

Diogenes of Sinope and the Currency of Happiness

According to a dominant symbolic reading of Diogenes of Sinope's mission to deface the currency, Diogenes sought to "put bad money out of circulation" (Long, Kurke, Branham), that is, destroy the social norms that inhibit life in accordance with nature and virtue. While not disputing the need for a symbolic reading of Diogenes' mission, the present paper aims to restore the literally financial meaning of Diogenes' defacement of the currency by pointing out the many ways by which anecdotes and legends involving Diogenes engage the phenomenon of money, that is, an abstracted, commensurable, fungible system of evaluation and exchange. First, many anecdotes feature Diogenes' transactional behavior. Diogenes the beggar confronted interlocutors with the demand for fair exchange, means of sustenance in exchange for his teaching about virtue and happiness. Language of buying and selling colors many of the anecdotes, since, as he puts it, "Very valuable things are sold for things of no value" (Diog. Laert. 6.35). Second, Diogenes substitutes real commodities (such as salt fish) for currency in some anecdotes, and in the political constitution he reportedly created in his work the *Politeia*, knucklebones are the currency, apparently an indication of the arbitrary valuation of symbolic tokens and perhaps the game-like quality of financial transactions. If Diogenes' abode in a barrel suggests his own status as a defaced coin (as Kurke suggests in an extended footnote), then it is the system of coinage in itself that Diogenes rejects, not the illegitimate status of some tokens within a generally good system. All this supports an overall symbolic basis for the defacement story, since the refinement of an otherwise good system is assumed in any reasonable account of the historical incident that might have underlain the story. The emphasis on the non-fungibility of virtue and other basic goods also renders the Cynic exhortation to poverty as a rhetorical

tactic, subordinate to the evaluation of virtue in the community in question, not a literal call to poverty in anything of real value.

Bibliography

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