.” His brash performance of poverty showed how to be self-sufficient with next to nothing by limiting one’s desires. In politics, Diogenes criticized war between nations and the institution of private property, calling himself “a citizen of the world.”
If Diogenes asked how one can live with integrity in an unjust world, the answer we have is not in what he wrote but in what he did. Instead of musing on the metaphysics of justice within the walls of an academy complicit in wealth and power, Diogenes exposed injustice and its obfuscation, demonstrating by example that what seems natural or inevitable is not. Life can be examined not just in theory but in practice: through trials of life that widen our conception of what is possible or desirable—as Diogenes did.

Plato scorned this style of Socratic philosophy. When someone asked him, “What sort of a man do you consider Diogenes to be?” he replied, “Socrates gone mad.” By and large, the tradition has shared in this opinion. Western philosophy has been described as “a series of footnotes to Plato”; no one calls it a cacophony of callbacks to Diogenes. But it is to some extent an accident of history that the critical examination of society in pointed jokes, performance art, or radical experiments in living is not counted as “philosophy.” For Diogenes, moral philosophy was an inescapable part of life, implicit in everything we do, not an esoteric subject of research. The question “How to live?” is one we cannot help but ask, and we answer it in practice every day.

This goes for Plato too. He may have been a metaphysician, but Plato had a life to live. His practical ambitions were political, and he wrote more about politics than any other topic. (Taken together, Republic and Laws, both
focused on political philosophy, make up nearly 40 percent of his collected works.)
The most arresting chapter of Waterfield’s book treats the seventh Platonic letter as
Plato’s “apology,” recounting his doomed attempt to transform Dionysius II, the
tyrranical ruler of Syracuse, into something like a philosopher-king.

Plato had visited Syracuse once before, in 384, making a convert of Dion, a trusted
adviser of Dionysius I. Dion persuaded Dionysius II to invite Plato back to Syracuse
in 366. It was an offer Plato could not refuse. “It would have caused me acute
embarrassment to find myself to be absolutely nothing more than a pure theorist,”
reads the seventh letter, “unwilling to take in hand any practical task.” The trip was a
disaster. With Dion, Plato hoped to make Syracuse a constitutional monarchy. But
Dionysius did not trust them, banishing Dion from the city. Plato then fled. When
Dionysius invited him again in 363, professing new interest in philosophy, Plato
stalled for two years before agreeing to come. The first thing he did when he arrived
was test Dionysius’s sincerity. The tyrant failed miserably: “His philosophy was no
more than skin deep, like a suntan,” writes Waterfield, borrowing a simile from the
seventh letter. It was only with help from powerful friends that Plato was able to
escape from Syracuse and return to Athens, humiliated.

The Plato of the seventh letter is politically naive and strategically inept: a warning to
academics who hope to see their ideas in action. Diogenes was reputedly scathing.
When Plato saw him washing vegetables, the story goes, Plato quietly remarked, “If
you paid court to Dionysius, you wouldn’t need to do that.” To which Diogenes
replied: “Yes, and if you washed vegetables, you wouldn’t need to pay court to
Dionysius.”
Diogenes was not impressed by wealth or power. Perhaps the most famous anecdote about him involves Alexander the Great, who came to meet him in Corinth. While the philosopher was sunbathing, Alexander approached him and said, “Ask whatever you desire,” to which Diogenes replied, “Stand out of my light.” Diogenes died in poverty in the late 320s, of causes unknown—rumors include food poisoning, self-asphyxiation, deadly fever, and old age. He asked that his body not be buried, but it probably was.

Plato, by contrast, came from money, and his funeral was marked by a procession. Waterfield is oddly sanguine about this. “Plato’s wealth was all to the good,” he writes: “It gave him leisure time. Philosophy would be poorer if Plato had been poor.” Which is a nice turn of phrase, except it’s followed by this:

People from the working class in the fictional city-state of Republic are rigidly excluded from a share in government, on the grounds that their occupation makes it impossible for them to have the kind of lofty and long-term thoughts that are appropriate to political leaders.

Plato’s repressive, hierarchical “utopia” is a dystopian regime.

How the history of philosophy, and of society, might look if Diogenes had dethroned Plato is a difficult question to answer. Diogenes did have students. He was the teacher of Crates, who taught Zeno of Citium, the first Stoic. In this lineage, the contemporary revival of Stoicism as a lifestyle movement is
the legacy of Diogenes at two removes. But like Plato, the ancient Stoics were metaphysicians. They were armed with a cosmology in which the divine mind, Zeus, ensures that everything works out for the best. Diogenes refused such consolation. Nor would he have warmed to well-connected Stoics such as Seneca, a political adviser to Nero, or the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius.

The true heirs of Diogenes the Cynic are activists, thinkers, and performers outside of academic philosophy. They are figures such as Gerrard Winstanley, who tried to build a communist utopia in Civil War England, 200 years before Karl Marx; Henry David Thoreau, who aspired to live deliberately, “front[ing] only the essential facts of life”; and Greta Thunberg, who leads school strikes for climate action. Diogenes’s heirs are writers who use philosophy to criticize our lives but are not professional philosophers —like Jenny Odell, whose best-selling book, How to Do Nothing, cites Diogenes as an influence. They are artists who imagine alternative communities, as Ragnar Kjartansson does in The Visitors, a multichannel video installation in which a group of friends, performing threads of a repetitive, wistful song in separate rooms, come together as one. They are comedians whose work protests the status quo: Dave Chappelle releasing 8:46 after the murder of George Floyd; Michelle Wolf at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner; Sacha Baron Cohen exposing bigotry with comic characters like Borat.

Diogenes was hardly unreflective. To one who said, “I’m ill-suited to philosophy,” he replied, “Then why live at all, if you have no interest in living well?” But his reflection was urgent: How to live in the world as it is today? Asked why people care more about poverty than philosophy, Diogenes quipped: “Because they expect that they may
become lame and blind, but never that they will become philosophers.” Our world would be a better place if we acknowledged that we might become both.

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