

Introduction



According to Diogenes Laertius, Empedocles died by jumping into Etna—and by hanging, by drowning, by falling, by traveling, and not at all: he simply vanished into thin air. Why so many and such varied deaths? What connection do these multiple deaths have to the life and work of Empedocles, as presented by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*? What is the connection between the historical life and philosophical work of Empedocles, and Diogenes Laertius' biographical account of them?

These were the questions that launched the present work, which examines the biographies of three archaic philosophers, Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus, by tracing the direct and correlative relationship that exists between the biographical data in the work of Diogenes Laertius and the extant fragments of these philosophers. Nowhere does the correlation between biography and philosophy occur more clearly than in the use of anecdotal material; nowhere in the anecdotal material is the correlation more striking than in Diogenes Laertius' use of various deaths to illustrate and exemplify his subjects' philosophy, morals, beliefs, idiosyncrasies, and foibles. This approach to philosophical biography yields three

important results: a method by which to analyze and interpret the interplay between biography and philosophy; a suggestion that a reevaluation of Diogenes Laertius is due; and a system by which to classify and study the mechanics of ancient biography in general.

The study of biography is not new ground for the classical scholar, although the notion of a direct correlation between biography and literature has not always, or even generally, been accepted. In 1981, however, Mary R. Lefkowitz broke new ground with her book, *Lives of the Greek Poets*. Her methodology yielded fresh and compelling interpretations of both biographers and poets, winning widespread support for the new biographical theory.

Lefkowitz argues that the poets' lives are taken from their poetry, which is read by the biographers as a series of personal statements. That is, the ancient biographer analyzes the subject's work in an autobiographical manner, a reading frequently aided by use of the first person ("I") by the poet. The biographer's reaction to those (seemingly personal) statements leads to the formation of a favorable or negative biographical tradition, which is illustrated in the poet's life by the use of anecdotes set in schematized patterns and formulas. For instance, in the biographical tradition that exists for Sappho, the poet throws herself over a cliff to her death in despair over her unrequited love for a handsome young man. Lefkowitz demonstrates that the story of Sappho's suicide reveals unfavorable reaction to her first-person lesbian references, negates those references, and punishes the poet for them.

However, Lefkowitz's work, like most other studies of this kind, is restricted to poetry and the poets. Fortunately, Alice S. Riginos' 1976 *Platonica: The Anecdotes concerning the Life and Writing of Plato*, has gone far in demonstrating a similar approach in the biography of Plato. In the *Platonica* Riginos successfully argues that Plato's biography, especially in the use of anecdotal material, adheres to these reaction formations and formulaic schema. The many anecdotes that speak of Plato and Dionysus of Syracuse, for example, fall into a well-established category that contrasts "philosopher" (free, intellectual, Greek, civilized) with "tyrant" (slavish, uneducated, barbarian, uncivilized). It is an anecdote, as we will see, that exists for almost every philosopher who has a biography.

The present work, then, examines the lives of three archaic philosophers as compiled and written by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. The method, the identification of anecdotes and patterns that correspond to the philosophy of the subject, is a fascinating

revelation of the ancient biographical mind at work. For instance the lives of Empedocles and Heraclitus, and indeed the lives of many other philosophers, bear some resemblance to each other, given that ancient biography runs along schematized patterns and forms. Both Heraclitus and Empedocles, for example, are asked by their fellow citizens to rule, and both refuse to do so. But there the similarity ends. Empedocles is celebrated by the biographers as an ardent democrat for his refusal, while Heraclitus is denounced as a misanthrope for his. Obviously, the refusal to rule is being used in completely different ways: Empedocles is glorified, Heraclitus vilified. Why is the same anecdote used to such different ends in the two lives?

To the biographers, the philosophers, like the poets and especially those who wrote in the first person, were never simply writing philosophy. To be sure, the archaic philosophers were not writing philosophy in the modern sense of writing philosophy. For modern thinkers, philosophy is the expression not of personal beliefs but of the conclusions that any rational being would arrive at after abstract, that is, impersonal reflection. In what follows, I will use “philosophy” in the modern sense, although it is by no means clear that the ancients thought of philosophy as an “impersonal, abstract” affair. Rather, especially for biographers such as Diogenes Laertius, philosophical works were also, and sometimes even primarily, read as autobiography. Philosophy, like poetry, was seen as a collection of personal or autobiographical statements, to which the biographer responds in kind. For example, in the course of his philosophical work, Heraclitus compares men to apes and children. The biographer, interpreting these remarks as personal rather than philosophical convictions, saw an ugly misanthropy at work and perhaps even one that applied to him personally. The biographers’ reaction to Heraclitus and to his work was, in fact, generally unfavorable and manifests itself in an unusually hostile biography; hence Heraclitus’ refusal to rule becomes another example of the philosopher’s misanthropy. Empedocles, on the other hand, in his work addresses his fellow citizens as “friends” and says that the “best men” become political leaders. His philosophical statements therefore impressed the biographers in a favorable manner and result in a generally favorable biographical tradition; his refusal to rule glorifies the philosopher as a selfless, sympathetic, and democratic fellow citizen. So within any philosophical biography, a single anecdote can work in quite different ways according to the biographical tradition that exists for the individual philosopher. That biographical tradition, favorable or hostile, arises from the

subject's philosophy, but even more so from the biographers' reaction to the subject's philosophical work, read in a personal manner as autobiography and not as philosophy.

The method discussed here imposes its own limitations. Consider, for example, Parmenides, who has considerable extant philosophical work, but no biography to speak of. Then again think of Pythagoras, who has a long and fascinating biography and no extant philosophy. The first requirement of the methodology then (an existing biography and extant philosophical work) is also the first limitation. Simply put, there must be a fairly detailed biography and enough extant philosophical work to realize, within honest intellectual boundaries, a working knowledge of the subject's philosophy. Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus all meet the criteria suitably. All three have wonderful lives and deaths, filled with sex and scandal and suicide, with books and tyrants and temples, a perfect balance of reverence and the irreverent. Fortunately, all three also have enough extant philosophy to find and interpret the correlation between their lives and their works, to see how their biographical traditions came about, and to determine how anecdotal material is used for each one.

And there are sources that fit these parameters. Fortunately, scholars have collected and compiled archaic philosophical material from varied sources, including Diogenes Laertius, who often quotes or paraphrases his subject's work. For the philosophical fragments that exist for Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus, I rely upon the most authoritative and accepted collection of archaic philosophical material, the sixth edition of Diels' *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, as revised by Walther Kranz. Included with the philosophical fragments are all the biographical elements that have been collected for the philosophers, the greatest part of which comes from Diogenes Laertius. Diogenes Laertius, however, is a problematic character. Even the dates of his life, ironically enough, are uncertain, although it is believed he lived sometime in the third century CE. This means, practically speaking, that Diogenes Laertius lived and wrote at a considerable distance from his subjects, some five to six hundred years in fact, since we usually date Empedocles to the late sixth century and Heraclitus and Democritus to the early fifth century BCE. If the lateness of Diogenes Laertius' dates inspires no great confidence in his knowledge of his subjects, neither, unfortunately, does his writing, which includes both the sublime and the ridiculous, usually presented side by side, from the same open-eyed and admiring authorial stance. Philosophical and even literary evaluations of Diogenes Laertius' contribution to the history

and interpretation of philosophy have not been positive. However, here too things are changing, and a secondary aspect of the study is a contribution to the reevaluation of the literary and/or philosophical value of Diogenes Laertius. His work, the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, is after all the source for almost all of our biographical information; as such, it has had a profound, if unacknowledged, influence upon philosophy interpretation. After nearly a century of neglect (since Nietzsche's *Beiträge zur Quellenkunde und Kritik des Diogenes Laertius*), Diogenes Laertius is once again the object of scholarly interest, as J. Mejer's 1978 *Diogenes Laertius and His Hellenistic Background*, M. Gigante's 1987 *Vite dei Filosofi*, and B. Gentili's and G. Cerri's 1988 *History and Biography in Ancient Thought* show.

Catherine Osborne's 1987 *Rethinking Early Greek Philosophy* admirably demonstrates the role of biographers in Greek thought and Diogenes Laertius' influence on or importance to philosophical thought specifically. Osborne persuasively argues that a wealth of new information is available to the modern philosopher/interpreter when a new method of philosophical retrieval, a "rethinking" of writers such as Hippolytus and Diogenes Laertius, is employed. To date, the misleading practice of examining philosophical fragments in isolation has led to a confusion in philosophical interpretation. Osborne convincingly argues the need to examine the fragments in the biographical or scholarly context in which they were preserved. A similar appraisal of Diogenes Laertius emerges in this work, supporting Osborne's theory and suggesting that Diogenes Laertius can, with proper interpretation, serve as an important and even respectable source for the modern scholar.

The third aspect of this book is the identification and categorization of standard themes (*topoi*) and anecdotes as revealed by comparison of philosophical statement with biographical material. In this way the reader is introduced to the mechanics of ancient biography. While the identification and classification of anecdotes and *topoi* into a coherent system is, in itself, crucial to our understanding of the ancient biographical mind, there is to date no systematic and comprehensive approach to the use of anecdotal material and *topoi* for the study of ancient biography. Here, then, is a beginning of that work in detailed and accessible form, which I hope will provide at least a reference and model, and at best, the basis for future research and interpretation for scholars in the field.

In this work, anecdotes are categorized by the way in which they are used; *topoi* by the standard theme they present. The request to rule, for

example, that we saw earlier in the lives of both Empedocles and Heraclitus is a standard theme or *topos* that occurs in the lives of many philosophers. In the life of Empedocles, as we saw, it is used positively to glorify the philosopher; in the life of Heraclitus, it is used negatively to vilify the author. These *topoi* are given color and veracity in anecdotes that are used in various ways to characterize the subject or his philosophy. They may present the philosopher in a realistic or unrealistic manner or in a comic, flattering, or hostile light. Furthermore, anecdotes may float freely from philosopher to philosopher, with details changed to personalize their use in the lives of several different philosophers, or they may be created for and adhere to one philosopher alone. My initial identification and categorization of anecdotes and *topoi* are as follows:

ANECDOTES

1. Illustrative. Illustrative anecdotes illustrate some aspect of the philosopher's work or personality. Heraclitus' misanthropy is illustrated by several anecdotes in which he either scorns or insults someone or "the people" as a whole or refuses to rule.
2. Concrete. These anecdotes make concrete or give physical form to some aspect of the philosopher's work. For example, the biographers that attribute certain laws to Solon the Athenian make these laws concrete (physical in form) by describing the actual physical form in which Solon presented them. The term *concrete* was suggested by Finley (1975, 47), who remarks that "the distant past was concretized and personalized, exactly as it had been in myth and legend."
3. Transferred. These anecdotes, which attach themselves to one philosopher after another, were termed "transferred" by Fairweather (1974, 263); I prefer the term *free floating*. Request to rule is a common theme for many lives and is shaped into an anecdote, hostile or favorable, as required.
4. Rebound. In this type of anecdote, the philosopher's beliefs, doctrines, work, or a popular interpretation of beliefs, doctrines, and work, rebound on the philosopher to comic or tragic effect. Death by rebound is a popular biographical device.
5. Representative. Anecdotes of this kind bring together representatives of schools, politics, beliefs, and cultures without regard to chronology or plausibility, simply because the people meeting represent opposites

or extreme types. For example, the meeting between Croesus and Solon is a representative anecdote used to contrast Solon, who represents all things Greek, civilized, moderate, wise, and western, with Croesus, who represents all that is barbarian, immoderate, foolish, and eastern.

TOPOI

1. Association with Athens. Athens, as the home of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and various philosophical schools and movements, plays a special place in philosophical biography. Many anecdotes are set there, even when it is unlikely for their subjects to be in Athens; association with the “home” of Greek philosophy confers special honor on the philosopher in question. The association, which often exists in opposition to chronological and doxographical records, has created a great deal of confusion.
2. Athletics. While many of Diogenes Laertius’ subjects are associated with games or sports, making the topos a common one, the use of athletics in philosophical biography is ambiguous. An association with sports, even on the Olympic level, most often forms part of a hostile biographical tradition; this hostility stems from the contempt with which Stoic and Cynic philosophers and biographers viewed sports. In a few lives, however, the association with sports demonstrates favorably either an “everyman” tradition for the philosopher or elevates the philosopher in a uniquely Greek manner, an elevation that the hostile tradition sometimes parodies. A very few philosophers are distinguished by the biographers as Olympic victors, although this probably results from a confusion between similar names. As discussed in chapter 1, this is likely the case in the life of Empedocles. As we will see, the biographies of those philosophers who attend or compete at the games showed a marked resemblance to the life of Pythagoras. Pythagoras’ own association with the Olympic Games is based equally upon a saying attributed to him (“Life is like the Great Games, to which some go to compete for prizes, some with wares to sell, but the best go as spectators.”) and upon his Sicilian citizenship, through civic association with Hieron and Theron, Sicilian rulers celebrated by Pindar for their Olympic victories. On the other hand, the ultimate source of the topos may well be the life of the archetypal

philosopher Thales, whose life and death, embodies almost all the biographical topoi that exist, for Thales dies while watching the Olympic games. What happier death could there be?

3. **Bon Mot.** Philosophers always have the last word and the last laugh (at least when the tradition is favorable.) Their quick wit and repartee usually reflects their philosophical system in miniature.
4. **Book Burning.** Philosophers seem constantly to burn each other's books or have theirs burned by irate citizens. Destruction of their work (which occurs in other forms as well) symbolizes a philosopher's or philosophical school's antipathy to another philosopher or school, as perceived and personalized by the biographer.
5. **Characteristics (Physical).** Philosophers are single, although rarely celibate, pale, unkempt, and often dirty, and they live to very old ages despite their often trying lives. Their physical characteristics reflect the hostile tradition, albeit usually presented in a comic way, from whence many of these portraits derive and reflect the popular interpretation of asceticism or philosophy in general.
6. **Characteristics (Emotional).** Philosophers are crazy. Most are melancholy, if not downright depressed. A few exhibit manic traits such as laughing uncontrollably. They can also be very absent-minded and tend to fall into wells and pits with some frequency. They commonly share an abusive, hateful character and manner that was notorious in the ancient world. Since as a group they disdain the life of the senses, they blind themselves or punish the flesh in quite imaginative ways. All these emotional characteristics, like the physical ones, reveal the comic or popular view of the life of the mind; perhaps there is solace here for those of us who lead such lives in this ancient and revered tradition of the absent-minded professor.
7. **Child Prodigy.** The childhood of the philosopher, like that of the poet, is a portent of his adult life, character, and sometimes philosophy; the child is the philosopher writ small.
8. **Contempt for Wealth.** The philosophers are quite contemptuous of the material world, as befits their ascetic nature. Usually they are born to great wealth and eminence, which they invariably cast off, democratic (or misanthropic) to a man. Their disdain for wealth can manifest itself physically, in a lack of proper clothes and hygiene, in a withdrawal from society, and in complete disdain for those who have power, especially when it is absolute. This last is used to special purpose in contrasting philosophers and tyrants.

9. Deification. Philosophers do, occasionally, become gods after their death; such an honor obviously comes of a favorable biographical tradition and may perhaps reflect a literary form of the hero-cult as practiced in early Greece. Deification is further discussed under the topos of Posthumous Honors.
10. East and West. One of the more common of philosophical topoi, in which the philosopher comes into contact with a representative of the east who is usually but not always a tyrant. The philosopher represents Greece and the west and all that is good, including education, sobriety, moderation, caution, justice, peace, democracy, civilization, and the rational in general. The tyrant or other eastern character represents the east and all that is bad, including barbarism, ignorance, luxury, injustice, and immoderate, uncivilized, and irrational behavior in general. The best-known example of this topos is the meeting between Solon, the Athenian lawgiver, and Croesus, the madly rash and unlucky king of Lydia. This meeting is further discussed under the topos of Philosopher and Tyrant.
11. Epiphany. Epiphanies, the appearance of the god or the god's representative, are rare but not unknown in philosophical biography. Bees, the standard emissaries of the gods in the lives of the poets, visit some philosophers such as Plato, while the gods themselves appear to a few lucky others. Some emissaries are more welcome than others, as we will see.
12. Exile. Almost all of the philosophers undergo or undertake some kind of exile, which can be voluntary, forced, political, or intellectual, as well as geographical, and can take the form of withdrawal, sleep, or silence also. Exile, in all its forms, symbolizes the philosopher's alienation from and/or rejection of his own physical or intellectual community.
13. Family. The philosopher's family background, as we saw previously is one of wealth, power, and prominence. The philosopher, however, typically rejects this background to embrace poverty, simplicity, democracy, exile, madness, or death. The philosopher's family, when it exists, seems to do so only to exasperate and torment the philosopher or to explain gaps and missing pieces in his work.
14. Feuds. Philosophers engage in and carry on feuds and contests with other philosophers and/or their disciples and schools, when they are not actually burning each other's books. Such behavior symbolizes intellectual disagreement between different philosophical schools,

which is perceived and expressed in terms of bitter personal enmity by the biographers.

15. **Inventions and Being First.** All of the philosophers invent something, be it rhetoric, machines, or beliefs, and are the first to do something such as map making, teaching, or traveling to a distant place. Here the biographers give a concrete form to a philosophical expression or cover and fill chronological or doxographical gaps, such as the tradition that makes Gorgias, known for his rhetoric, the student of Empedocles, who, according to the biographers, invented it.
16. **Laws and Lawgivers.** Most of the philosophers actively engage in politics by giving laws, framing constitutions, and generally helping the civic body, or atypically by shunning or criticizing civic concerns. Philosophers advocate democracy and shun tyranny and political office. The very few exceptions to this topos demonstrate an extremely hostile biographical tradition.
17. **Lost Works.** Quite often the biographers list works written by the philosophers that are otherwise unknown to us and then explain why the work no longer exists. Most often, missing or lost work has been destroyed by a (usually) female family member. The actual destruction may be intentional or accidental and occur with or without the philosopher's consent. Otherwise missing work is due to intentional book burning by a rival or a disturbed citizen body or the accidental burning of a storage place. "Lost" works, however, are more usually those mistakenly attributed to an author, for example, the tragedies written by a different Empedocles, but attributed to the philosopher and thus "lost."
18. **Philosopher and Tyrant.** A constant in philosophical biography, this topos opposes west and east, democracy and tyranny, freedom and slavery, education and ignorance, civilization and barbarism, simplicity and wealth, philosopher and tyrant. In such encounters, the tyrant often makes a request to the philosophers (that they visit him, explain their work, teach him, or simply obey him, sometimes offering wealth and recognition in return), which the philosopher refuses. This set piece owes much to the standard topics of rhetoric.
19. **Philosopher Triumphant.** Occasionally, even the philosopher triumphs over social and biographical expectations of impracticality and absentmindedness and emerges triumphant, sometimes even making a profit. These rare occasions illustrate the favorable tradition and

actively refute hostile biographical readings of the philosopher's work and perceived character.

20. Plagiarism. Philosophers are commonly accused of stealing one another's work, or even that of a god's, and claiming it for their own. This is either a hostile interpretation of philosophical influence, as discussed further in the topos of student and teacher, or an attempt to deny the subject's own philosophical importance.
21. Ptheiresis. Death by ptheiresis (lice disease) occurs more often in philosophical biography than one would imagine. However, it does not afflict those unkempt philosophers described earlier, as one might expect, but is reserved for those considered impious or at least unorthodox in their religious beliefs.
22. Student and Teacher. The student-teacher relationship in philosophical biography is most often presented in terms of a love affair between one philosopher and another, a relationship to which chronology seems no bar. In general, the biographers make any information about their subjects concrete and personal, and philosophical influence becomes a love affair, much as philosophical differences become a feud. The terms and their implications (*paides/erastes*) owe much to Plato's "exploitation of the Athenian homosexual ethos as a basis of metaphysical doctrine and philosophical method" (Dover 1972, 16).

ABBREVIATIONS

Note: Standard works are abbreviated in the text as follows:

- DK H. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, rev. W. Kranz (Berlin, 1954)
- DL R. D. Hicks, ed., *Diogenes Laertius. Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1925)
- LGP M. R. Lefkowitz, *Lives of the Greek Poets* (Baltimore, 1981)