
Life of Demonax

Lucian of Samosata (ca. 170 CE)

Translated by Wendell Piez, 2026

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Introduction

Inevitably, even in our own time we were not to be entirely lacking in persons worthy of note and memory, whether for showing a splendid excellence in physique, or an acute philosophical mind. I speak in reference to Sostratus the Boeotian, whom the Greeks acclaimed and regarded as Heracles, and most of all to the learned Demonax. Both of these were men I personally knew and admired, being acquainted with Demonax the longest. Regarding Sostratus I have written in a different book, describing his stature and incredible strength, his ascetic lifestyle in Parnassus, his rough bed and rustic food, and his various deeds not undeserving of renown, such as arresting criminals and building roads, canals and aqueducts through impassable areas. To speak of Demonax, in contrast, is worthwhile for two reasons, namely so that the best people (if I might be so bold) should keep him in memory, and also so that the more talented young people and those inclined towards the study of philosophy might have not only ancient examples to emulate, but also a standard from our own times to set up and admire: the best of philosophers I have known.

Synopsis

He was born of a Cyprian family, and not an obscure one with respect to material wealth and political eminence. But as he was born for greater things, and believing in himself and his potential, he pursued the study of philosophy, at the urging neither of Agathaboulus (by God) nor, earlier, of Demetrius, nor Epictetus, although he sat with all these and indeed with the learned Timocrates of Heraclea, a man greatly accomplished in both rhetoric and science. But Demonax was not, as I said, inspired primarily by any of them, instead being motivated from childhood, by his admiration for beautiful things and by an innate attraction to philosophy, to pass over everything that ordinary people consider worthwhile. Instead he devoted himself entirely to

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freedom and forthrightness, and conducted his affairs straightforwardly, cleanly and irreproachably, providing an example to everyone who saw and heard him, in his thinking and in the sincerity of his pursuit of knowledge.

“Without unwashed feet” (as the saying goes) he was ambitious, becoming familiar with the poets and memorizing many of their works. He also practiced speaking and knew all sides in philosophical controversies, according to the aphorism, “not a little nor only with his fingertip.” He exercised his body and trained himself against hardship, providing for himself entirely with none of his needs unmet. Then when he learned he could no longer care for himself, he departed this life, leaving behind a great reputation among the most eminent of the Greeks.

His outlook

He did not subscribe to any particular school of philosophy, but commingled them into one, without revealing to anyone which one he favored. He seemed most akin to Socrates, even if in his style and his easy approach to life he seemed to emulate the Sinopean;^α he never presented himself falsely for the sake of admiration or attention from onlookers, but as an ordinary person, going on foot, not in the least puffed up, he took part and performed as a citizen. He offered no Socratic irony, demonstrating for his contemporaries the famous Attic tact, such that his interlocutors were sent away neither contemptuous of rudeness, nor wishing to escape from mean-spirited criticism, but rather entirely encouraged by his gentility to be much more composed, more enthusiastic and more hopeful for the future.

He was never seen complaining or stressed or angry, even when rebuking others; he found fault with misdeeds, while he sympathized with the misdoers, and claimed to observe the doctors' rule, to treat sicknesses without being unhappy with sick people.

He considered it to be human to go wrong, while God and those like unto God lift up and set right those who have stumbled.

^α Diogenes of Sinope

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Living in such a manner and wanting for nothing, he worked together on an equal basis with his friends. When they considered their good fortune, he reminded them of how temporary and apparent was their success, while if they lamented their poverty, complained about politics, or blamed sickness or infirmity, he would scold them with a laugh, for not seeing how soon their hardships are to cease and they to be free, from good and from bad, as everything is overtaken, in a short moment, by a long oblivion.

His mild temperament

He was able to reconcile quarreling brothers and mediate peace between women and their husbands.

He could even talk down a crowd of protesters and convince most of them to moderate their patriotic fervor.

His personal philosophy was something like this: gentle, refined, and exemplary.

Only the decline or death of a friend would distress him, as indeed he maintained that friendship is the greatest of human gifts.

Accordingly he was a friend to everyone and there was no one with whom he was not familiar, or no one human, and he enjoyed being with everyone, more or less, excepting only such people as seemed to him to be beyond hope of helping.

Reputation at Athens

In all this he acted and spoke like the Graces, or even Aphrodite herself, “as ever” (as the line goes) “Persuasion sat upon his lips.”

For all this the entire Athenian populace, including the authorities, admired him exceedingly, and altogether regarded him as one of the greats.

And yet early on he offended the majority, receiving from many as much resentment as Socrates for his boldness and candor, to the point where even certain Anytus-and-Meletus types^β stood up to accuse him of the same thing as his predecessor, namely that he never offered sacrifice, nor was he ever initiated at Eleusis.

^β The prosecutors of Socrates, 395 BCE

At this, he rather boldly put on the garlands and white shirt and went to the courthouse, where he calmly if diffidently defended his position: "As for never having made offerings to Athena, don't be amazed," he said, "you Athenians, if I never made offerings to her, since I never imagined she needed any offering from me." As for the other matter, the mysteries, he said he had another reason for not joining in the initiation, namely that if the mysteries were to turn out to be fraudulent, he could not be silent towards the uninitiated and must dissuade them from the sacred rites, whereas if they were real, he would have to expose them to the public out of charity.

The Athenians, who had been up in arms, were mollified instantly by this, and from that point began to pay him honor, respect, and ultimately admiration. And yet at the start of his statement to them he made a sharper comment: "Men of Athens," he said, "you see me here all dressed up and ready to sacrifice, since the last one^Y didn't work out for you."

As related by Favorinus

I wish to offer a few of the more striking and urbane things he said, starting with a nice remark from Favorinus that he said to him.

Favorinus had heard from someone that Demonax had ridiculed his performances, especially deprecating certain of his lines as rough, weak and philosophically dubious. He approached Demonax and asked who he was, to denigrate his work.

"A person," he said, "whose ears are not so easily fooled."

The educator took this in and asked, "What qualifies you, Demonax, to quit school-teaching and start professing?"

"My testicles," he said.

On another occasion he had approached Demonax to ask what school he favored in philosophy.

He answered, "what tells you I am into philosophy?" and departing, he laughed pleasantly to himself.

Asked why he was laughing, he said, "it seemed funny to me that you have decided to tell apart philosophers by their beards, when you don't have a beard yourself."

^Y i.e., Socrates

Silent philosophy

There happened to be a Sidonian teacher well regarded in Athens, who claimed credit for personally testing every philosophy — in his own words:

If Aristotle should call me to the Lyceum, there I will be.

Should Plato, to the Academy, I will get up and go.

Should it be Zeno, I'll visit the Stoic Gallery.

Should Pythagoras call, I am silent.

From the middle of the audience Demonax stood up and said “Hey”(addressing him by name) “Pythagoras is calling you.”

Young Pytho

A certain Pytho, a good-looking upper-class young Macedonian, was pestering him, quizzing him on philosophy and calling on him to explain the solution to a problem. “I know one thing, kid,” he said, “you go all the way.”

Pytho grew angry at this double-edged taunt and threatened him back: “I'll show you what I'm made of!” With a laugh he asked him back, “oh you're made of something?”

Beaten by an Olympian

On another occasion he laughed at an Olympic athlete who appeared dressed up in a floral theme, who hit him on the head with a rock and drew blood. The bystanders grew angry, each one as if he had been struck personally, and shouted for the police to come. Demonax said, “No, not the police, get me a medic!”

Don't lose it

One time walking in the street he found a gold pinky ring, and posted a notice in the town square promising to the loser, whoever its owner might be, to come and describe its weight, stone and manufacture, and they would receive it back.

A pretty schoolboy appeared and said he was the one who had lost it.

When what he said made no sense, Demonax said “Get lost, kid, and keep your own pinky ring safe, since you haven't lost this one.”

Enervated

A Roman senator who was in Athens introduced a son who was quite attractive, but girlish and delicate: “My son here offers greeting!” Demonax said, “A fine boy, he suits you well, much like his mother.”

Dog in a bearskin

There was a Cynic philosopher who went around in a bearskin coat. Demonax decided he shouldn't be called by his name, Honoratus, but Bearistotle.^δ

Happiness

When someone asked him how he thought happiness should be defined, he said the only happy person was a free person.

When the other answered there are many free people, he said “my rule for that is one who neither hopes for, nor fears anything.”

The other said, “And how is anyone supposed to do that? For the most part every one of us is subject to those.”

“Yet if you consider human affairs, you find nothing deserving of either hope or fear, since pains and pleasures all come to an end anyway.”

Not dogging

Peregrinus Proteus criticized him for laughing so much and playing around with people, saying “Demonax you're not dogging.”^ε He answered “Peregrine you're not humaning.”

^δ Arkesilaos, punning 'arctos' (bear)

^ε You are not practicing Cynicism

Down under

Once a geographer had been lecturing on the Antipodes and Demonax stood up, brought him to a well and showing him the shadow in the water, asked “are those the kind of Antipodes you are talking about?”

Power of persuasion

A psychic medium claimed to know powerful incantations, which he could use to convince anyone to do anything he wanted. “Don't be so amazed,” he said, “I have the same ability as yourself, if you like, come to the bakery and watch me convince them to give me bread, with only a little incantation and a small talisman,” suggesting that his pocket money had the same power as a magical incantation.

Herodes detained

When the great Herodes was mourning Polydeuces' premature death, he would order the carriage readied and the horses to stand by in case he might wish to come up and join the dinner. On arrival Demonax said “I have a letter for you from Polydeuces.” Hearing this and supposing that Demonax like the others was commiserating with him, he said to Demonax, “what does Polydeuces want?” “He is mad because you haven't joined him already.”

Universality of loss

To someone who was mourning a child and had shut themselves in darkness, he claimed he himself was a psychic medium and had the power to summon the boy's ghost, if only they could name three people that had never mourned anyone. When the other prevaricated and looked askance (since I suppose they knew no such person) Demonax said with a laugh, “so you think you are the only one who suffers the unendurable, while knowing no one who has never mourned?”

Keeping it straight

He also tended to laugh at those who used out of date expressions or strange terminology.

To one person who had responded to a question with an archaism, he said, "I was asking you now, friend, and you answered me like Agamemnon."

Keeping it real

When a certain one of his friends said "Demonax, let's go to the Asclepion and pray for my son," he said, "what, has Asclepius gone deaf, if he can't make out our prayers from here?"

Two muddleheads

Once he saw two fellows arguing philosophy, struggling over a proposition like idiots. One would pose a stupid question and the other would respond with something nonsensical. "Friends," said Demonax, "it seems to me one of you is milking a goat while the other holds a sieve underneath."

First and only

Agathocles the Peripatetic boasted that he was alone, the first among debaters. "But Agathocles," he said, "if you are first, you aren't alone; if you are alone, you are not first."

Little turd

The Consul, Cethegus, when he was travelling through Greece to Asia to serve with his father, did and said so many ridiculous things that one of Demonax's friends said he was a big load of crap. "By Zeus," said Demonax, "but not big."

Hero philosopher

Once he saw the philosopher Apollonius set sail with many of his students – he had just been appointed to a post at the Royal Academy – "There goes Apollonius," said Demonax, "and his Argonauts."

Deathless

Once someone asked whether he considered the soul to be immortal. He said “yes, just like everything.”

Herodes divided

Regarding Herodes, he said that he demonstrated the truth of the Platonic claim that we do not have a single soul, since the same soul could not have played host to Regilla and Polydeuces as if they still lived, while making such fine speeches.

Xenophobia

Once he dared to ask the Athenians, on hearing the public announcements, for what reason foreigners were excluded from the mysteries, as the ceremony was instituted for them by Eumolpus, a foreigner from Thrace.

Dinner for fishes

On one occasion he was to embark on a sea voyage in winter, and a friend of his said, “aren't you afraid the ship will capsize and you will be devoured by fishes?” He answered “Wouldn't it be rude of me to deny the fish their dinner, when I myself eat fish?”

Practice makes perfect

He advised one performer of terrible speeches to practice more and to exercise. When he said, “I constantly recite to myself,” Demonax answered “Sure enough, you are reciting with an idiot for an audience.”

Fortunes for sale

Once he saw a fortune teller performing public divinations for a payment. “I don't see,” he said, “on what account you claim your fee. If you really do have the power to change events, you are demanding a tiny amount, while if everything is really up to God, what can divination do for you?”

Facing off

An elderly Roman, in good physical shape, was demonstrating armed combat on a sparring post. He asked "Demonax, how is my form?" "You do well," he said, "against an opponent made of wood."

Reckoning

Additionally he provided able responses even to intractable questions. Once someone asked as a joke, "If I were to light a thousand minas of wood on fire, Demonax, how much would the ash be worth?" "Total up the smoke," he said, "and the difference is all ash."

Ripostes

A certain Polybius, an entirely uneducated and crude person, said "Caesar has honored me with Roman citizenship." "If only," said Demonax, "you had been made Greek rather than Roman."

Seeing a well-dressed man very pleased with his purple border, he leaned over to his ear, grabbed the garment and said "Once, before you, a sheep wore this, and it was a sheep."

When washing once he hesitated to enter a bath of scalding hot water, and someone accused him of flinching. "Tell me," he said, "was I going to sacrifice for my country?"

He was asked what he thought of the afterlife. "Just wait," he said, "and I'll send word from there."

Etched in stone

Admetus, a poor poet, said he had written a one-line epigram, which he ordered in his will to be engraved on a column, as follows:

Earth takes Admetus' shell: I go to God

To this, laughing, Demonax said "That's such a nice epigram, Admetus, I wish it were already inscribed."

Aging in place

Someone looked at his knees, saw what happens to old men, and asked, "What's that, Demonax?" Smiling, he said, "Charon bit me."

Showing respect

Once he saw a Spartan whipping a household servant. "Stop!" he said, "you are offering the slave the same respect as yourself!"

Legal advice

When a certain Danae brought a lawsuit against her brother, he said, "take care not to be Danae, daughter of Akrisios."^ζ

Dog displays

Most of all he battled against those philosophers who were not after the truth, but showing off.

Once he saw a Cynic with the cloak and satchel, except for a staff he had a pole for pounding wheat, who noisily claimed to be an admirer of Antisthenes, Crates and Diogenes. "Don't lie," he said, "as you are clearly a student of Hyperides."^η

Unfair competition

When he saw many of the athletes in the boxing competition cheating, violating the rules by biting, he said "It is not unfitting how the spectators call today's athletes lions."

^ζ "Judge-not"

^η "Pounder"

Shaving the dog

What he said to the Proconsul was also smooth, but pointed. He was a person well groomed, on his legs and entire body. When a particular Cynic stood up in public, attacked him and accused him of unmanliness, he grew angry and ordered him arrested, to be either put into the stocks, or sent into exile.

Demonax happened to be there and begged him to be lenient, for having been emboldened by the accustomed Cynic frankness. When the Proconsul answered "Then I will hand him over to you – but if he does this again, what should happen to him?" Demonax said, "Order to have him depilated."

Rule quietly

In consulting with another whom Caesar had tasked with ruling the greatest nation, who asked, "How best to rule?" Demonax said "Never lose your temper, and talk a little, but listen a lot."

Worker bees

Asked if he enjoyed eating honeycakes, he said "Oh do you think the bees built their honeycombs for morons?"

Memorial statue

Seeing a statue in the Public Gallery with a hand lopped off, he said "Look, the Athenians have set up a bronze memorial honoring Cynegeirus!"

Lame joke

With respect to Rufinus of Cyprus – I speak of the disabled teacher – seeing he was spending a great deal of time in the schools, he said, "that's pretty bold: a disabled Peripatetic."

Stoic manners

One time Epictetus had upbraided him and counseled him to take a wife and make a family, it being right for any man with a talent for philosophy to leave behind a replacement for himself. Demonax enthusiastically replied “Well then Epictetus, give me one of your daughters.”

Categorical imperative

To recall his statement to Herminus, the Aristotelian. Knowing he was a good-for-nothing who had done innumerable terrible things, notwithstanding his praise of Aristotle and having the ten accusations^θ in his mouth, “Herminus,” he said, “clearly ten accusations are called for.”

No more mercy

The Athenians, out of envy for the Corinthians, were debating whether to stage gladiatorial entertainments. Demonax went to them and said “Athenians, do not vote on this without first taking down the Altar of Mercy.”

Being bronzed

On one occasion when he came to Olympus, the Elians voted to commission a bronze statue of him. “By no means, my Elian friends,” he said, “should you embarrass your ancestors, who put up a statue for neither Socrates nor Diogenes.”

Not legal advice

I once heard him say this to a person experienced in the law, that “laws are mostly useless, whether written for criminals or with good people in mind, since good people have no need of laws, yet by laws, no bad people are made any better.”

^θ categories

Quoting the classics

His favorite line from Homer –

Alike the strong and weak man go to death

He praised Thersites as a kind of Cynic populist.

Philosophical inclinations

Asked once who he considered to be the greatest of philosophers, he said “They are all marvelous. I revere Socrates – but I admire Diogenes, and I love Aristippus.”

His accomplishment

He lived not far short of one hundred years, healthy and free of pain, troubled by no one, needing nothing, supportive of his friends and never making enemies.

Indeed, the Athenians and all of Greece had so much regard for him that when they heard of his death, the governors stood and everyone fell silent.

Towards the end when he was very old, he would enter whatever house he happened on, uninvited, and stay for a meal and a bed. The residents thought of this as the appearance of a blessing, as if a good angel had visited their home.

When he passed by, the bakers' wives would pull him in: each wanted him to accept cakes from her, seeing this offering as good fortune for herself.

The children would also bring him fruit and call him Father.

In the assembly

Once when the Athenians had collapsed into political discord, he went to the assembly and just by appearing, brought them to silence. When he saw they had relented, he excused himself without a word.

At the games

When a time came when he could no longer look after himself, he said to his companions the lines called out by the heralds at the games:

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*Now the games end with the fairest
Prizes awarded, the moment
Calls us no longer to tarry*

And abstaining from everything he soon departed this life cheerfully, just as he always appeared to anyone who knew him.

At the end

A little before his death, someone asked what he wanted for a memorial. "Don't do anything special," he said. "The smell will cover me." The other said "What? Wouldn't it be awful to let dogs and birds have a meal from the body of such a great man?" "It's not at all wrong," he said, "if by dying I can be of some use to the living."

So the Athenians buried him lavishly at public expense, and mourned him greatly. At the stone bench where he used to pause when he was tired, they brought flowers in his honor and prayed, deeming the stone he sat on to be sanctified.

There was no one who did not appear for his funeral procession, especially from among the philosophers.

And bearing him they brought him to his tomb.

Conclusion

These are only a few of many things I might recount. By them, readers will know the kind of man he was.

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