

The Cynics

Introduction Part 3 – The Big Ideas, Goals, and Practices of the Cynics

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"Cynicism is . . . a match for the most excellent kind of philosophy." — Julian, the Roman emperor

"The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue. Some have said that Cynicism is a shortcut upon the path of virtue." — Anonymous (reported by Diogenes Laertius)

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The Best of the Cynics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Ancient Cynics.

Introduction Part 3

The Big Ideas, Goals, and Practices of the Cynics

THE CYNIC OUTFIT. One ancient Cynic claimed that the Cynic outfit was the "uniform for a good man."¹ Certainly it was an outfit for the man who wished to live a simple, frugal life. "Cynics," Diogenes Laertius explains, "teach that a man should live simply . . . wearing only one piece of clothing, a worn garment."² When asked to defend himself and the way he appeared—his long beard and hair, his bare feet, and particularly his dirty old cloak—one Cynic answered, "It meets my needs. It was easy to come by, and it gives its owner no trouble. It is the cloak for me." Later he added that "the whole outfit that you ridicule . . . enables me to live a quiet life, doing what I want."³

The outfit itself was a simple one consisting of a doubled-over, tattered cloak (*tribōn*), a leather bag (*pēra*), and a staff (*baktron*). The first we hear of it is in reference to Antisthenes. "Antisthenes wore only one garment. He was the first to fold or double over his cloak, which was rather threadbare. He carried a staff and a leather bag."⁴ Later men suggested the Cynics dressed the way they did in imitation of Heracles, one of their heroes. Crates, for example, was compared to the hero in that he "also went about half-naked and was distinguished by the club he carried."⁵ Heracles himself, we are told, "was clad in a dirty skin."⁶ Diogenes of Sinope called Heracles' clothing—that is, the lion skin—"virtue's clothing."⁷

The Stoic Epictetus was careful to point out that the Cynic outfit did not a Cynic make. To be a Cynic one had to act like a Cynic. It's to that—to the goals and practice of the Cynic—we now turn.

Cynic Goals

Living life according to virtue. “The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue.”⁸ We have already noted several times that many in the ancient world considered Cynicism to be a “shortcut to virtue”—to excellence, the good life. And it is true. But virtue, here, must be understood correctly. Although it had to do with elevating the soul above the body and valuing internal goods over things external, we mustn't overlay other or later Greek ideas onto the Cynic conception of virtue, which was something radical, even excessive—“Socrates gone mad,” as Plato contended.

For the Cynic, virtue—which, according to Antisthenes “is the same for a woman as it is for a man”—is sufficient for happiness. Happiness itself is a matter of the drastic reduction of desire, or even the absence of desire, and the psychological freedom that follows from such—a freedom from all wants. It is self-control and the self-sufficiency or independence that results therefrom.⁹ What is the guiding star that may lead one to this life of virtue? The answer is nature. Living virtuously means living according to nature.

Living life according to nature. For the Cynics, living according to nature entails two major points. One is the opposition to convention, the way humans customarily feel and think, seek and do things. By convention we humans eat, have sex, and relieve ourselves in private; we pursue gold, wear fashionable clothing, contract marriages, put on lavish feasts, worship many gods, form into rival parties and polities, and fight wars. But it doesn't have to be so. We are told that “Diogenes [the Cynic] asserted that he could counter . . . convention with nature.” Accordingly, he reevaluated all human customs, “granting nothing at all . . . to human custom and law, but following nature.” For example, we are informed that “Diogenes was in the habit of doing everything in public—both the business of Demeter [eating] and Aphrodite [having sex].”¹⁰

How may we know what it means to follow nature? We may by observing the way animals behave—dogs, lions, and mice, for instance. Though meant to be a criticism, one ancient observer notes that Cynics “utilize [the] good things [of the earth] no more than the beasts. Your drink is water, just like theirs. You eat what you pick up, like a dog. And the dog's bed is as good as yours—straw is enough for . . . you.” In short, says this observer, the Cynics reject “all the wonderful paraphernalia of civilization.” Of course, any Cynic in his right mind would have nodded in agreement. In fact, the Cynic criticized eventually declares, “My prayer would be . . . that I might need bedding no more than the lion, and costly food no more than the dog. Let my sufficient bed be the whole earth, my house this universe, and my chosen food the easiest to procure.”¹¹

The story goes that Diogenes learned how to follow nature by watching a mouse:

Theophrastus declares in his work the *Megarian* that it was by watching a mouse—how it didn't long for a marriage bed, and how it didn't care about the dark, and how it didn't long for things that have a reputation for causing pleasure—that Diogenes discovered the means of adapting himself to circumstances.¹²

Desire reduction. As already mentioned, the life of virtue for the Cynic was closely tied to the radical reduction of desire. Diogenes Laertius recounts that “when someone extolled a luxurious life” in the presence of Antisthenes, that is, a life that would satisfy every conceivable desire, “he said, ‘May the sons of your enemies have a luxurious life!’” He is also reported to have said, “I would rather go insane than enjoy myself with pleasure.” Similarly, Diogenes told a man “who was earnestly entreating a prostitute” with every hope of success, that “it would be better for [him] to be unsuccessful.”¹³

The point seems to have hinged upon the fact that such satisfaction never fully comes; desire always leaves one desiring more, and the pursuit of pleasure often leaves one in pain or suffering hardship. “Pleasure,” writes Dio Chrysostom, “after overpowering and taking possession of her victims, delivers them over to the most hateful and most difficult hardship.” He presents Diogenes of Sinope as one who battles with pleasure and those desires that longingly stretch out for pleasure. But, Diogenes declares, a man “should flee from pleasure as far as possible and only have unavoidable dealings with her.”¹⁴

The Cynic view was that the desires are a plague that torment the human soul. Diogenes averred that “bad men obey their desires as house slaves obey their masters.”¹⁵ These were not only what we might term positive desires, such as the desire *for* pleasure of any kind, lust *for* sex, or greed *for* wealth, but also negative desires, those desires *against* something—the desire that seeks to avoid (and is thus *against*) pain and suffering, the desire of anger *against* personal injury, and the desire of fear that *flees* death, and the like.¹⁶ When accused of not having any true victories to speak of, Diogenes claimed that he had vanquished “many and mighty antagonists” including “anger, pain, desire, fear, and the most redoubtable beast of all, treacherous and cowardly, I mean pleasure.”¹⁷

If bad men are enslaved by their desires, then what about good men? What are they to do? Epictetus explains that desire must be completely taken away.¹⁸ If the master is desire, and the master causes untold suffering, then there must be a revolt. Desire must be overturned. But what will happen, we may ask, when desire is reduced in this manner? Diogenes asserts that something remarkable occurs. A new kind of pleasure appears, as it were, in the sky. It’s as if one leaves the city and its light pollution behind and moves out into the countryside where the stars are finally revealed in all their majestic number and brilliance. “According to Diogenes, contempt for pleasure is, if we get used to it, quite pleasant itself. And just as those who are accustomed to living with pleasure feel nauseous when they have to give this life up, so too do those who have practiced the opposite life feel pleasure when they

look down on pleasure.”¹⁹ Diogenes judges that “the gods had given men an easy life”—one according to reduced desire. “But,” he said, “the easy life had become obscure over time by their seeking honey-cakes and perfumes and like things.”²⁰ The Cynic in Lucian’s dialogue expresses what may be the desire-reducing Cynic’s motto: “May I never wish for more than my share but be content with less.”²¹

Self-control (enkrateia). “When Phryne the prostitute set up a golden statue of Aphrodite in Delphi, Diogenes is said to have written on it, ‘From Greece’s lack of self-control.’”²² So reports Diogenes Laertius, giving us insight into the nature of self-control—that when desire is present (desire for things like the “works of Aphrodite,” as sex was commonly called), self-control is often absent.

Key to desire reduction is self-control. In fact, it may fairly be said that self-control *is* desire reduction or to be without desire altogether. St. Basil of Caesarea, a Christian bishop who had great admiration for Diogenes of Sinope and who betrays his own Cynic leanings (if we may call them such) in his letters and other writings, wrote that “God seems to be self-control because he desires nothing.” He goes on to write, “Desire is a disease of the soul, whereas its health is self-control.”²³ Self-control as health, then, is the opposite of desire as disease. To become healthy, to become self-controlled, a person must necessarily reduce his or her desires. The greater the reduction, the greater the health. Diogenes is reported to have said that “it was characteristic of the gods to need nothing, and that, consequently, when a man needs very little or nothing at all, he is like the gods.” It was a judgment repeated by later Cynics.²⁴

Diogenes Laertius notes that Diogenes of Sinope exhibited *apatheia*, impassibility or freedom from desire and other emotions, and Crates was known for his self-control (*enkrateia*). Cynic *apatheia* and *enkrateia* are closely related.

Self-sufficiency (autarkeia) “You alone revealed to mortal men the teaching that self-sufficient living is a way of life that is not burdensome.”²⁵ Such was the inscription written on the bronze statue set up to celebrate Diogenes in his hometown of Sinope. The self-

sufficient man is the one who is easily able to provide for himself everything he desires—the easy life that the gods originally supplied. And what he desires lines up with simple necessity. “A man’s sufficiency is that which meets his needs.”²⁶ Warmth? The Cynics’ tattered cloak is enough. Defense? His staff. A storehouse? His leather bag. A dwelling? The wine-jar that Diogenes lived in or some public space. Food? Lupin beans, olives, and other simple foods. Drink? Water or inexpensive wine. Explaining how Diogenes taught self-sufficiency, Diogenes Laertius informs us that he “used to teach the boys in his care to supply their own needs, and to be content with simple food and water to drink.”²⁷ The Cynic in Lucian’s dialogue states, “I enjoy what comes to hand, use what is cheap, and have no yearning for the elaborate and exotic.”²⁸

The wise man, argued Antisthenes, “is self-sufficient.”²⁹ While this has to do with the fact that the wise man is easily able to provide for his needs, it also—or perhaps mostly—has to do with the fact that the wise man is the virtuous man, the man whose life is in accord with nature. Virtue is “sufficient in itself for happiness.” To put it another way, “Virtue is self-sufficient for happiness.”³⁰ Accordingly, Crates knew that if his sons became philosophers, men in love with wisdom, they “would need nothing.”³¹

Freedom (eleutheria) Seen in another light, self-sufficiency is freedom. “The character of a Cynic,” writes Epictetus, it that “of a free man,” that “of a man who lives under the open sky.”³²

Such freedom releases the Cynic from the anxiety and subservience that many experience in the presence of others, particularly in the presence of those who have and wield great power. Such unfree men worry about what the powerful may do to them or whether they will give them what they want. Rather than being free and independent, they are entirely others-dependent. When may they eat? Only when the powerful eat. As Diogenes pointed out to Callisthenes, a man who “shared extravagance at the side of Alexander [the Great],” he was only allowed to eat “when Alexander [chose to eat].”³³ Likewise, we are told that when Plato “approached [Diogenes] and

quietly said to him, ‘If you had paid court to Dionysus [the tyrant of Syracuse], you would not now be washing vegetables,’” Diogenes countered, “‘If you had washed vegetables, you wouldn’t have paid court to Dionysus.’”³⁴

When asked “what he gained from philosophy,” Crates answered, “A measure of lupin beans and no one to worry about.” In doing so, he concretely reduced Cynicism to two of its most essential goals: to have enough and to be free from worry about others. Crates declared “that obscurity and poverty were his own homeland, which Fortune could never take captive.”³⁵ Of his outfit, one Cynic explained, “it enables me to live a quiet life, doing what I want and keeping the company I wish to keep.”³⁶ Finally, Diogenes “declared that his manner of life was the same as that of Heracles. He preferred freedom more than everything else.”³⁷

Cynic heroes (hērōs). The mention of Heracles highlights another goal the Cynics had—to be like certain heroes, certain great human beings (some who were eventually deified). To name the most prominent from mythology, there were Heracles, Theseus, Odysseus, and the Amazons.³⁸

The Cynic in Lucian’s dialogue declares that Heracles “was the best man that ever lived. . . . He had self-control and fortitude. He wanted power and not luxury.” There was also Theseus, who was Heracles’ disciple, says the same Cynic. He was “the best of his generation—he too chose to go naked and without shoes. It was his pleasure to let his hair and beard grow.” “Well,” he concludes, “I admire those ancients and would gladly be like them. By contrast, I do not have the smallest admiration for the present generation’s wonderful felicity—tables! clothes! bodies artificially polished all over! no hair growing in any of the places where nature plants it!”³⁹

The Roman writer Apuleius compares the Cynic Crates of Thebes to Heracles (in this case, the Latin version Hercules) in this way:

The poets tell that Hercules of old by his valor subdued all the wild monsters of legend, beast or man, and purged all the world of them. Even so our philosopher

Crates was truly a Hercules in the conquest of anger, envy, avarice, lust, and all the other monstrous and shameful things that plague the human soul. He expelled all these pests from their minds, purged households, and tamed vice. Not only that, but he too went half-naked and was distinguished by the club he carried. And he sprang from that same Thebes where men say

that Hercules was born.⁴⁰

More recent heroes (relative to the origin of Cynicism) were the Persian king Cyrus, who cherished the value of hard work and human effort, and Socrates, who was—in the Cynic mind anyway—the prototypical Cynic.

Cynic Practice

Cynic shamelessness (anaideia). Form in your mind the picture a large dog hunched over in a grassy park doing his business. (An unpleasant image, yes, but in this case necessary.) He glances around with a strained look on his face as if somewhat defenseless. Then, nature having taken its course, he pads away smiling—sniffing the grass, chasing a squirrel, wagging his tail, all the while oblivious to others. The Cynics wanted to be no different than this dog. In a word, they wished to be shameless in what they did and where they did it. Accordingly, whereas most Greeks ate, made love, and used the restroom in private, they advocated doing these acts wherever they happened to be, even in the most public of all locations, the marketplace. There is no natural function that is truly shameful, they argued; rather, such functions have only become shameful thanks to human convention.

Take farting, for example, something that seems naturally embarrassing, even shameful. On the contrary, for the Cynic, the act of passing gas is quite natural and, therefore, not truly or naturally shameful in any way or in any situation. We see this illustrated in a story Diogenes Laertius relates about Crates and his student Metrocles.

One day, in the midst of others, Metrocles of Maroneia farted when he was practicing a speech. He was so despondent because of what he had done that he shut himself up in his house, fully intending to starve himself to death. When Crates learned about this and was summoned, he visited Metrocles. First, he ate a bowl of lupin beans—*on purpose*. Then he tried to persuade Metrocles that he had done nothing bad. For it would have been a

miracle if he had not, following nature, relieved himself of such a blast of wind. Finally, when Crates himself farted, he renewed Metrocles' strength, encouraging him by means of similar actions.⁴¹

Take another example—that of going to the restroom. According to a story told by Dio Chrysostom, Diogenes once did his business in public during the Isthmian games. Imagine him there, speaking to a crowd about his own successful battles with hardship and pleasure. To illustrate his struggles, he mentions the example of Heracles, who, he contends, heroically labored in a similar manner. Diogenes says that

to avoid creating the opinion that he [Heracles] did only impressive and mighty deeds, he went and cleaned out the dung in the Augean stables, that immense accumulation of many years. For he thought that he should fight stubbornly and war against opinion as much as against wild beasts and wicked men.

Ordinarily, such gruesome labor would have been the work of a shameless slave. But not in Heracles' case! Dio Chrysostom explains that the crowd listening to Diogenes truly enjoys what he is saying—until, that is, Diogenes behaves in a shameful manner that defies every sensible norm (and with this we get to Cynic shamelessness, that of performing an “inglorious act” in public):

While Diogenes spoke in this manner, many stood around and listened to his words with great pleasure. Then—possibly with this thought of Heracles in his

mind—he stopped speaking and, squatting on the ground, he performed an inglorious act. Seeing this, the crowd straightway scorned him and called him crazy.⁴²

To give one last example, most of us might find tripping before others or making a loud noise or doing something apparently subservient in public embarrassing. Not the Cynics.

Someone dropped a loaf of wheat bread [in a public space] and was ashamed to pick it up. Seeing this, Diogenes wished to offer him a lesson, and so he tied a rope to the neck of a wine-jar and dragged it across the Ceramicus.⁴³

Rather than cowering with shame, Diogenes positively welcomed all the popped eyeballs and open mouths expressing astonishment. Similarly:

Someone wished to study philosophy with Diogenes, so he gave the man a big fish to carry [in a public space] and told him to follow after him. Eventually, thanks to the shame he felt, the man threw the fish away and departed. Sometime later, Diogenes encountered him, and laughing, he said, “Our friendship ended thanks to a big fish!”⁴⁴

Moreover, the Cynics held that the whole notion of reputation was bunk, something unnatural, a matter of human convention alone. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, they held that “a bad reputation is a good thing.”⁴⁵ The point was not that a bad reputation was something good in itself (they were not establishing a new convention), but to counter the idea that a good reputation—which depends in part at least on others rather than on oneself alone—was something inherently good. Additionally, a bad reputation assisted the Cynic in his efforts to let go of convention and to follow nature. Consequently, they held that the laughter of others directed at oneself is itself laughable and something to embrace and overcome:

When someone said, “Most people laugh at you,”

[Diogenes’] reply was, “Yes—and it is likely that asses laugh at them. But even as they pay very little attention to asses, so do I not pay attention to them.”⁴⁶

One man said to [Diogenes], “The many laugh at you.” He replied, “But I am not laughed down.”⁴⁷

Training, practice, exercise (askēsis). Since ancient times there has been the debate over whether Cynicism was a school of philosophy or a way of life.⁴⁸ If nothing else, the Cynic emphasis was always on training, practice, and exercise rather than mere theories and ideas. Diogenes made the point to the Cynic Hegesias when the latter asked him to lend him one of his writings. “You are a vain and thoughtless man,” Diogenes judged. “For in the case of figs, you would not choose painted figs but real ones, yet in this case you pass over genuine practice for what is merely written.”⁴⁹

We are told that “Diogenes said that absolutely nothing in life is successful without training, which has the power to conquer anything.”⁵⁰ Training of the soul, he said, “gives rise to perceptions that facilitate virtuous deeds.”⁵¹ What sort of training did he have in mind? The following anecdotes give some idea.

Diogenes Laertius tells us that “in summertime, Diogenes used to roll in his wine-jar house over hot sand. And in wintertime, he used to hug statues of men covered with snow. He practiced endurance in every way.” And “he would walk in the snow barefoot.” And “Diogenes once begged alms from a statue. When asked why he did this, he said, ‘To practice being rejected.’” And “Diogenes was going into a theater while everyone else was going out in the opposite direction. When someone asked him why, he said, ‘This is what I practice doing every day of my life.’” Diogenes was not the only one to practice in this manner. “Crates,” we’re informed, “used to revile prostitutes on purpose in order to practice getting used to the profanity they would give him in return.”⁵²

Endurance (karteria). In many ways, Cynicism as a way of life can be reduced to the ability to endure whatever may happen. “When someone asked him

what result he obtained from philosophy, Diogenes said, ‘If nothing else, this: I am prepared for every turn of fortune.’”⁵³ The report is that Antisthenes would walk some ten miles round trip each day to be with and listen to Socrates in Athens. From him he “learned the art of endurance . . . imitating his indifference to suffering.” It was because of this education in endurance, we are told, and imitation of Socrates’ example “that [Antisthenes] began the Cynic philosophy and the Cynic way of life.”⁵⁴ Remarking on Cynic endurance, Epictetus states, “The Cynic should also have such power of endurance that he seems insensible to the common sort, like a stone.”⁵⁵

We have already seen how individual Cynics trained to endure. Now let’s turn to how they positively embraced hardship.

Toil, hard work, hardship, suffering (ponos). “Antisthenes argued that hard work, with all its toil and suffering, is something good. He did so by pointing to the examples of great Heracles and Cyrus.”⁵⁶ The Cynic logic was something along these lines: if the ability to endure is something positive, and hard work and its consequent suffering as well as other hardships are the means by which one develops the ability to endure, then hard work, suffering, and hardship are something positive. In *Oration 8*, Dio Chrysostom has Diogenes put it this way:

But the noble and excellent man believes that his hardships are his greatest opponents, and always wants to battle with them day and night—not to win a sprig of parsley, as so many goats might do, nor for a bit of wild olive, or of pine, but to win happiness and virtue throughout all the days of his life . . . He is afraid of none of those opponents nor does he pray to draw another, but he challenges them one after another, grappling with hunger and cold, withstanding thirst, and disclosing no weakness even though he must endure the lash or give his body to be cut or burned. Poverty, exile, loss of reputation, and the like have no terrors for him.⁵⁷

Raising the example of Heracles, as Cynics liked to do (as mentioned above), Epictetus expounds, “When Heracles was exercised by Eurystheus, he did

not think that he was wretched, but without hesitation he attempted to execute all that he had in hand.” Later on in the same discourse, he presents Diogenes calling out to passersby “to see the battle between a fever and a man.” Instead of going to a friend’s house to nurse his illness, he suggests that a Cynic should “look around for some convenient dunghill on which you will endure your fever.”⁵⁸

Pleasure (hēdonē). Interestingly, these hardships are not the only kind that Diogenes faces with determination. Rather, he also battles pleasure, which, he points out, deceives and bewitches and imprisons. “For it is impossible to dwell with pleasure or even to linger with her for any length of time without being wholly conquered and enslaved.” To remain free, therefore, one must again and again decline pleasure. “He should flee from pleasure as far as possible and only have unavoidable dealings with her.”⁵⁹ The experience of pleasure in itself serves to weaken and gradually enslave a man rather than freeing him.

This ultimate hardship of being enslaved to pleasure is one the Cynic cannot embrace because it inherently entails weakness, the erosion of the ability to endure. As such, the difference between the one enslaved and the Cynic is immense: the addict (the one enslaved to pleasure) suffers enslavement by force (by the force of desire for pleasure, which powerfully demands satisfaction), whereas the Cynic endures deprivation by choice. The difference between the two is vast—that of choice versus a lack of freedom.

Putting up with hard work and suffering is not about being a masochist. Rather, in the end, it is about contentment—the ability to endure anything in order to be content with anything. The Cynic in Lucian’s dialogue states, “I can put up with cold and heat and be content with the works of God.” Not those, he counters, who pursue an easy life full of pleasure. They are “displeased with everything that happens and grumble without ceasing. What is, is intolerable. What is not, [they] pine for. In winter [they] want summer; in summer, winter. In heat [they] pine for cold; in cold, for heat.”⁶⁰

Things indifferent (adiaphoros). For the Cynics, those things that contribute to virtue and being virtuous

are good, and those that contribute to vice and being vicious are bad. Anything else is “indifferent,” that is, something that neither contributes to being virtuous or vicious. As Diogenes Laertius summarizes it, “Cynics teach that whatever is between virtue and vice should be counted as indifferent, that is, neither good nor bad.”⁶¹ Accordingly, hard work and suffering and the ability to endure are good, whereas a life of ease and pleasure are not. Things like human customs or fine clothing are things indifferent.

Poverty (penia). As with hard work and suffering, the Cynics viewed poverty as something to be welcomed. They did so because when a person embraces poverty, he or she has nothing to lose and is consequently secure. Crates declared that “obscurity and poverty were his own homeland,” his own walled city, “which Fortune could never take captive”⁶²—Fortune, or Luck, which was notorious for invading a man’s life, sacking it, as it were, and taking everything. In Xenophon’s *Symposium*, Antisthenes observes,

A man’s wealth or lack of wealth is not a matter of household goods but of soul goods. . . . As for me, my possessions are so great that I can hardly find them myself. I have enough to eat so that I’m not hungry and enough to drink so that I’m not thirsty. And I have enough clothing so that when I’m outside, I’m no colder than Callias is. . . . I do not purchase highly prized items in the marketplace since they are very expensive, but I withdraw wealth from my soul.⁶³

Simplicity, frugality (euteleia)—simple, frugal (eutelēs) living, living simply (litōs). If the reduction of desire and self-sufficiency are two of the most significant Cynic goals, both ordered to freedom, then simplicity is one of the most powerful practices by which these goals are achieved. To live simply, to be satisfied with what is necessary and to disregard the inessential, is to be fully content. To live in such a state is to be like the gods, who are completely satisfied.

Here’s how Diogenes Laertius sums up the Cynic position, a summary that contains the goal (to be satisfied like the gods), the disregard of inessentials (things like wealth and reputation), and the means by

which (living simply):

Cynics also teach that men should live simply, procuring for themselves only necessary food and wearing only one piece of clothing, a worn garment. They think very little of wealth and reputation and noble birth. Some Cynics get by on herbs and vegetables and cold water. They live in any kind of shelter, or even large wine-jars, just as did Diogenes, who used to say that it was characteristic of the gods to need nothing, and that, consequently, when a man needs very little or nothing at all, he is like the gods.⁶⁴

Diogenes Laertius further tells us that upon being accepted by Antisthenes, Diogenes “set out to live a simple and frugal life.”⁶⁵ The simplicity or frugality he practiced was one of bare necessity, the attempt to live life with the fewest needs or possessions possible—needs and possessions that paradoxically implied being possessed, that the owner was possessed by the possessions themselves in that he depended on them.

One time Diogenes saw a child drinking out of his hands. Consequently, he pulled the cup from his leather bag and tossed it away, saying, “A child has outdone me in frugality.” Another time, when he similarly observed a child who had broken his own spoon taking up lentil soup with a hollow crust of bread, he threw away his spoon.⁶⁶

If the ancient athlete’s objective was to give his life over to training in order to win victory and glory, the Cynic’s goal was to live simply, to live in such a way so as to radically reduce desires and thus become self-sufficient and ultimately free.

The Cynic’s fundamental intention and resolution toward living simply is that found in Lucian’s dialogue: “Let my sufficient bed be the whole earth, my house this universe, and my chosen food the easiest to procure.”⁶⁷ The key word is “sufficient.”

Citizen of the world (kosmopolitēs) Part of a Cynic’s practice was the act of releasing himself from all unnecessary externals, including that most important of ancient Greek possessions, citizenship in a particular city-state. Citizenship gave the Greek security and

power in the form of walls and numbers. But it also bound him. In exchange for these “goods,” he had to get involved in what was oftentimes the turbulent political life of the city, an involvement that in turn created other apparent needs and commitments—not to mention the frequent need to fight on behalf of the city. All of this was judged unnecessary by the Cynic.⁶⁸

Because of this desire for release and consequent liberty, Cynics viewed themselves as citizens of nowhere (we might say) or everywhere (as they said), the whole cosmos, rather than citizens of a particular place. Hence, “When someone asked him where he came from, Diogenes said, ‘I am a citizen of the world.’” He believed “the only true citizenship is that which is a citizenship in the whole cosmos.”⁶⁹

Living in the world—the Cynic mission

Telling the truth—frankness, outspokenness, freedom of speech (parrhēsia). “When someone asked Diogenes what was the most beautiful thing among men, he said, ‘Freedom of speech.’”⁷⁰ With this brief anecdote, we might think, *Ah, so the Cynics were early proponents of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America.* Not quite. Although there are similarities between Cynic *parrhēsia* and more modern political freedom of speech and expression in that people are at liberty to say what they truly think, the Cynic emphasis was far broader.

To understand, we must grasp what speech is and does for human beings. In essence, it reveals the mind or thoughts and feelings of a person. Therefore, speech is truly beautiful in that it connects persons, one to another, in a manner that is otherwise hard to achieve. But this is only in theory. In reality, speech can serve as the bars of a prison if it is deceptively utilized to present a person falsely or for some other unspoken motivation and goal. Cynics wanted nothing to do with such an imprisonment. Nor did they wish for such a one for others. Rather, they struggled to speak freely and frankly, to present things in the fullest light rather than allowing things to be overshadowed by the opinion of “the many,” by unnecessary courtesies, by deceptions, by things like reputation or wealth or power (which may all be viewed as speech in that they present a person in a certain light).

We see frankness or freedom of speech in action with a number of anecdotes having to do with Diogenes’ relationship with Alexander the Great, the one man who was the wealthiest and most powerful man in his corner of the world at the time. Again and again

Diogenes attempts to identify and speak in terms of how things actually are rather than surrendering to appearances:

One day Alexander the Great stood by Diogenes and said, “I am Alexander, the great and mighty king.” In response, Diogenes said, “And I am Diogenes, the dog.”⁷¹

When the Athenians voted to call Alexander, “Dionysus,” Diogenes said, “You can make me, ‘Sarapis.’”⁷²

Alexander stood opposite him and asked, “Are you not afraid of me?” Diogenes replied, “Why? Are you good or bad?” When Alexander said, “Good,” Diogenes replied, “Who then would fear something good?”⁷³

One day, when Diogenes was sitting in the sun nearby the Craneum grove of Corinth, Alexander stood over him and said, “Ask me for anything you desire.” Diogenes replied, “I would like you to stop blocking the light.”⁷⁴

The goal of Cynic freedom of speech or frankness was not merely to be obnoxious. Rather, as with their whole life, the goal was freedom—a freedom that hinged upon the realization that one does not require a certain response from others in order to be free. Consequently, they did not recognize the need to say what others wanted to hear—speech that ended up entrapping rather than liberating.

But more, Cynic frankness served as well to set others free. When asked who he would rather be if he were not himself, the wealthy and powerful Alexander declared he would like to be Diogenes.⁷⁵

Apparently he recognized the great value of Cynic freedom. Moreover, by their free speech, the Cynics were able to admonish and advise others who knew that a Cynic would never deceive or be indirect about what was best. We are told that “Crates was nicknamed the ‘Door-opener’ because he was in the habit of entering every house in order to admonish the inhabitants.”⁷⁶ Here’s how Epictetus expressed the fundamental job of the Cynic:

It is [the Cynic’s] responsibility, then, to be able with a loud voice, if the occasion arises, and appearing on the tragic stage, to say like Socrates: “Where are you hurrying? What are you doing, you miserable men? Like blind people you are wandering up and down. You are going by another road and have left the true road. You search for prosperity and happiness where they are not.”⁷⁷

Dealing with delusion or vanity (tuphos). To look for happiness where it is not is a matter of delusion. Such delusion or vanity is the smoke or mere appearance of the fire of happiness, we might say, rather than the fire itself. *Tuphos* is an imposter, a pretense, a conceit. It is seeming or appearance rather than being or actuality. Diogenes, we are told,

used to say that when he saw ship captains and physicians and philosophers living life, he regarded humans the wisest and most intelligent of all living beings. But when he saw interpreters of dreams and diviners, and those who paid attention to them, or those who were puffed up with their own outward appearance or wealth, he acknowledged that there was no more thoughtless and empty creature than a human being.⁷⁸

More, Diogenes “would generally chide men for the way they prayed, declaring that they asked for the seemingly good rather than the truly good.” And he “ridiculed noble birth and reputation and all such distinctions, calling them the showy ornaments of vice.”⁷⁹

Other Cynics similarly shed light on *tuphos*. Crates wrote that “much wealth is prey to vanity.”⁸⁰ It is liable, as the expression goes, to go up in smoke. The Cynic Monimus declared that “all opinion”—that is,

unfounded supposition—“is vanity.”⁸¹

Altering the currency (paracharattein to nomisma). Any state’s currency is a medium of exchange created to signify value. Once established, such a currency has value or is valuable. The truth, however, is that the currency is only valuable by convention. Gold has no inherent value. Nor does silver. The Cynics concluded the same about all human conventions. Wanting to follow nature, or that which is inherently valuable, they wished to reevaluate “human custom and law”—conventions regarding birth, reputation, marriage, eating, education, politics, and, in short, whatever was traditionally considered valuable. Regarding Diogenes’ words and deeds, Diogenes Laertius reports that “it was evident that [he] acted accordingly [that is, in accord with his sayings and teachings]—altering the currency, as it were, or reevaluating human customs, granting nothing at all in this way to human custom and law, but following nature.”⁸²

Distinguishing between true and false happiness. We’ve already seen how, according to Epictetus, it is the Cynic’s job to speak freely about what makes for happiness and what does not. Like Socrates, the Cynic must call out to others, asking, “Where are you hurrying? What are you doing, you miserable men? . . . You are going by another road and have left the true road. You search for prosperity and happiness where they are not.” For the Cynic, true happiness is not found among external goods, things such as wealth and power or even bodily goods. “Most of the precious instruments of happiness that you so pride yourselves on,” notes a Cynic, “are won only by vexation and worry.” He goes on:

Give a moment’s thought, if you will, to the gold you all pray for, to the silver, the costly houses, the elaborate dresses. And do not forget all the trouble and toil and danger they cost—the blood and death and ruin. Not only do large numbers of men perish at sea on their account, but many endure miseries in producing them. Moreover, they’re very likely to be fought for—the desire for them makes friends plot against friends, children against parents, wives against husbands. How pointless it all is! Embroidered clothes have no more warmth in

them than others. Gilded houses do not do better in keeping out the rain. A drink is no sweeter out of a silver cup—or a gold one for that matter. An ivory bed makes sleep no softer; on the contrary, your fortunate man on his ivory bed between his delicate sheets constantly finds himself calling on sleep in vain. And as to the elaborate dressing of food, I hardly need to say that instead of aiding nutrition it injures the body and produces diseases in it.⁸³

True happiness is simple, consisting of simple things. Unhappiness, or false happiness, by contrast, is complex. “Diogenes often declared that the gods

had given men an easy life. But the easy life had become obscure over time by their seeking honey-cakes and perfumes and like things.”⁸⁴

Going back as far as Homer, the “easy life” was synonymous with the happy life. The problem for the many was that when most imagined the happy, easy life, they envisioned the one lived by the gods—full of pleasure and every desirable thing.

True, said the Cynics. The easy life *is* the life lived by the gods. But the true, real happiness of the gods has everything to do with desiring nothing rather than having every imaginable desire satisfied.

So ends Item 3, “Introduction Part 3 — The Big Ideas, Goals, and Practices of the Cynics.” See you in **Item 4**, “The Cast of Significant Cynics — A Quick Reference & Chronology.”

NOTES

¹ Lucian, *The Cynic* 16.

² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.104.

³ Lucian, *The Cynic* 1 and 19.

⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.13. Diogenes Laertius’ source is Diocles of Magnesia.

⁵ Apuleius, *Florida* 22.

⁶ Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 8.

⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.45.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.105.

⁹ See Frederick Copleston, *Greece and Rome: From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus*, 119.

¹⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.38, 71, 69.

¹¹ Lucian, *The Cynic* 5, 15.

¹² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.8, 3, 66.

¹⁴ Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 8.

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.66.

¹⁶ For a sampling of various desires, see Apuleius, *Florida* 22: “Even so our philosopher Crates was truly a Hercules in the conquest of anger, envy, avarice, lust, and all the other monstrous and shameful things that plague the human soul.”

¹⁷ Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 9.

¹⁸ See Epictetus, *Discourse* 3.22, where, in inviting one to radically change, he states, “You must take away desire altogether.”

¹⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.44.

²¹ Lucian, *The Cynic* 15.

²² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.60.

²³ Basil of Caesarea, *Letter* 366. On whether or not Basil actually wrote this letter, see the related note above (in short, some say yes; others say no). Regardless, it expresses Cynic judgments.

²⁴ For Diogenes of Sinope, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.104. For “later Cynics,” see, for instance, Lucian, *The Cynic* 12: “Accordingly, the gods have no needs, and those men who have the fewest needs are nearest the gods.”

²⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.78.

²⁶ Lucian, *The Cynic* 3.

- ²⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.31.
- ²⁸ Lucian, *The Cynic* 11.
- ²⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.11.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 6.11.
- ³¹ Ibid., 6.88.
- ³² Epictetus, *Discourse* 3.22.
- ³³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.45.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 6.58.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 6.93.
- ³⁶ Lucian, *The Cynic* 19.
- ³⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.71.
- ³⁸ For the Amazons, see Crates, *Letter 28 To Hipparchia*.
- ³⁹ Lucian, *The Cynic* 13-14.
- ⁴⁰ Apuleius, *Florida* 22.
- ⁴¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.94. In place of “Metrocles of Maroneia farted when he was practicing a speech,” one early twentieth century, and thus very late Victorian, translation reads, “When he had made a breach of good manners . . .” Nevertheless, the verb *apoperdomai* (to break wind, fart) clearly appears in the text—twice.
- ⁴² Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 8.
- ⁴³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.35.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 6.36.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 6.11.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 6.58.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.54.
- ⁴⁸ See *ibid.*, 6.103, where Diogenes Laertius obliquely refers to the debate when he says, regarding the Cynics, “. . . if, that is, we decide that the [Cynic] school is a kind of philosophy and not, as some declare, a way of life.”
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 6.48.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., 6.71.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 6.69.
- ⁵² Ibid., 6.23, 34, 49, 64, 90.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 6.63.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 6.2.
- ⁵⁵ Epictetus, *Discourse* 3.22.
- ⁵⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.2.
- ⁵⁷ Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 8.
- ⁵⁸ Epictetus, *Discourse* 3.22.
- ⁵⁹ Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 8.
- ⁶⁰ Lucian, *The Cynic* 17.
- ⁶¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.105.
- ⁶² Ibid., 6.93.
- ⁶³ Xenophon, *Symposium* 4.34-41.
- ⁶⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.104.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 6.21.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 6.37.
- ⁶⁷ Lucian, *The Cynic* 15.
- ⁶⁸ We would be remiss *not* to note that, although he would have been very young, Antisthenes fought on behalf of Athens on at least one occasion, the battle of Tanagra (426 BC). And Diogenes of Sinope may have taken part in the action of the battle of Chaeronea (338 BC).
- ⁶⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.63, 72.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.69. We are also told that Antisthenes “took delight in *parrhēsia*” (Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 8).
- ⁷¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.60.

⁷² Ibid., 6.63. The one (Dionysus) was a Greek god; the other Greco-Egyptian, the combination of the Egyptian gods Osiris and Apis.

⁷³ Ibid., 6.68.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 6.38.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 6.32.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 6.86.

⁷⁷ Epictetus, *Discourse* 3.22.

⁷⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.24.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 6.42, 72.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 6.86.

⁸¹ Ibid., 6.83.

⁸² Ibid., 6.71.

⁸³ Lucian, *The Cynic* 8-9.

⁸⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.44.

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"Cynicism is . . . a match for the most excellent kind of philosophy." —Julian, the Roman emperor

"The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue. Some have said that Cynicism is a shortcut upon the path of virtue." —Anonymous (reported by Diogenes Laertius)

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