

THE
JOURNEY



A SPIRITUAL ROADMAP
FOR MODERN PILGRIMS

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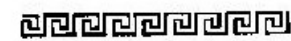
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THREE

THE CYNIC

*Can't We Be
Cynical About
Cynicism?*



As we left Protagoras behind, we could see and hear him wagging his head and tongue at us. But he did not follow us. (Apparently these philosophers that we met at each fork in our road could not leave their places and follow us.)

I cannot tell how long we walked down the rocky road toward the tiny hole in the ceiling that we had seen from afar. All I know is that it took far longer than I had expected. But eventually the road forked again, and as soon as it did, another philosopher immediately appeared in the left fork. This one, however, had no robe. He was dressed in nothing but a barrel, and he was carrying a lantern. He looked like a sad and spastic frog—rather like Jean-Paul Sartre.

"Diogenes!" called Socrates, evidently recognizing him.

"What nonsense have you come to beguile us with today? Are you still looking for an honest man with that lantern? Have you not yet noticed the holes in your barrel?"

Diogenes scowled and replied, very sternly, "I will deter your poor victim from his pointless quest."

"And how will you do that, Diogenes? You certainly do not make for a very attractive alternative."

"I will ask him how he intends to find this 'meaning of life' he is searching for. Protagoras said there is no objective truth at all, and you refuted him easily. But I am much more commonsensical. Of course there is some objective truth, and you can know it. It is self-contradictory to say otherwise. But not about the meaning of life. Physics and mathematics and such things are objective truths, but what you are looking for is objective truth in something like philosophy or religion or morality—am I right? Is that the sort of thing you are hoping to find?" He turned to me with his question.

"Yes," I said.

"Well, give it up. The meaning of life is that life has no meaning, in that sense. Or, if you prefer, the meaning is subjective. You make it up as you go along. It is whatever you please. Different strokes for different folks. For some it's philosophizing, for some it's collecting bottle caps."

I looked down at my bleeding toe as if it were some talisman against this man's spell of black magic. Noticing it, Diogenes said, "You may stub your toe against a stone, but how do you expect to stub your toe against 'the meaning of life'?"

"Not my toe," I said indignantly, "my mind."

"Ah, you think it can be found by *thinking*?"

"Yes."

"But it has not worked! Thousands have thought, and

they have come up with thousands of thoughts. Unlike stones, meanings are as manifold as we make them."

"So the meaning of life is purely subjective."

"Exactly."

"But *that* thought is also only subjective. So why should I believe it?" I thought I had learned how to refute this kind of thing.

But Diogenes had an answer: "Nearly everyone agrees about stones, do they not?"

"Yes."

"But not about the meaning of life."

"No."

"So how can you possibly say you can hope to know the objective truth about that? No matter what you believe, you will be disagreeing with the majority, and with many minds much brighter than yours."

My heart fell when I realized that Diogenes had appropriated the Socratic method and that I was on the receiving end instead of the giving end. I looked desperately to Socrates, who was standing meekly and silently beside me. He saw my look, understood, and shot back a look of his own which said both *Good for you for beginning to think and argue for yourself* and also *Too bad you have to give up so soon and ask for my help*—just like a father, easy to please and hard to satisfy. He then turned to address Diogenes.

"Let us see first whether we have understood your argument, before we decide whether to be persuaded by it. Is it fair to summarize it this way?—that whether or not there is objective truth about such things as *stones*, and whether or not we can know *that*, there is no objective truth about the meaning of life, about things we cannot touch and sense, like moral and religious and philosophical questions. Or if there is objective truth about the mean-

ing of life, we cannot hope to find it and know it. This is your conclusion, is it not?"

"Yes. Things like my barrel and things like your 'meaning of life' are very, very different kinds of things."

"And how are they different?"

"Everyone can find my barrel easily, Socrates, but no one can find your so-called meaning of life."

"Is this because it is too difficult to find, since we cannot sense it with our bodies as we can sense your barrel?"

"Yes."

"Or is it because people disagree much more about the meaning of life than about your barrel?"

"That too. Both reasons. People disagree *because* it is so difficult."

At this point Socrates turned to me and put in an aside:

"Note that it is always well to restate your opponent's argument in your own words to his own satisfaction, to be sure you understand it before you begin to evaluate it."

I remembered my history, and said, "Wasn't that a maxim of the medieval universities in their Scholastic Disputations?"

"It was. They really inherited that from me. It is a rule of fundamental fairness in debate. Your culture has quite forgotten it, except in the sciences. This is one reason you have so little understanding and so little agreement outside the sciences."

"It's a rule of morality, then—to be fair to your opponent?"

"Yes, but also a rule of self-interest, to be fair to yourself."

"I don't understand."

"Why do you debate? Is it not to find the truth? Is this not your self-interest?"

"I hope so."

"So do I. And you would not be sure what was true if the argument you refuted was not really your opponent's argument at all, but some other, some 'straw man' you had set up just to knock down. You would be like ships passing in the night rather than like crossed swords testing which blade was stronger."

"So even if I defeated the 'straw man' argument, I would not have defeated my opponent."

"I would not put it like that. I would not want to defeat my human opponent at all."

"What?"

"My real opponent is not made of flesh and blood. My opponent is ignorance, and I hope that is the opponent of my dialogue partner too. If so, we are fundamentally friends, not enemies, since we seek the same thing. This is why I seek out people who disagree with me. They are my special friends and allies. Their opposition helps me to be surer of the truth, as iron sharpens iron, or as a sparring partner strengthens your muscles, or an experiment confirms your theory."

I was grateful for this advice, and surprised that Socrates spoke directly this time like a preacher, instead of indirectly by questioning like a philosopher. Evidently this was a quasi-religious thing to him.

He then turned again to Diogenes. "Let us now examine these two reasons, the reason of Difficulty and the reason of Disagreement. Tell me, please: is it harder to discover a small stone than a large stone?"

"Of course."

"And is the small stone any less objective, or objectively true?"

"No."

"Then difficulty in discovery does not take away objective truth."

"Not a little difference like that, Socrates—between two stones. But there is a big difference between any sized stone and the meaning of life. You won't find the meaning of life no matter how good your glasses or microscopes are."

"But if difficulty of discovery made a thing more subjective, then a *little* difficulty of discovery would make the thing a *little* more subjective, and a big difficulty would make it a lot more subjective. But the little difficulty of discovering a little stone does not make the little stone even a little subjective. So the principle is not valid."

Diogenes did not answer but instead began to sulk. So Socrates tried to reason with him again. "Don't you see? How many small stones are on the surface of the moon is a very difficult thing to discover, but it is objective. Whether I feel a small stone in my shoe is a very easy thing to discover, but it is subjective. So *difficulty* and *subjectivity* are not the same."

Instead of thanking Socrates for the clarification, Diogenes sulked some more. Socrates went on (more for my sake than for Diogenes): "And your second reason also seems to prove nothing. Disagreement is no more a criterion of subjectivity than difficulty is. May I prove that to you?"

"I can't stop you."

"No, but you can stop yourself from looking at it. Look here for a moment, please, with me. Let us look at what people do disagree about. Do people ever disagree about the size of stones?"

"Sometimes."

"About the future? For instance, when a baby will be born?"

"Yes."

"About the past? For instance, when the universe began?"

"Yes."

"And about what things are good and what things are evil?"

"Yes."

"And about the meaning of life?"

"That too."

"But are not these things objective truths? Either the universe began billions of years ago, or it didn't. Either the baby will be born tomorrow, or not. Either it is good to fight a certain war, or it is not. Either life has meaning, or it does not. Either that meaning is to find the truth, or not. Each of these things is very different from something subjective, like a feeling, that is dependent on you."

"Some of these things are feelings, Socrates. Like the meaning of life. That's why people disagree about it. It's subjective."

"We have seen, at least, that people do sometimes disagree about some objective things, have we not?"

"Yes."

"Now let us see whether they disagree about subjective things."

"All right."

"Do they disagree about whether I feel pain in my foot? Or whether you desire to drink ale?"

"No. People don't argue about those things."

"Why not?"

"They are purely subjective."

"Aha! So it is not subjective things but objective things that people argue about."

"It looks like it."

"And do people argue about things they disagree on or

things they agree on?"

"Things they disagree on."

"So disagreement is only about objective things, not subjective things."

"That seems to follow."

"So disagreement about something is a reason not for thinking that something is subjective, but rather for thinking that it is objective."

"Oh."

"Do you see? Disagreement about something does not make that something subjective."

"I guess that follows logically. But it still seems common sense to say it does."

"I think not. Does it seem common sense to say that you can turn $2 + 2 = 4$ from an objective truth into a subjective truth simply by choosing to disbelieve it? That you can change the number of years the world has existed simply by not agreeing with whatever scientists have discovered about it? That I can change the truth about your barrel just by changing my thoughts about it? That I can remove the rock in my sandal just by doubting it? Is that what you call common sense?"

"But Socrates, all these are physical things. The meaning of life is not."

"True. But your argument was that the meaning of life is subjective because people disagree about it. Was that not your argument?"

"Yes."

"And that argument needs to assume that whatever people disagree about is subjective. Is that logic correct?"

"Yes."

"And I have shown that your assumption is false. For many of the things people disagree about are objective,

while people do *not* disagree about the subjective."

"All right then, it is subjective not because people disagree about it but because it is not physical."

"So whatever is not physical is not objective?"

"Yes."

"So your thoughts, which are not physical, are not objective to me, not independent of my thoughts? Your thoughts are only figments of my imagination?"

"Of course not."

"But thoughts are not physical things, are they?"

"No."

"Therefore it is not true that all nonphysical things are subjective."

"So it isn't. But the meaning of life is."

"Why? You have not yet given any good reason for your belief."

"Maybe not, Socrates, but neither have you. All you've done is refute my arguments. Give me something positive. Prove there is objective truth about the meaning of life."

"Suppose I could not do so. What would you conclude from that?"

"That you ought to be a cynic about it, like me, and believe that life has no meaning."

"Because I could not prove it?"

"Yes."

"So you are now assuming that we should believe only what we can prove."

"Yes. Isn't that the way *you* proceed? Isn't that *your* working assumption?"

"Certainly not!"

"But I thought you were big on this thing of reason and logic and proof."

"Oh, I am. But I don't think it's logical at all to demand

proof for everything."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not see how I can have proof of *that*."

Diogenes looked puzzled, so Socrates put it another way. "Do you say we should doubt everything we cannot prove?"

"Yes."

"Can you prove that principle?"

Diogenes looked embarrassed, as if his barrel had become transparent.

"Since you cannot prove it, we should not believe it, according to your principle. For your principle is not that 'seeing is believing' but that 'proving is believing.' All right, Diogenes, you have convinced me. You are right. Your conclusion is correct: we should not believe it if we cannot prove it. So let us abandon this unprovable principle that you must doubt whatever you can't prove. And therefore even if I can't prove that life has meaning, that will not convince me that I should doubt it. Thank you for your lesson, Diogenes."

"And thank you for yours, Socrates," I said. "I see your strategy now. Instead of trying to prove life had meaning, you disproved all the arguments that it didn't. Just like before: instead of proving objective truth, you disproved all the arguments against it. Why did you do it that way?"

"Because we all begin by believing in truth, and objective truth, and our power to know it, and even in a real meaning and purpose to life. Then along come some skeptics who give us reasons for doubting this. If I can refute all those reasons, we are back where we started, believing with no good reasons to doubt. We do not start as skeptics and then prove that there is truth. We start as believers. We assume that truth is, and is objective, and is knowable. And

whenever we choose the opposite road from this assumption, we fail. On that road we embrace nonsense and contradiction: the truth that there is no truth, or the proof that there is no proof. In fact we prove only that we are fools when we try that road. But nothing proves we are fools to try the other road."

"And that is the road I will try now," I said decisively, turning my back on Diogenes.

He called out from behind me: "You will never find that wild goose that you chase!"

"Perhaps not," I called back to him. "But even if not, the chase is worth the effort. Common sense itself tells me so. 'Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.' 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained.' The mere search for this truth is worth more than all that you offer me."

"What makes you think you are so different from me that you will find it? What do you think you've got that I haven't got?"

The direct question demanded a direct answer. "Courage to venture," I said. "And curiosity. How will I ever know if I do not try?"

"You'll be back!" he predicted glumly.

But by now I realized that it was time to stop arguing with him. "Goodbye," I said—more with my feet than my mouth.

As we walked down the right road, Socrates asked me, "Do you really think you have shown great courage?"

"Why not?" I asked.

"Courage comes only in the face of risk, does it not?"

"Yes."

"What have you risked? You yourself said it is better to travel down this road, even if you never arrive at your goal, than to arrive at the goal of his road. You have risked

nothing. You have dared nothing, except to have made the daring step of believing that one philosophy of life is really truer than another—that seeking truth, for instance, is really more meaningful than collecting bottle caps. Now do you think that is a great thing for which to be praised?”

“No, it is mere sanity,” I said.

“Nevertheless I praise you for it,” he said. “In an insane asylum like your world, simple sanity can be a heroic achievement.”