Aristippus

Diogenes Laertius

In his book, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, the historian Diogenes Laertius (c. 3rd century) provides us with one of the most complete accounts of early Greek philosophy. In this excerpt, Laertius describes the hedonist philosophy of Aristippus and the Cyrenaic philosophers that came after him.

I. Aristippus was by birth a Cyrenean, but he came to Athens, as Aeschines says, having been attracted thither by the fame of Socrates.

II. He having professed himself a Sophist, as Phanias, of Eresus, the Peripatetic, informs us, was the first of the pupils of Socrates who exacted money from his pupils, and who sent money to his master. And once he sent him twenty drachmas, but had them sent back again, as Socrates said that his daemon would not allow him to accept them; for, in fact, he was indignant at having them offered to him. And Xenophon used to hate him; on which account he wrote his book against pleasure as an attack upon Aristippus, and assigned the main argument to Socrates. Theodorus also, in his Treatise on Sects, has attacked him severely, and so has Plato in his book on the Soul, as we have mentioned in another place.

III. But he was a man very quick at adapting himself to every kind of place, and time, and person, and he easily supported every change of fortune. For which reason he was in greater favor with Dionysius than any of the others, as he always made the best of existing circumstances. For he enjoyed what was before him pleasantly, and he did not toil to procure himself the enjoyment of what was not present... They say that he once ordered a partridge to be bought for him at the price of fifty drachmas [the standard currency at the time]; and when someone blamed him, “And would not you,” said he, “have bought it if it had cost an obol?” [1 obol = 6 drachmas] When he said he would, “Well,” replied Aristippus, “fifty drachmas are no more to me.” Dionysius once bade him select which he pleased of three beautiful courtesans; and he carried off all three, saying that even Paris did not get any good by preferring one beauty to the rest. However, they say, that
when he had carried them as far as the vestibule, he dismissed them; so easily in-
clined was he to select or to disregard things. On which account Strato, or, as oth-
ers will have it, Plato, said to him, “You are the only man to whom it is given to
wear both a whole cloak and rags.”

VII. But since we have written his life, let us now speak of the Cyrenaics who came
after him...

VIII. These men then who continued in the school of Aristippus, and were called
Cyrenaics, adopted the following opinions. They said that there were two emotions
of the mind, pleasure and pain; that the one, namely pleasure, was a moderate
emotion; the other, namely pain, a rough one. And that no one pleasure was differ-
ent from or more pleasant than another; and that pleasure was praised by all ani-
mals, but pain avoided. They said also that pleasure belonged to the body, and
constituted its chief good, as Paraetius also tells us in his book on Sects; but the
pleasure which they call the chief good, is not that pleasure as a state, which con-
sists in the absence of all pain, and is a sort of undisturbedness, which is what Epi-
curus admits as such; for the Cyrenaics think that there is a distinction between
the chief good and a life of happiness, for that the chief good is a particular plea-
ure, but that happiness is a state consisting of a number of particular pleasures,
among which, both those which are past, and those which are future, are both
enumerated. And they consider that particular pleasure is desirable for its own sa-
ke; but that happiness is desirable not for its own sake, but for that of the particu-
lar pleasure. And that the proof that pleasure is the chief good is that we are from
our childhood attracted to it without any deliberate choice of our own; and that
when we have obtained it, we do not seek anything further, and also that there is
nothing which we avoid so much as we do its opposite, which is pain. And they
assert, too, that pleasure is a good, even if it arises from the most unbecoming
causes, as Hippobotus tells us in his Treatise on Sects; for even if an action be ever
so absurd, still the pleasure which arises out of it is desirable, and a good.

Moreover, the banishment of pain, as it is called by Epicurus, appears to the
Cyrenaics not to be pleasure; for neither is the absence of pleasure pain, for both
pleasure and pain consist in motion; and neither the absence of pleasure nor the
absence of pain are motion. In fact, absence of pain is a condition like that of a
person asleep. They say also that it is possible that some persons may not desire
pleasure, owing to some perversity of mind; and that all the pleasures and pains of
the mind, do not all originate in pleasures and pains of the body, for that pleasure
often arises from the mere fact of the prosperity of one’s country, or from one’s
own; but they deny that pleasure is caused by either the recollection or the anticipation of good fortune—though Epicurus asserted that it was—for the motion of the mind is put an end to by time. They say, too, that pleasure is not caused by simple seeing or hearing. Accordingly we listen with pleasure to those who give a representation of lamentations; but we are pained when we see men lamenting in reality. And they called the absence of pleasure and of pain intermediate states; and asserted that corporeal pleasures were superior to mental ones, and corporeal sufferings worse than mental ones. And they argued that it was on this principle that offenders were punished with bodily pain; for they thought that to suffer pain was hard, but that to be pleased was more in harmony with the nature of man, on which account also they took more care of the body than of the mind.

And although pleasure is desirable for its own sake, still they admit that some of the efficient causes of it are often troublesome, and as such opposite to pleasure; so that they think that an assemblage of all the pleasures which produce happiness, is the most difficult thing conceivable. But they admit that every wise man does not live pleasantly, and that every bad man does not live unpleasantly, but that it is only a general rule admitting of some exceptions. And they think it sufficient if a person enjoys a happy time in consequence of one pleasure which befalls him. They say that prudence is a good, but is not desirable for its own sake, but for the sake of those things which result from it. That a friend is desirable for the sake of the use which we can make of him; for that the parts of the body also are loved while they are united to the body; and that some of the virtues may exist even in the foolish. They consider that bodily exercise contributes to the comprehension of virtue; and that the wise man will feel neither envy, nor love, nor superstition; for that these things originate in a fallacious opinion. They admit, at the same time, that he is liable to grief and fear, for that these are natural emotions. They said also that wealth is an efficient cause of pleasure, but that it is not desirable for its own sake. That the sensations are things which can be comprehended; but they limited this assertion to the sensations themselves, and did not extend it to the causes which produce them. They left out all investigation of the subjects of natural philosophy, because of the evident impossibility of comprehending them; but they applied themselves to the study of logic, because of its utility.

Meleager, in the second book of his Treatise on Opinions, and Clitomachus in the first book of his Essay on Sects says, that they thought natural philosophy and dialectics useless, for that the man who had learnt to understand the question of good and evil could speak with propriety, and was free from superstition, and escaped the fear of death, without either. They also taught that there was nothing naturally and intrinsically just, or honourable, or disgraceful; but that things were
considered so because of law and fashion. The good man will do nothing out of the way, because of the punishments which are imposed on, and the discredit which is attached to, such actions; and that the good man is a wise man. They admit, too, that there is such a thing as improvement in philosophy, and in other good studies. And they say that one man feels grief more than another; and that the sensations are not always to be trusted as faithful guides.