

# THE HISTORY AND MYSTERY OF DIOGENES LAERTIUS

**Paul Swift**

Bryant University, USA

## Abstract

“The History and Mystery of Diogenes Laertius” examines the peculiar status of the *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. As literature, philosophy, and history, the *Lives* is a unique text, since it furnishes us with the only surviving attempt to construct an encyclopedia of philosophy from the ancient western world. This essay examines some of the influence this text has had on the history of philosophy, especially Nietzsche’s interpretation of philosophy. There are parts of the *Lives* which are widely regarded as accurate by specialists in philosophy (such as the Letter to Menoecus by Epicurus), but there are also parts of the text which are historically unreliable and inaccurate. Diogenes veers from history into fiction at times and this essay addresses some of the difficulties involved in determining precisely where these transitions occur. Even when using the best scholarly methods, it is not always possible to know which parts of the *Lives* are trustworthy: thus there is a mystery, a legend which Diogenes preserves at the dawn of western philosophy.

The *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius survives from antiquity as the oldest attempt to offer a comprehensive history of Western philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Little is known about who Diogenes Laertius actually was, but he preserved details of the lives and doctrines of philosophers from the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE through the third century CE. Diogenes considers several accounts of philosophy as originating in Egypt, India, and Persia, but makes a point of insisting that philosophy begins with the Greeks.<sup>2</sup> All quests for the origins of Western philosophy in the ancient world must deal with this surprisingly neglected text, the peculiar odyssey

of Diogenes' *Lives*.

When I was giving a paper in New York City some years ago at a philosophy conference, a friend of mine referred to the *Lives* as the *National Enquirer* of the ancient world. Some of this vast collection of philosophy, poetry, anecdotes, and humor from the *Lives* is indeed unreliable as an historical source for philosophers from antiquity and bears a superficial resemblance to a supermarket tabloid.<sup>3</sup> However, some of the *Lives* is widely accepted as authentic and the text often provides us with the best we have to go on from the earliest Ionian and Italian philosophers. All modern accounts of Plato's life are virtually identical to the history which Diogenes Laertius preserves.<sup>4</sup> However, not everything that Diogenes writes about Plato is accepted as truth, or even likely for that matter.

I am especially interested in trying to figure out where Diogenes Laertius lapses from history into fiction, a real problem that persists at the dawn of philosophy in the old West. Where and when may we safely assume that Diogenes is offering history, rather than reports of rumors and heresay?<sup>5</sup> Where does his collection veer from history into fiction?

Although Diogenes gets some details wrong from primary texts which still survive, he also gets many details correct, and there still is a kind of rigor in how he has assembled and edited the contents of the *Lives*.<sup>6</sup> Diogenes Laertius furnishes us with the only virtual encyclopedia of philosophy which has survived from the ancient world, even though figures such as Seneca, Lucretius, and Cicero are not mentioned. It is a unique text in the history of philosophy and here I hope to open discussion about several ambiguities and problems which Diogenes Laertius presents. I will address a few of things he writes about Plato and his influence on Nietzsche, but a few comments are in order about the peculiar status and role this work occupies in Western philosophy.

It is virtually certain that Diogenes Laertius assembled the *Lives* from multiple sourcebooks, as well as from primary texts from the history of philosophy and literature.<sup>7</sup> He is neither consistent nor reliable in some of his reports, since some of the details he cites obviously contain errors.<sup>8</sup> Some of the errors found in Diogenes Laertius were probably introduced by copyists in the precarious transmission of the text from antiquity, but some errors are undoubtedly due to the compiler, Diogenes himself. Among

other errors, he repeats himself at times, contradicts himself, and attributes the same anecdotes to different philosophers. Nonetheless, Diogenes does purport to be trying to deliver an accurate account of the histories passed down to him, taking painstaking details about titles of philosophical works, philosophic doctrines, causes of philosophers' deaths, and other details.

In 1929, Long claimed that none of the surviving oldest versions of Diogenes Laertius went back prior to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Long claims that there were four versions of the *Lives* from the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century still in existence at that time, and there was very likely a common predecessor text from which these versions were derived from the ninth century. He points out that a Latin opening was added to the *Lives* by a monk sometime before 1432. Diogenes Laertius' text arrives in the modern world via a precarious lineage of copyists.

The surviving collection from Diogenes Laertius provides a history of about nine centuries, offering a chapter for each of the 82 different philosophers on whom he focuses. It is virtually certain that a substantial portion of book VII has been lost. Thus the *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* at one time was larger than it is now, as there are indices which have survived, indicating that there were at least twenty other additional chapters devoted to Stoic philosophers which have been irretrievably lost.

Someone once compared Diogenes Laertius to an enormous jigsaw puzzle with many missing pieces—and the missing pieces of this enormous puzzle are replaced with pieces from dozens of other puzzles—a nightmare for anyone who tries to make the mix of shapes fit together seamlessly. Such an analogy still does not do justice to the difficulty of making historical sense of Diogenes Laertius, since there are special problems involved with some of the sources which he incorporates: to what degree are the primary texts he uses reliable? Some of his compilation clearly seems to be reliable, since he quotes primary texts at times of works that still survive, such as Plato's, and he also preserves the *Letter to Menoecus* from Epicurus which is accepted as authentic today by virtually all historians of ancient philosophy.

However, he also passes down letters which are widely regarded as forgeries, such as Pherecydes to Thales 1.121. Yet Diogenes Laertius still suggests that he is trying to preserve a "straight" account of the details concerning the history of philosophy throughout most of the *Lives*. None-

theless, his work may poetically embellish some elements from the history of philosophy at times and I believe that this is part of the reason why neither philosophers nor historians pay much attention to this text today.

Diogenes Laertius attempts to eulogize the philosophers at times. At various junctures in the text he conveys the idea that philosophy betokens a special type of greatness. He wants to tell an interesting story about philosophy, one that invites the listener to imagine what the great philosophers were like as persons within circumstances in real life. Sometimes story-tellers play with the facts, and the degree to which this happens within the *Lives* still remains a mystery.

I suspect that part of the reason that less attention is paid to Diogenes Laertius today than was the case in prior centuries has to do with the way philosophy is done today. In some quarters, interest in the history of philosophy is viewed as far removed from the cutting edge of philosophy. A former colleague of mine remarked that the history of philosophy really starts with Hume, suggesting that philosophy before Hume is something like witchcraft. If not witchcraft, pre-Humean philosophers could still be conceived as quaintly obsolete for the philosophers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After all, what can medieval or ancient thinkers offer for the quest of rigor in contemporary philosophy of science? Little or nothing—but is that what philosophy is all about? Alternatively, some philosophers who are sympathetic to currents in post-modernist thinking run the risk of making philosophy overly literary—to conceive the discourse of the sciences as one competing narrative or story about the world. It is just not intellectually defensible to have groundless deep skepticism about the real progress the sciences have made in the last few centuries for predicting how events unfold.

In the last few centuries there has been an increasing importance for philosophers to be well informed about developments in the sciences. If philosophy is a quest to understand what the nature of reality is, it is imperative to recognize that human beings really do know more today than they did in prior epochs. Some contemporary philosophers recognize this and infer that there is no pressing need to sort out the problems of ancient philosophy. However, prior generations of philosophers seem to be more receptive to such questions, as virtually every major philosopher of the modern epoch (between Gassendi and Nietzsche) had an acquaintance

with Diogenes Laertius.<sup>9</sup>

How much time is a professional philosopher willing to devote to digging through the history of ancient philosophy, when technologies constantly emerge which produce and make new types of knowledge possible? One could argue that the value of assimilating developments in new sciences is inversely proportionate to the need to immerse oneself in the ancient histories of philosophy. What value does the history of philosophy have for understanding the present world? The answer to this question depends in part on what one intends to get out of philosophy.

Diogenes Laertius is a story-teller and he depicts the details of the lives of the philosophers (not just their philosophic doctrines or positions and lists of books), as well as details about tyrants, cryptic ramblings, and poetry. He seems to have an interest in relating bizarre and unusual details, since such details often make for good stories. Many of his anecdotes are intended not only to inform, but to entertain. He does not want to bore anyone who is curious about philosophy, so he relates funny anecdotes at times, often to display a type of wit which philosophers exercised. The degree to which he takes poetic license to tell the history of philosophers renders his text mysterious at times: is it history or fiction? I suspect he offers a creative synthesis at times.

Many of details which Diogenes relates are frequently regarded as philosophically trivial. He is not only interested in the doctrines various philosophers put forward, but spends considerable effort relating the personal characteristics of philosophers, such as how they dressed, what they liked to eat, how they exercised, their favorite pastimes, whether they drank alcohol, and what they said about or did for friendship, marriage, and sex. His text is hard to characterize, since parts of it are profound, goofy, and even pornographic.

He actually quotes songs by some of the earliest thinkers (Chilon, Pittacus, Bias, Cleobulus), some of which he claimed were still sung during his own time. I am especially interested in the early connection of the eminent philosophers to music, and I believe this dimension also captured Nietzsche's attention. The idea of a music-playing Socrates was important for Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*: is it possible today for philosophers to use music as a medium to help spread their ideas?

Diogenes Laertius was especially important for Friedrich Nietzsche,

as one of Nietzsche's dissertation projects was under Ritschl—one which investigated the sources of Diogenes Laertius. Nietzsche's earliest published articles appeared in Ritschl's journal, *Rheinische Museum*. Diogenes Laertius is the figure who marks Nietzsche's transition from purely philological interests into the realm of philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

In Nietzsche's personal library there are still two copies of the *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* that survive today. For the most part they are free from marginalia, but the chapter on Democritus in one of Nietzsche's editions has little marks under virtually every word.<sup>11</sup> Diogenes Laertius clearly exerts a significant influence on Nietzsche's philosophic reflection, as Nietzsche employs the stories of Socrates directing Euripides' plays (DL II 18) as the basis for his central thesis of the *Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche exploits these rumors to suggest that tragedy dies when Socrates (the hypertheoretical moralist) hijacks the poetic imagination by making tragedy subservient to dialectical interests—making art subservient to morality.

One of the rumors involving Plato and burning texts in Diogenes is that Socrates takes Plato in as a student only after Plato tosses his tragic writings into the fire. It is worth noticing that Diogenes attributes the same anecdote to Metrocles, “come hither firegod” (DL VI 95), later in the text. It is likely that the sheer amount of sources which Diogenes tried to coordinate led to organizational difficulties where he accidentally repeated himself at times. Some of the repetition and inconsistency can be explained by the way in which Diogenes must have worked, since he assembled large quantities of papyrus scrolls from different authors and different collections from the history of philosophy and literature. The sheer amount of sources from which he seems to draw must have been nearly unmanageable, or at least very difficult to organize for his compilation.

Mejer argues that prior generations of scholars who have suggested that Diogenes is dishonest lack sufficient evidence to draw such a conclusion. Mejer is probably correct to suggest that Diogenes did not understand everything he read—but Mejer also maintains that Diogenes attempts to pass the histories of philosophy down as he has received them. He thus holds that Diogenes is honest and not willfully deceptive. Even if there are many parts of the *Lives* which are unreliable, Mejer argues that we ought to assume that Diogenes was basically honest.

Diogenes Laertius must have had some training in philosophy, and some have argued that he was an Epicurean philosopher. The disproportionate length of text devoted to Epicurus and his defense of Epicureanism may support this point, but he also expresses a deep respect for both Plato and the Stoics. Diogenes clearly is important as a sourcebook for Epicurean philosophy. Sorting out the parts of Diogenes which are reliable seems to be impossible at times, since some of the early histories which he passes on can not be verified by comparing them to other existing sources. Precisely what to make of his chapters on Socrates and Plato proves to be most difficult. At one point he conveys the idea that he is writing the *Lives* for a young woman who is a Platonist and he seems particularly interested in clarifying the historical details about Plato.

Diogenes points out that Plato puts words into the mouth of Socrates, attributing doctrines to Socrates which Socrates never held.<sup>12</sup> In terms of making sense of the evolution of Plato's writings, such a view is quite consonant with contemporary views, i.e., the early Platonic dialogues are more Socratic, whereas the middle and later dialogues are frequently viewed as advancing Plato's poetic license.

How much does Plato make up about Socrates? Diogenes reports varying accounts of the life of Socrates which apparently derive from authors other than Plato or Xenophon. Diogenes offers multiple accounts of the fine that Socrates proposes in his defense. Diogenes lists 25 drachmae, but then claims that Eubulides says he offered 100 (DL II 41-2). At the minimum it seems safe to acknowledge that Plato's figure of 30 minas in the *Apology* does not square with every account of Socrates' life which Diogenes was reading. However, there are roughly seven centuries between Socrates death and the likely time when Diogenes was writing, so at first glance it seems to make the most sense to assume that Plato is giving the more reliable account of the *Apology*. However, to what degree are we entitled to assume this?

How much is trustworthy from Diogenes? He writes that "Euphorion and Panaetius relate that the beginning of the *Republic* was found several times revised and rewritten, and the *Republic* itself Aristoxenus declares to have been nearly all of it included in the *Controversies* of Protagoras" (DL 3.37).

There was ample opportunity for forgeries to infiltrate the histories

of philosophy in the centuries lying between Plato and Diogenes Laertius, and virtually all philologists believe that Diogenes passes some of them off as if they were authentic at times. Many philologists believe that this is the case with respect to the claim that Plato copied most of the *Republic* from earlier authors. However, Diogenes also points out ten different dialogues that were falsely attributed to Plato (DL 3.62), so it really seems like Diogenes Laertius is trying to be careful in preserving the correct titles and doctrines of Plato's work. It seems like Diogenes has a will to objectivity and fact checking.

Which details are reliable from this early treasure mine of philosophy at times is impossible to determine. I would like to mention in closing that it seems very unlikely that Diogenes is simply fabricating the history of philosophy, and the copies of the last wills of Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Strato, Lyco, and Epicurus which he preserves reflect a value structure in his composition. Diogenes is interested in the details of the lives and deaths of philosophers, and tries to communicate something about who they were as real persons, rather than merely relaying the titles of their works and philosophic positions. This orientation almost certainly influenced Nietzsche's early desire to construct psychological character types in his analysis of the personalities of the Greek philosophers.

## **Conclusion**

Any attempts to reconstruct the earliest history of Western philosophy invariably consult details found in Diogenes Laertius, but at times it is difficult if not impossible to figure out which parts of the text are reliable. By comparing Diogenes to primary texts which still survive, as well as consulting other authors who comment on the history of philosophy such as Aristotle, Clement of Alexandria, Cicero, Eusebius, Pliny, Plutarch, Porphyry, Seneca, Stobaeus, and others, we may provisionally piece together a view of what the earliest history of Western philosophy was like. Diogenes Laertius may not be entirely satisfying as history, philosophy, or literature, but the *Lives* is still valuable as a peculiar window into the ancient world.

The *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius is a

very peculiar text, like none other in the history of Western philosophy. The huge amount of resources in which he finds himself entangled must have been unmanageable at times and contributed to some of the errors he records. However, I want to suggest, like Mejer, that for the most part Diogenes is probably honest and attempts to preserve the history of Western philosophy as it has been passed down to him. Moreover, there is a sense of a critical rigor which he exercises, since he does not appear to record just any random details from the history of philosophy. His identification of discrepancies within the tradition as it has been passed down to him, along with his attempt to identify forgeries and remove them from the lists of the genuine works of earlier philosophers indicates that he wants to preserve and contribute to the history of Western philosophy. The problem, however, still remains that even when we use all of the best scholarly methods, at times it is still impossible to identify if and when Diogenes lapses into fiction. Thus his collage of details of the eminent philosophers still offer us a genuine mystery, for no one knows whether some of his stories are true or false, a legend at the dawn of Western philosophy.<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Diogenes Laertius comes after Sextus Empiricus (Sextus Empiricus is mentioned in the chapter on Timon, IX 116), but the dates of Sextus are also uncertain. DL probably lived in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, so there were quite a few centuries between the time he assembled his compilation and the active periods of the earliest Greek philosophers.
- <sup>2</sup> Diogenes Laertius claims that the human race also begins with the Greeks (!) and the very name “philosophy” refuses to be translated into foreign speech (DL I.4).
- <sup>3</sup> Long points out that “Richard Hope has counted 1,186 explicit references to 365 books by about 250 authors, as well as more than 350 anonymous references.” Introduction to *the Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Loeb, Harvard University Press: Cambridge. xix.
- <sup>4</sup> Plato almost never writes about himself, except a brief mention of himself in the *Apology* and *Phaedo*. In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato does relate details of his travel to Sicily and his interaction with Dionysus II, but some scholars regard this letter as inauthentic.
- <sup>5</sup> Sometimes it is easy to recognize that what he is writing cannot possibly be true: he relates accounts of Epimenides’ life as if he is giving a straight history, but he claims that Epimenides took a 57 year nap (I.109)! Later in the same chapter

(1.112) he points out that some authors maintain that Epimenides simply went into solitude during his absence. At times the constellation of rumors contradict each other, but do any of them correspond to the historical biographies? Diogenes Laertius tries to rule out forgeries at times: in the same chapter he writes, “There is extant a letter of his to Solon the law-giver, containing a scheme of government which Minos drew up for the Cretans. But Demetrius of Magnesia, in his work on poets and writers of the same name, endeavors to discredit the letter on the ground that it is late and not written in the Cretan dialect but in Attic, and New Attic too. However, I have found another letter by him which runs as follows: (Here Diogenes quotes the long letter by Epimenides).

<sup>6</sup> A type of rigor is evidenced by Diogenes Laertius when he calls attention to various discrepancies in the histories of philosophy with which he was working. Consider his comments about Anaxagoras: “Of the trial of Anaxagoras different accounts are given. Sotion in his *Succession of the Philosophers* says that he was indicted by Cleon on a charge of impiety, because he declared the sun to be a mass of red-hot metal & that his pupil Pericles defended him, and he was fined five talents and banished. Satyrus in his *Lives* says that the prosecutor was Thucydides, the opponent of Pericles, and the charge was treasonable correspondence with Persia as well as impiety & the sentence of death was passed on Anaxagoras by default...Hermippus in his *Lives* says that he was confined in prison pending his execution... (and) that Pericles came forward and asked the people... to release him. So he was released; but he could not brook the indignity he had suffered and committed suicide (DL II 12-13). Also consider Diogenes’ survey of the varying accounts of Ariston’s books by Panaetius and Sosicrates (VII 163) and the account of whether Empedocles actually leapt into the fire (VIII 70-1). These sections provide examples of a type of critical rigor that is present in Diogenes.

<sup>7</sup> The reliability of Diogenes Laertius’ sources is important for assessing Diogenes himself, since he uses comic poets as authorities (!) for his philosophic lineages at times. If one were to imagine that 99.999 percent of all written philosophy were destroyed today and a thousand years in the future the only accounts of the history of philosophy would come from the Open Court series, future people would be forced to use such texts in the reconstruction of the history of philosophy. However, utilizing *Philosophy and the Simpsons*, *Philosophy and the Sopranos*, and the rest of their series to understand the history of philosophy through the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be very unsatisfying for professional philosophers, since the Open Court series is intended to open philosophy to a wider audience that otherwise would not care about philosophy. Interesting constructions would emerge, but if they were based essentially on a corpus that had to convey philosophy in general through references to pop culture and sensationalism, there still would be something obviously missing in terms of critical rigor and reliability for professional philosophers. Such an analogy still does not capture the difficult complexity of making sense of Diogenes’ *Lives*, but does pro-

vide a sense of what could happen if one were forced to reconstruct the history of philosophy based primarily upon a corpus assembled from “pop philosophy” for dilettante audiences.

<sup>8</sup> Consider Diogenes’ story about Anaxagoras commenting about the tomb of Mausoleum (DL II.11), which was a structure created at least 78 years after Anaxagoras’ death by Mausolus’s widow. Such a story can not possibly be true.

<sup>9</sup> Gassendi published his notes to book X in 1649 on Epicurus, the only book of the *Lives* devoted entirely to one thinker. See Spinoza’s letter on Plato’s plot to incinerate Democritus’s texts, a theme that also reverberates through Friedrich Lange and Nietzsche, a legend preserved in Diogenes Laertius. Each of these thinkers addresses this story about Plato which comes from the *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*: “Aristoxenus in his *Historical Notes* affirms that Plato wished to burn all the writings of Democritus that he could collect, but that Amyclas and Clinias the Pythagoreans prevented him, saying that there was no advantage in doing so, for already the books were widely circulated. And there is clear evidence for this is the fact that Plato, who mentions almost all the early philosophers, never once alludes to Democritus, not even where it would be necessary to controvert him, obviously because he knew that he would have to match himself against the prince of all philosophers, for whom Timon has this meed of praise, ‘Such is the wise Democritus, the guardian of discourse, keen-witted disputant, among the best I ever read’” (DL IX 40).

<sup>10</sup> In the nineteenth century multiple philologists proposed the thesis that Diogenes copied primarily from one text, rather than assembling from the vast collection of the titles to which he refers. Nietzsche advanced this thesis at one time, arguing that Diogenes Laetius had primarily copied from Diocles.

<sup>11</sup> Check out my *Becoming Nietzsche* (Lexington Books, 2005) for more on Nietzsche’s connection to Democritus and how it overlaps with Nietzsche’s analysis of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*.

<sup>12</sup> See DL 2.45: “But Plato, after mentioning Anaxagoras and certain other physicists in the Apology, treats for his own part themes which Socrates disowned, although he puts everything into the mouth of Socrates.” Also, DL 3.35: “They say that, on hearing Plato read the *Lysis*, Socrates exclaimed, ‘By Heracles, what a number of lies this young man is telling about me!’ For he has included in the dialogue much that Socrates never said.” Virtually all modern historians of philosophy believe that the *Lysis* is written about twenty years after Socrates’ death, so the report that Socrates actually heard Plato read the *Lysis* is almost certainly false.

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