

The Cynics

Introduction Part 2 – Basic Facts about the Cynics

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The following comes from the Cave's
The Best of the Cynics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Ancient Cynics.

Introduction Part 2

Basic Facts about the Cynics

WHAT IS CYNICISM? As we have noted, Plato judged Diogenes of Sinope a "Socrates gone mad (*mainomenos*).\" As we have also noted, this was not intended as a compliment. Rather, it was meant to undercut what Diogenes was doing, to say that he was everything denoted by *mainomenos*, a Greek word related to the English words "mania" and "maniac.\" He was crazy! insane! a lunatic! a man drunk! a man frenzied (as in the sort of frenzy inaugurated by Dionysus and his secret rites)! For Plato, Diogenes—and thus Cynicism—was an extreme version of the far healthier, moderate, and *sane* Socrates.

If Diogenes was a "Socrates *mainomenos*," then what was it about Socrates that Diogenes and

Cynicism took too far? The answer primarily has to do with the Socratic art of endurance—Socrates' self-control and indifference to suffering.¹ But it is also related to Socrates' frank and open search for the meaning of reality and human life and his free questioning of the conventional terms used to describe the same. It also has to do with his habitual inattention to his own appearance, and his emphasis on frugality and living a simple life. Diogenes and the Cynics took all of these to an extreme (begging, of course, the Aristotle-inspired question about whether a virtue or an excellence can even be an extreme).

The Stoics later said that "the Cynic philosophy and way of life is a shortcut to virtue.\" This

“shortcut” element of Cynicism also seems to imply an extreme. It is not the steady-as-you-go climb to the mountaintop; rather, it is going straight up, off the trail. In this way we might say that the ancient Cynics were off-roaders. So, if philosophers like Plato advocated the road less travelled followed by the few—which they did relative to the many who were focused, they judged, on things like getting rich, building a reputation, and having the fullest possible range of pleasures—the Cynics trudged along an empty road travelled by very, very few to none at all, a feat that took immense courage, intense focus, and, yes, a fair measure of madness. You’re going up *that* way?

Here’s how the tenth century AD Byzantine *Suda* (a historical dictionary and encyclopedia covering the ancient Greek and Roman and Byzantine worlds) defined Cynicism:

A school of philosophy. It’s definition is ‘a short path to virtue.’ The goal of Cynicism is to live according to virtue, in the manner of Diogenes and Zeno of Citium. The Cynics held that one should live frugally, eating sufficient food to support oneself and looking down on wealth and reputation and nobility of birth. Some of them were vegetarians, using plants for food, and they drank cold water and utilized whatever shelter they happened to find, even large wine-jars. They used to say that it was a unique characteristic of a god neither to need nor want anything—and those who need and want few things are like a god. They also hold that virtue is teachable and that it cannot be lost.²

In summary, then, Cynicism was a shortcut—the short path to virtue or excellence (*aretē*). It was the diet plan that most doctors would advise against, the one where you lose three or more pounds per week versus the far more steady—and surely, Plato would argue, sane and healthy—one to two pounds. Nevertheless, the few who truly practiced Cynicism seemed to get it done. In some measure they became virtuous men and women, champions in the contest against pleasure and pain. But they were the few—the very few.

Who were the major Cynics? Some of the most significant Cynics were Antisthenes of Athens, Diogenes of Sinope, Crates of Thebes, Crates’ wife, Hipparchia of Maroneia, Teles of Megara, Demetrius, Dio Chrysostom, and Demonax.³

Who founded Cynicism? There are two positions regarding who founded Cynicism. The traditional view held by scholars through antiquity and by many if not most scholars today is that the Athenian Antisthenes (c. 445-365 BC) founded Cynicism.⁴ There have been those, however, who have doubted this position. They hold that Diogenes of Sinope (c. 410-323 BC) was the actual founder. It was only later, they claim, that others labeled Antisthenes a Cynic in order to connect Zeno of Citium (c. 334-262 BC), the founder of Stoicism, to Socrates (c. 469-399 BC). This strategy of connection worked because Zeno of Citium was the student of the Cynic Crates of Thebes (c. 365-285 BC), who was the student of Diogenes of Sinope, who was (it was supposed) the student of Antisthenes. Regardless of the view one takes on the matter, it seems safe to conclude that in some way both Antisthenes and Diogenes inspired and influenced the founding of Cynicism—Antisthenes as a “Socratic” philosopher, and Diogenes, who was, as Dudley states, the original *dog*. But what does *that* mean—to call Diogenes a dog?

What does the name “Cynic” mean? How did the Cynics get their name? The name Cynic means “dog” (from the Greek *kuōn* or *kyōn*, dog). There are two major accounts for why the Cynics came to be called “dogs.” One is stated by Diogenes Laertius in his *Lives* (6.13):

Antisthenes used to lecture in the gymnasium of the White Dog (*Cynosarges*). He did so not far from the gymnasium’s gates. Some people say that the Cynic school received its name from the White Dog. And Antisthenes himself was simply called “Dog.”

Most, however, accept the other account. It has to do with the intentional shamelessness of the Cynics and its similarity to the shamelessness of dogs. People called them “dogs” or “dog-like” (*kunikos*) because they behaved like dogs. To expand on this,

Diogenes was nicknamed dog “because of his rejection of conventions, his adoption of poverty, and his practice of shamelessness.”⁵

A scholium on Aristotle gives the following explanation for why the Cynics were called dogs:

The Cynics, or Dogs, have their name for four reasons. First, it is for the detached carelessness of their way of life, for they emphasize a general indifference, and, like dogs, they eat and have sex in public spaces, and they go barefoot and sleep in wine-jars and tubs and along the way. . . . The second reason is that the dog is a shameless animal, and Cynics praise shamelessness as being superior to decorum and respectability. . . . The third reason is that the dog is good at keeping watch, and they guard the canons of their philosophy. The last reason is that the dog is a perceptive animal that can discriminate between its friends and enemies. . . . Accordingly, Cynics recognize those who are suited to philosophy as friends, and they welcome them kindly, while they bark like dogs at those who are ill-equipped for the pursuit of wisdom.⁶

Finally, we are told in an anecdote that Diogenes himself called himself “the dog.” The story goes that “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.’”⁷

What was it like to practice the Cynic way of life? Cynic practice consisted of two major aspects. One was about becoming truly free or independent by means of ongoing training—the practice of endurance by reducing desires, embracing hardship and suffering, and living a self-sufficient and simple or frugal life centered on necessity alone. The other had to do with a mission to others to help them see through human vanity and the apparent value of many human conventions in order to live a more authentic and virtuous life according to nature. Alongside Cynic training and practice, frankness or truth-telling and preaching was the central way that Cynics reached others.

What are the major ancient sources for the Cynics and the nature of Cynicism? Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives and*

Opinions of Eminent Philosophers (third century AD) is one of the most significant sources for identifying who the major Cynics were and what they believed. The problem is that it requires judicious reading against other sources to discover what is accurate and what is not. This is particularly true regarding biographical details furnished by the *Lives*. Nevertheless, as others have judged, Diogenes Laertius’ general presentation of the Cynics and their approach to life seems fairly accurate.

Aside from Diogenes Laertius, there were many others who wrote about the Cynics and Cynicism.⁸ Unfortunately, most if not all of what they had to say is now lost. Others, whose writings we still possess, include Xenophon of Athens, Teles of Megara, Dio Chrysostom, Epictetus, Apuleius, Lucian of Samosata, and Julian (the Roman emperor). Aside from Diogenes Laertius, their works make up the content of this present collection of Cynic texts.

What major works did the Cynics write?—or those who wrote from a Cynic perspective? And who favorably wrote about Cynicism? Of the earliest Cynics, we possess only fragments. The longest passages are “The Speech of Ajax” and “The Speech of Odysseus” by Antisthenes. Both emphasize the Cynic virtues of each Homeric hero. Nothing significant survives from Diogenes of Sinope. A collection of ancient Cynic letters exists, the letters of Diogenes and Crates, among others, but, though they are Cynic in spirit and counsel, they are not considered genuine.⁹ Later writers either wrote favorably about Cynicism or from a Cynic perspective. Though he himself was not a Cynic, in his *Symposium*, Xenophon allows Antisthenes to speak in his own Cynic voice about the wealth of the soul and the frugal life of simplicity. Dio Chrysostom, who lived and practiced the Cynic way of life for many years, wrote several orations with Cynic themes centering on Diogenes of Sinope. One, *Oration 6*, demonstrates the blessings of the Cynic way of life compared to the suffering brought on by the usual pursuit of ease and pleasure. Another, *Oration 8*, explores Diogenes of Sinope’s turn to what amounts to Cynicism under the tutelage of Antisthenes, and offers a speech by Diogenes given at the

Corinthian games that explains his own ongoing contest with hardship and pleasure. Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher and instructor, wrote a discourse surveying what it truly means to live a Cynic life. Lucian of Samosata, or someone who imitated his style, penned a dialogue, *The Cynic*, in which a Cynic philosopher defends his way of life. We have passages from Apuleius, author of the *Metamorphoses* (*The*

Golden Ass), that give us some idea about Crates of Thebes and his practice of Cynicism. The Roman emperor Julian, though not himself a Cynic, wrote a few orations addressing Cynic themes. Finally, Joannes Stobaeus preserved long passages of the Cynic Teles of Megara, including “On Self-Sufficiency,” “A Comparison of Poverty and Wealth,” and “On Pleasure Not Being the Goal of Life.”

So ends Item 2, “Introduction Part 2 — Basic Facts about the Cynics.” See you in **Item 3**, “Introduction Part 3 — The Big Ideas, Goals, and Practices of the Cynics.”

NOTES

¹ See *ibid.*, 6.2. “[Antisthenes] learned the art of endurance from [Socrates], imitating his indifference to suffering. So it was that he began the Cynic philosophy and the Cynic way of life.”

² Suda, *kunismos* (Cynicism), kappa 2712. Given the similarity of their definition and description of Cynicism, it is clear the author of the *Suda* had an eye on the work of Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.104.

³ For more on the major Cynics, see “The Cast of Significant Cynics” in the “Other Matters of Interest Related to the Cynics” section toward the end of this book.

⁴ See William John Kennedy, *Antisthenes’ Literary Fragments: Edited with Introduction, Translations, and Commentary* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2017), <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/16595>.

⁵ James Longrigg, “Cynics,” in Graham Speake, ed., *Dictionary of Ancient History* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 186.

⁶ See *Scholia in Aristotelem* (Commentary on Aristotle), gathered by Christianus Augustus Brandis (Berolini, apud G. Reimerum, 1836), in Dudley, *A History of Cynicism*, 5.

⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.60.

⁸ Among those cited by Diogenes Laertius, there were Achaicus, Antisthenes of Rhodes, Cleomenes, Demetrius of Magnesia, Diocles of Magnesia, Dionysius the Stoic, Eratosthenes, Eubulides, Eubulus, Favorinus, Hecaton (Hecato) of Rhodes, Hermippus, Hippobotus, Lysanias, Menander, Metrocles of Maroneia, Menippus, Neanthes of Cyzicus, Olympiodorus of Athens, Polyeuctus, Satyrus, Sosicrates, Sotion, Theophrastus, Theopompus, Timon, and Zeno of Citium.

⁹ The others are the Cynic letters are Anacharsis, Heraclitus, and Socrates or various Socratics. For an introduction to these and their texts, see Abraham J. Malherbe, ed., *The Cynic Epistles: A Study Edition* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1977).



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