

A. A. Long

The concept of the cosmopolitan in Greek & Roman thought

Cosmopolitan, the English equivalent of the older French word *cosmopolite*, derives from the ancient Greek term *kosmopolites* (*kosmos* plus *polites*) to signify “citizen of the world.” The original Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope (c. 390 – 323 B.C.), notorious for his “in your face” discourse and readiness to do everything in public, probably coined this expression and first applied it to himself.¹ “Citizen of the world” suited Diogenes’s stance of flouting local conventions in order to demonstrate their

lack of grounding in what he took to be the pre-cultural norms of human nature. In light of the hundreds of individual Greek city-states, highly jealous of their autonomy but also Panhellenic in many of their customs and collective sense of superiority to the “barbarians,” citizenship of the world must have originally seemed a profoundly paradoxical, even nonsensical concept.

Diogenes was a younger contemporary of Plato (alleged to have called Diogenes “Socrates gone mad”) and much the same age as Aristotle.² With its dropout lifestyle, Diogenes’s Cynicism never became a school with a formal curriculum. Its leading adherents left a prominent mark on Hellenistic literature through their sardonic criticism of conventional values, but Cynicism more or less died

A. A. Long, a Fellow of the American Academy since 1989, is Irving G. Stone Professor of Literature, Professor of Classics, and Affiliated Professor of Philosophy and Rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley. His publications include “Language and Thought in Sophocles: A Study of Abstract Nouns and Poetic Technique” (1968), “Stoic Studies” (1996), and “Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life” (2002). He has edited “Problems in Stoicism” (1996), “The Question of ‘Eclecticism’: Studies in Later Greek Philosophy” (with J. M. Dillon, 1988), and “The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy” (1999). He is a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy.

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1 Diogenes’s use of the expression is attested in the biography of him composed by Diogenes Laertius (fl. c. A.D. 200) in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, book 6, section 63. This biography (hereafter DL) is the best source for the life and thought of the Cynic Diogenes. On the Cynics in general, see Robert B. Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

2 DL, 6.54.

out as an independent movement and was absorbed into Stoicism until it underwent a revival in the Roman Imperial period.

Before Stoicism, the great contributions to political thought of Plato and Aristotle presupposed the small and nationalistic city-state as the normative context of community life. With no vestige of cosmopolitan sympathy, each assumed that the populace of an ideal community would hardly reach six figures, and that it would engage in defensive and offensive wars from time to time. Babylon, for example, notwithstanding its encircling walls, was for Aristotle too large to count as a true city-state.³

Stoic ethical and political thought, however, in the five centuries of its educational impact on the Mediterranean world, readily embraced cosmopolitanism in its various guises. Crates of Thebes, a leading Cynic follower of Diogenes, powerfully influenced Zeno (334 – 262), the Cypriot immigrant to Athens who established the Stoic school of philosophy there.⁴ Such different figures as the Roman jurist and philosopher Cicero (106 – 43); the apostle Paul (fl. 50 – 60); Philo (c. 30 B.C. – A.D. 45), the Alexandrian exegete of the *Torah*; and the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161 – 180) also express cosmopolitan sentiments. Philo, although not an official

3 Aristotle, *Politics*, 2.6, 65a14, 3.3, 76a28.

4 On Zeno, see Theodore Scaltsas and Andrew Mason, *The Philosophy of Zeno* (Larnaca: The Municipality of Larnaca, 2002). For detailed treatment of early Stoicism, see Keimpe Algra et al., *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and for an introductory account that extends into the later Stoic tradition, see A. A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

adherent of Stoicism (his allegorical interpretations of the Five Books of Moses are permeated with Stoic ideas nonetheless), is in fact the earliest surviving author to use the exact expression *kosmopolites*.⁵

Ancient ideas of the Stoic cosmopolitan live on today, especially in such notions and contexts as moral universalism in the Kantian tradition, natural law theory, and the indifference of race, gender, and status to the worth of individuals.⁶ Yet none of these ideas is as important to modern cosmopolitan or quasi-cosmopolitan contexts as international political institutions, free trade, and supranational efforts to implement world peace, combat rogue regimes, and relieve suffering across national borders. Moreover, the ancient cosmopolitan wasn't typified as a highly sophisticated person or someone with multicultural sympathies, whose tastes, manners, and values are precisely what make him or her at home anywhere, as the modern cosmopolitan is cast. The principal continuity between the ancient and modern cosmopolitan turns on taking citizen, in the expression "citizen of the world," in an extended or metaphorical sense. In the absence of a global state or government (which no Greek or Roman envisioned), literal world citizenship is an impossibility. What is possible, however, and what Stoic cosmopolitans advocated our doing, is for us to treat persons, no matter who or where, as quasi-siblings, whose claims on our care and fair treatment are grounded simply in the fact that we are all human beings.

5 On Philo, see David T. Runia, *Exegesis and Philosophy: Studies on Philo of Alexandria* (Great Yarmouth: Variorum, 1990).

6 See Pauline Kleingeld and Eric Brown, "Cosmopolitanism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu>.

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Citizenship of the world presupposes the existence of cities in the ordinary sense of the word: settled communities with precise territorial boundaries, cultural traditions, laws, political institutions, and social identities. In Homer's epic poetry, our principal written source for earliest Greece, full-fledged cities are not part of the main narrative, which looks back to less formally structured communities governed by hereditary chieftans.⁷ There are fortified palatial settlements, centralized farmsteads, such as the home of Odysseus on Ithaca, and the great citadel of Troy, but nothing that we can call a *polis* in the sense of a Greek city-state. Such communities and their colonies only start to emerge in the eighth century B.C., some five hundred years after the Bronze Age societies that Homer principally envisions. His Achaeans and their Trojan foes are fiercely partisan, but foreign though the latter are, Homer himself does not take sides. He scarcely differentiates the two sets of people in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, where ethnicity and nationality are not identifiers of human worth. Instead he characterizes human beings quite uniformly as mortals, bread-eaters, speech-users, and with numerous other attributes.⁸ His evenhandedness and uniformity, rife with normative connotations, imply that human identity is inseparable from an ethical orientation.

Is Homer's outlook cosmopolitan? Yes and no. His uniform perspectives are more than Panhellenic because they extend to Egyptians and Ethiopians, as well as Trojans. But nationalism is too weak a component of his poems for it to

7 See the classic study by Moses I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (Viking: New York, 1978).

8 See Harold C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), chap. two.

be transcended by strict cosmopolitanism. What is most striking is the complete absence from his vocabulary of the word *barbaros* (barbarian) in reference to non-Greeks. Homer knows the word only as part of an epithet meaning "foreign-speaking."

As a prejudiced ethnic slur connoting brutish, stupid, slavish, and coward, *barbaros* came into vogue in the context of the unexpectedly successful Greek, and especially Athenian, victories against the invading Persians.⁹ Depreciation of non-Greeks had already begun after Homer, but it gained momentum, especially at Athens as that dominant community established its hegemony over other Greek city-states (ostensibly as an alliance against Persia), during the first half of the fifth century. Still, Herodotus, the Ionian historian of the Persian Wars, was wonderfully aware of cultural relativism. Other contemporary writers commented on the natural (as distinct from the cultural) identity of human beings, the absence of a natural basis for slavery, and the existence of natural norms that transcend the practices of particular communities.¹⁰ The atomist philosopher Democritus is credited with saying "To a wise man every land is accessible; for the entire world (*kosmos*) is a good soul's native land."¹¹

Prejudice and chauvinism did, however, prevail at this time, no doubt deriv-

9 See Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

10 See William K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3, *The Fifth-Century Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), chap. VI, and George B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 154–159.

11 Fragment 247 Diels-Kranz.

ing much of their support from the belligerent patriotism individual Greek states adopted both in relation to one another and to the continuing threats of Persian invasion. For the medical writer Hippocrates, differences in basic human nature do not make peoples of Asia – modern Turkey, Iraq, and Iran – “soft” and “lazy” by comparison with Europeans, but, instead, the equable climate and despotic regimes of their native lands.¹²

Was Socrates an early cosmopolitan? His incalculable influence on all of moral philosophy and his position as the Stoics’ chief role model make this question an important one. Offered the opportunity to escape while awaiting execution, Socrates, according to Plato’s *Crito*, declined to do so, on the ground that he would be doing wrong to the laws of Athens, which he personified as his cultural parents. Even though Socrates appears to have left Athens only when on military service and showed no significant interest in foreign affairs, his ethical convictions are completely universal in their scope, including such propositions as the involuntariness of wrong-doing and the absolute sovereignty of justice.¹³

Two of Socrates’ followers merit mention as well. Aristippus, reputed founder of the Cyrenaic school of radical hedonism, is reported to have told Socrates that his own ideal was a life of freedom (avoiding the two extremes of office holding and slavery), which he pursued by “not confining [himself] to

one nationality but by being a stranger everywhere.”¹⁴ A Cynic or Stoic would substitute “citizen” for “stranger,” so Aristippus was at most a half-hearted cosmopolitan. Antisthenes, another of Socrates’ leading companions, probably had a major influence on Diogenes.¹⁵ Self-sufficiency, mental strength, freedom grounded in deliberate poverty, “making reason one’s city wall,” as he is memorably quoted as saying, and approval of the Homeric Odysseus for his adaptability and indifference to conventional shame – these are the salient features of Antisthenes’ recommended outlook, all of them authentically Socratic. Do they throw light on what Diogenes meant by calling himself a citizen of the world?

Asked where he came from, Diogenes said, “I am a *kosmopolites*.”¹⁶ The phrase “defacing the currency,” an activity (probably a self-description) attributed to Diogenes, helps us interpret this assertion.¹⁷ The word translated currency is related to *nomos*, signifying custom or law. According to our best source for the historical Diogenes, “he gave to matters of *nomos* none of the weight he granted to matters of nature” and placed nothing ahead of freedom.¹⁸ The biographical tradition tells us that the young Diogenes was compelled to leave his native Sinope because either he or his father

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12 See Hippocrates’ remarkable little work *Airs, Waters, and Places*.

13 A case for attributing some cosmopolitan tendencies to Socrates is made by Eric Brown, “Hellenistic Cosmopolitanism,” in Mary L. Gill and Pierre Pellegrin, eds., *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

14 Xenophon, *Memoirs of Socrates*, 2.1.13.

15 On Antisthenes, see Susan Prince, “Socrates, Antisthenes, and the Cynics,” in Sara Ahbel-Rappe and Rachana Kamtekar, eds., *A Companion to Socrates* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

16 DL, 6.63.

17 DL, 6.71.

18 Ibid.

had defaced the local coinage.¹⁹ (This story reads suspiciously like an attempt to provide a literal scenario for Diogenes's metaphorical defacements of custom or law. Other anecdotes include his being captured by pirates and sold as a slave.) In due course he found his way to Athens, where he lived as a "resident alien" without citizen rights, seemingly supporting himself entirely by begging and the handouts he received as a famously entertaining curmudgeon and street philosopher.

Diogenes sought to present himself as a living icon of counter-culturalism. He was especially renowned for his way-out exhibitionism – masturbating in public, eating raw meat, living in a tub – his cult of poverty, rugged simplicity, refusal to respect anyone on the basis of rank or position, and his brilliantly caustic discourse, the last of which harked back to Socrates and Antisthenes. Neither of these predecessors, though, anticipated Diogenes's unremitting exhibitionism and affronts to conventional decency and manners.

Where is the originator of cosmopolitanism in any of this? He approved being described in the following verses from Greek tragedy: "Stateless, homeless, without a native land / A beggar, a vagabond, living by the day."²⁰ Here his world citizenship, rather than an endorsement of internationalism or worldwide community, looks like a combination of refugee and hippy, with the "I don't give a damn where I live and I regard all laws as constraints on my freedom" flavor of the modern cynic.

19 DL, 6.20, probably with a view to putting bad money out of circulation. Diogenes's father is said to have been in charge of the local mint.

20 DL, 6.38.

Reading Diogenes's expression "citizen of the world" negatively is certainly correct up to a point; he took himself to be living a life unconstrained by any local or official citizenship. However, Diogenes wasn't purely iconoclastic in his rejection of the conventional norms of civic life, nor did he have only a negative manifesto to promote. Diogenes Laertius, after quoting the verses printed above in his biography of Diogenes, says of the Cynic, "He claimed that he could oppose confidence to fortune, nature to law or custom, and reason to emotion" – with nature and reason being the crucial words in this statement. By opposing nature to *nomos* Diogenes took up sides in a debate that had been rumbling on for the previous one hundred years. Earlier defendants of nature tended to view it as libertarianism, and, in doing so, saw themselves as hedonists or supporters of untrammelled political power. Diogenes was a libertarian of a kind, but the nature he opposed to *nomos* was not an anything-goes egoism, but, rather, reason, which he took to be the essence of human nature. His forceful attacks on *nomos*, ribald though they typically were in formulation, had the serious purpose of challenging his audience to hold their cultural practices accountable strictly to the light of reason. By forcefully contrasting nature with *nomos*, Diogenes drew attention, as Antisthenes had already done, to the idea that in reason human beings have their greatest authority for action and their greatest bulwark against the vicissitudes of fortune. For Diogenes, the true Cynic was a Hercules of the mind, whose conquests would be the monsters of irrational passion and cultural prejudice and whose weapon would be reason on the path to self-mastery.

We are probably warranted in crediting Diogenes with the idea that human

nature in its rational capacities transcends all civic and ethnic boundaries. Diogenes's cosmopolitanism was normative rather than descriptive, though. His worldwide city should be regarded as the community of the wise, an ideal of enlightened persons united not by local or relational ties but by the common values they share – a group that understands what human nature needs in order to perfect itself.²¹ This is the cosmopolitanism that Diogenes, through his follower Crates, passed down to Zeno and the Stoic tradition.²²

In the early Hellenistic world, Greek language and culture spread into Western Asia and Egypt in the aftermath of the conquests of Alexander the Great (d. 323), providing a fertile context for implicit cosmopolitan sentiments to take root. Stoicism provided the theoretical stimulus and explicit support for these sentiments.

Zeno stamped Cynic credentials on his earliest and most famous book, *Republic*, probably in deliberate confrontation with Plato's most celebrated work of the same name. The philosopher and biographer Plutarch, writing some four hundred years later, described its main point thus:

Our household arrangements should not be based on cities or local populations,

21 Did Diogenes present himself as a universal benefactor and philanthropist? I see him as more quirky and hard-edged than these descriptions imply, appropriate though they are to the Stoicized Cynic of Epictetus. But for a different view see John Moles, "Cynic Cosmopolitanism," in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*.

22 On Crates, who is said to have been Zeno's first teacher (DL, 7.1–2), see A. A. Long, "The Socratic Tradition: Diogenes, Crates, and Hellenistic Ethics," in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 41–46.

each one marked out by its own legal system, but we should regard all people as our fellow-citizens and local residents, and there should be one way of life and one order, like that of a herd grazing together and nurtured by a common law.²³

Zeno radically proposed that the ideal community would dispense with such fundamental Hellenic institutions as temples, courts of law, gymnasia, currency, conventional family life, and dress codes. Plutarch's "one way of life" captures some of Zeno's ideas, but fails to register the completely utopian character of the Stoic founder's vision, namely a community comprised solely of the wise and virtuous.

Zeno gave impetus to two closely related and enormously influential ideas: moral universalism and natural law. According to Stoic cosmology, the world is under the direction of a supreme nature named Zeus, who is perfectly rational and providential and present to all human beings (or at least those who listen to the voice of reason) in Zeus's law-like prescriptions and prohibitions.²⁴

Zeno himself may not have theorized the concept of a world city, but Stoicism was soon associated with the notion that the universe as such is a kind of city or, as Cicero two centuries later expressed it, "the common home of gods and human beings, or a city that belongs to both."²⁵ Rather than reject the conventional concept of a city or local community, Stoics characteristically spoke of "two communities." The Roman Stoic Seneca (d. A.D. 65) said:

23 *On the Fortune of Alexander*, 329A–B.

24 DL, 7.87–89.

25 Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 2.154. For further evidence and discussion, see Malcolm Schofield, *The Stoic Idea of the City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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There are two communities – the one, which is great and truly common embracing gods and human beings, in which we look neither to this corner nor to that, but measure the boundaries of our state by the sun; the other, the one to which we have been assigned by the accident of our birth.²⁶

Marcus Aurelius penned the most eloquent statements of our cosmic citizenship. Through a chain argument, he links what is common, reason, law, citizenship, humanity as a whole, and the world:

If mind is common to us all, then so is the reason which makes us rational beings; and if that be so, then so is the reason which prescribes what we should do or not do. If that be so, there is a common law also; if that be so, we are fellow-citizens; and if that be so, the world is a kind of state. For in what other common constitution can we claim that the whole human race participates?²⁷

For both Marcus Aurelius and the ex-slave and Stoic teacher Epictetus (c. A.D. 55 – 135), persons who detach themselves from human society are as “severed limbs.”²⁸ Epictetus presents an idealized Cynic as his cosmopolitan paradigm. This figure, whom he also calls God’s messenger, makes the earth and the sky his home. Witnessing to the truths that make for a good life, Epictetus’s Cynic cosmopolitan practices philanthropy on a global scale.

This cosmopolitanism does not imply that Stoics thought that human beings lack, or should learn to lack, all preferences for their immediate family mem-

bers or weaken their ties to local communities. Stoics listed among appropriate acts (which reason recommends our undertaking) honoring parents, brothers, and native land and spending time with friends.²⁹ They derived human sociability from our natural love of offspring and (outside the utopian contexts of their earliest philosophers) proposed that their wise paragon would want to engage in government, marry, and have children.³⁰

Yet, while softening Diogenes’s mordant unconventionalism, Stoicism was the one ancient philosophy that adumbrated ideas of natural human rights and international ideals of justice. In *On Duties* (*De officiis*), Cicero, writing as a supporter of Stoicism, argues that international law (*ius gentium*), the law governing relations between states, ought to be the civil law (*ius civile*). At the same time he complains (in sentiments that have lost no force in the ensuing two thousand years) that we still lack a firm image of the authentic justice that international law should reflect.³¹ Cicero’s *On Duties* was more influential on early modern thought than any other work of classical antiquity.³²

Hierocles, a Stoic philosopher of the second century A.D., proposed a fascinating model and recommendation for the way human beings should regard their personal and social identities.³³ Each of us, he said, should picture our-

²⁹ DL, 7.108.

³⁰ Cicero, *On Ends*, 3.67 – 68.

³¹ Cicero, *On Duties*, 3.69.

³² See Andrew R. Dyck, *A Commentary on Cicero, De officiis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 39 – 48.

³³ The translated text is included in A. A. Long and David N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic*

²⁶ *On Leisure*, 4.1.

²⁷ *Meditations*, 4.4.

²⁸ *Meditations*, 4.29; Epictetus 2.5.26.

selves as the center of a series of concentric circles. The nearest circle contains one's immediate family – parents, siblings, spouse, and children – and the next contains uncles and aunts, grandparents, nephews, nieces, and cousins. The circle beyond this is comprised of more distant relatives, and then, as one goes farther, the circle of neighbors, then fellow tribesmen, then fellow citizens, then people from nearby towns, then fellow-countrymen, and, finally, in the outermost and largest circle, the entire human race. Hierocles recommended two strategies for reducing the distance between oneself and the series of circles. First, we should draw the circles closer to ourselves, treating the third circle as if it were second and so on, making the occupants of each circle that degree closer to us. Second, we should call cousins brothers, uncles and aunts fathers and mothers, and so forth. Without rejecting the nuclear family, as early Stoic utopianism had proposed, Hierocles offered this way of reducing the conventional gaps separating close family members from other citizens, and citizens from foreigners.

Stoic thought clearly shaped cosmopolitan sentiments in the general culture of later antiquity, too. Take, for example, the Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (3:26). After telling the baptized that they have been clad in Christ, the Epistle reads: "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul, in the context of the irrelevance of Jewish ritual and identity to the Christian faith, focuses on unity and anticipates Marcus Aurelius's conception of universal and shared citizenship.

Philosophers, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 439 – 440.

His negation of race, status, and gender differences is a rhetorically charged application of the Stoics' claim that all human beings are the same in virtue of their basic natural attributes.

A second example harks back to Philo of Alexandria, the extraordinary exegete of the *Torah* who wrote a few decades before Paul. Philo, mentioned above as the earliest extant author to use the exact Greek word *kosmopolites*, did so because he had an expert knowledge of Stoicism that he drew on constantly, not for its own sake but as an interpretive guide to the more obscure passages of Biblical narrative. In most instances, Philo applies the term to virtuous and wise persons in contexts that are obviously Cynic and Stoic in inspiration: "The good man [alluding to Moses] is a citizen of the world, and therefore / not on the roll of any of the world's cities since he has the whole world as his portion" and "The law-abiding man is directly a world citizen because he regulates his actions by / reference to the will of nature by which the entire world is administered."³⁴ Of particular interest is Philo's assessment of Adam as the aboriginal and unique citizen of the world. The world was quite literally Adam's home and city because in Eden he lived without a manufactured dwelling and passed his life there in complete fearlessness and peace, in command over all other created beings.³⁵ With shades of primitivism and pre-civilized innocence, Philo's Adam reads like an ideal Cynic, fully integrated with himself and his natural surroundings.

Cynics and Stoics were classical antiquity's principal theorists of cosmopolitanism.

³⁴ First reference from *Life of Moses*, 157; second reference from *On the Creation*, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

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tanism. What merits future research is the extent to which the Roman Empire, with its extensions of citizenship to its multitudinous provincials, gave people a sense of identity that went beyond their local allegiances. Would “citizen of the world” have come so readily into Philo’s mind three centuries earlier? I doubt it, largely because a cosmopolitan ideal is not attested in other philosophical schools before the Roman Empire.

Epicurus founded his school at Athens a few years before Zeno acquired his following of Stoics. Avoiding political involvements and cultivating a simple life, Epicurus showed some affinity to the Cynic practice of Diogenes and Crates, but he recommended that his adherents live in ashram-like communities of friends under the protection of conventional cities, rather than as citizens of the world. In the second century of our era, yet another Diogenes (of Oenoanda in central Anatolia) characterized the Epicurean millennium in strongly cosmopolitan terms, saying “Then everything will be full of justice and mutual friendship, and there will be no need of city-walls or laws.”³⁶ In this future ideal of felicitous farming and philosophy (as the text explains), the state has withered away. As with Philo, Diogenes of Oenoanda is capable of looking at normative human identity and culture on a global scale.

Thinking along such lines must have been encouraged by the internationalism of the Roman Empire, but such an outlook was hardly widespread. No classical author is more sophisticated than the satirist Lucian (b. c. A.D. 120), but, though he liked to draw on Cynic authors, he shows no sympathy for cosmopolitanism. In a little work entitled

Encomium of one’s native land, Lucian, drawing on Odysseus’s epic nostalgia for Ithaca, voices what was – and probably still is – the majority attitude of people today: the land where one is born is dearer than anywhere else.

³⁶ See A. A. Long, *From Epicurus to Epictetus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 198 – 199.