FILOZOFIA
Roč. 65, 2010, č. 6

ANCIENT CYNICISM AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY

WILLIAM DESMOND,* Department of Ancient Classics, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Kildare

"I think, therefore I am." Descartes' indubitable proposition has become a cliché partly because it sounded one of the keynotes of modern philosophy down to the present day. The proposition also implicitly invokes one of the keynotes of ancient Cynicism: the individual's freedom from external determination. Therefore, as the epistemological, metaphysical and ethical implications of Descartes' "subjective turn" are explored in different ways by modern thinkers, there are moments in which they can return to Cynic themes also: notably individualism, hostility to authority, scepticism, naturalism and indifference to metaphysical transcendence. In this article, we will look briefly at combinations of these themes in six thinkers from the sixteenth to the late twentieth centuries: Descartes, Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche, Foucault and Sloterdijk.

In his *Discourse on Method* (1637), Descartes recalls how he came to formulate his advice on how for analyzing a complex situation to its simpler components and reconstructing the whole from these more tractable parts. Nothing might appear more uncharacteristic of the Cynics than this ambitious method for systematically solving problems and series of problems. The Cynics avoided arithmetic, geometry, science and abstractions generally, and so those ancient anecdotes that envision Diogenes buffoonishly entering Plato's Academy (e.g. D.L. 6.40, 6.53) might be readily transferred to the Cartesian school. Like Plato, Descartes argued that immediate experience is best explained by reference to non-immediate geometric form. But the very success of Cartesian methods for the systematic conquest of nature would eventually populate the industrialized world with machines and a spirit of mechanism that would alienate later Romantics, vitalists, Beatniks and hippies. Thus Descartes' *Method* became one indirect cause for new resurgences of the Cynics' desire to "live according to nature."

More directly reminiscent of the Cynic spirit of individualism is the Cartesian *cogito*. For Descartes formulated his method in near-open revolt against what he regarded as the

* William Desmond pôsobí na katedre klasickej filológie a literatúry Národnej univerzity Írska. Do r. 2007 pôsobil na írskej University College Dublin (2004 – 2006) a na americkej Yale University (2001 – 2004). Doktorát obhájil r. 2002 na Yale University prácou o počiatkoch gréckeho kynizmu (*The Greek Praise of Poverty: A Genealogy of Early Cynicism*). Venuje sa gréckej literatúre a filosofii klasického obdobia, jej recepcii v 19. storočí (Hegel, Nietzsche), antickej historiografii a dejinám modernej filosofie. Okrem knihy *Grécka chvála chudoby: Genealógia raného kynizmu* (2006) vydal prácu *Kynici* (*Cynics*, 2008), ktorá je širokým úvodom do kynického hnutia od antiky po súčasnosť. Obidve práce boli veľmi dobre prijaté odborníkmi v oblasti antického myslenia. V tlači je jeho najnovšia kniha *Filosofickí vládcovia antiky* (*Philosopher-Kings of Antiquity*, 2011).

dead-weight of the past. In the *Meditations* (1641) as in the *Discourse* he speaks of his dissatisfaction with his schooling at La Flèche and with European learning generally. He speaks of his wanderings, his decision to study himself and his search for an Archimedean point, an indubitable first principle that together with the "natural light of reason" would ground all further metaphysical and geometrical deductions. What is important here is the focus on the thinking subject as the prime reality: the so-called subjective turn in modern philosophy. For subsequent thinkers who accept this subjective turn (e.g. British empiricists, Kant, Husserl), it is the rational ego with its feelings, ideas and will that becomes the judge of what is real, true and good. One consequence in ethics and politics is that the individual often becomes the source of political authority. So in the dominant ideology of the West, governments are instituted, theoretically at least, to serve the will of the individual or the people. The underlying ideas are not unrelated to those of ancient Cynics who similarly stress the primacy of immediate needs and feelings: that is, the immediacy of the subjective will. This inner relation was recognized by the anarchist thinker Kropotkin, who founds his earliest predecessor in the early Zeno, student of Crates; modern anarchists go even further than the Cynics in looking upon the *cogito* as fundamentally good, and upon law, government and external control generally as evil. Another consequence of the subjective turn has been a certain scepticism with regard to metaphysical or other seemingly elitist knowledge-claims. Most notably, Kant's "Copernican Revolution" places the subject inescapably at the centre of its own existence, unable to know anything but the temporal. Thus Kant's critique of metaphysics precludes any Platonic revelations, beatific visions and other religious *Schwärmerei*, in a way that can be compared, at least roughly, with the Cynics' limitation of knowledge to immediate experience and with their scorn for Platonic Forms, Mysteries and other metaphysical *typhos*.

Subjectivism and a distrust of ancient authority is keenly apparent in the man whose singular influence on him Kant admitted with gratitude. Rousseau was a highly independent character in both his ideas and behaviour. His name was made when his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1749) won first prize from the Dijon Academy, and it remains a classic work in praise of natural simplicity and nature over the corrupting effects of culture. Here Rousseau looks back to ancient Persians, Spartans and early Romans, idealized as poor but rich in the virtues of frankness, valour and patriotism and though he does not allude to the ancient Cynics, his fundamental outlook is comparable in that both regard the arts and sciences as a source of corruption, not progress. The *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) takes Cynic-like ideas even farther as it fiercely decries private property as the origin of all social evil. In the state of nature (as Rousseau famously argues), all lived in spontaneous, unreflecting unity with nature, but when first the words "mine" were spoken, then land was divided, wars fomented, metallurgy invented, and the inventions of weapons, coined money, governments and laws served only to entrench and intensify the evils of growing inequality. This dichotomy between natural freedom and social slavery remained a life-long preoccupation, and though Rousseau's final intellectual solution in a "social contract" takes him far from the ancient Cynics, his praise of natural spontaneity would remain a clarion call for all later Romantics and naturalists.

In addition, Rousseau's preference for nature over custom, for instinct over artifice, seems to have moved him to some Cynic antics of his own. According to Frédéric-Melchior Baron de Grimm, Rousseau was courteous and almost obsequious in his manner as a young man but after the *First Discourse* he became a celebrity and then "suddenly... he cloaked himself in the coat of the Cynic and fell into the other extreme" of rudeness and self-assertion.[1] In one notorious incident, he missed a meeting with King Louis XV and outright refused royal gifts. In such incidents it was as if Diogenes were snubbing Alexander again, and so among the *philosophes*, who were more fawning in their courtship of the "philosopher-kings" and Enlightened despots, Rousseau gained the ambivalent title of the "modern Diogenes." Voltaire for instance lampooned him as "Diogenes' dog bastard." On the other hand, Rousseau's many-sided talent was clear and it has been argued that Diderot took him as the model on which to base the character of the brilliant Rameau. Based on his major study of ancient Cynicism (*Kynismus*) and more negative, modern cynicism (*Zynismus*), Niehues-Pröbsting calls *Rameau's Nephew* (1762) "the fundamental book of modern cynicism' (1996: 350). Through the 1700s, Enlightenment writers often adopted Diogenes as a free thinker in their own mould: a foe of superstition and tyrants, a friend of reason and liberty. For his part Rousseau inherited and readapted this association, praising unadorned nature and natural emotion in ways that would impress subsequent Romantics.

Living through the French Revolution as well as the Romantic revolution against the spirit of mechanism, Hegel was neither Cynic nor cynical, but his ideas on Cynicism were fundamental for later receptions by philosophers and historians alike. Hegel demands that one immerse oneself systematically in the spirit of the art, religion and philosophy of past ages, studying them in their complex totality, so as to make their essential insights one's own. This study of the past is complemented by a respect for what has proved itself worthy through time: not only the tradition of philosophy but also the social institutions that constitute a rational *Sittlichkeit* where the individual can perform his duties, not merely for duty's sake but also in a system of rights, responsibilities and reciprocity that is deeply meaningful. Much of this is directly contrary to the tenor of ancient Cynicism. For example Hegel praises private property and regards work as an expression of one's freedom, arguing that by labour one not only adds value to the raw materials of nature or experience, but also thereby makes the external one's own and indeed makes oneself as a fully free being. In the same rubric, Hegel praises the bourgeois family, the marketplace of enlightened self-interest (as understood by Adam Smith), the bureaucratic state, and even war between states as a stimulus to the spirit. All this would have been anathema to a Diogenes, who threw away his possessions, idled in the sun, did not marry, mocked merchants and money-changers, and dishonoured world-conquerors like Alexander.

From one perspective therefore, Hegel scorned the Cynics. But at the same time, in his immensely influential *History of Philosophy* (1833-1836), Hegel places them with the Megarians and Cyrenaics among the minor Socratics. These continued Socrates' subjec-

[1] Cited in Niehues-Pröbsting 1996: 341.

tive turn and therefore represent the necessary stage when consciousness knows "itself in its individuality, as free from all dependence on things and on enjoyment (1995: 480). In Hegel's view, this Socratic attitude anticipates Christianity and Kantian *Moralität*, but the Cynics themselves barely progressed beyond superficial maxims like "The wise man is self-sufficient" and "the good is virtue." Lacking lacked systematic basis, Cynicism was more a way of life than a true philosophy, and so the spirit could not rest content with it. The Cynics' vaunted freedom was in fact merely the negative freedom of renunciation, and was thus secretly dependent on what they renounced (e.g. the city); they did not attain the rational freedom of recognizing oneself in all forms of otherness. It was left to the Stoics to work Cynic subjectivism into a higher, more systematic form, and by then the best days of Cynicism were over. Hegel acknowledges Antisthenes and Diogenes as "men of great culture," but later Cynics were "nothing more than swinish beggars, who found their satisfaction in the insolence which they showed to others. They are worthy of no further consideration in Philosophy" (1995: 486-87). Hegel's ambivalent view of the Cynics is characteristic of modern thought generally. For some, the Cynics' anti-intellectualism, scepticism and squalid self-sufficiency seem narrow and selfish. For others, the Cynics are champions of individual freedom and self-reliance, spiritual cousins of figures like Thoreau or countercultural groups like the Beatniks.

A counter-cultural thinker like Nietzsche also admired the Cynics, and several aspects of his life and work are overtly or implicitly Cynic. His struggle with a conformist educational establishment, his later homelessness, frugal lifestyle and cosmopolitanism as a "good European" are all quasi-Cynic. His sardonic outlook found expression in a restless, fluid style of writing which with its mixture of aphorisms, prose paragraphs, and songs has been likened to the Menippean satire. If the Cynics satirized their contemporaries, Nietzsche "philosophized with a hammer," smashing false idols, piercing beneath the mask of ideologies, discerning the true motive beneath, and so in general "defacing the coin of custom" in his own irreverent style. Nietzsche waged war especially on the practices, institutions and texts of a Platonized Christianity which denied ultimate reality to the fluctuating, willing self: here once again a modern Diogenes attacks a Platonic metaphysics of transcendence. The most famous engagements in this war come in the *Gay Science* (1882) and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885) when Nietzsche proclaims that "God is dead." Interestingly, he chooses to make this declaration with an image that harkens directly back to the celebrated anecdote of Diogenes. Diogenes went into the crowded agora with a lantern at noon, looking for a just man. Nietzsche's "Madman" rushes into the marketplace in the "bright morning hours" shouting at passers-by that God is dead, that they have killed him. And just as Diogenes cannot find an honest man in the sharp practices of the market, so the Madman can find none to believe him, benighted as they are by the blindness of ages. Perhaps commenting on his own style of philosophical criticism, Nietzsche writes in one aphorism:

The modern Diogenes. Before one seeks men one must have found the lantern. Will

it have to be the lantern of the cynic?[2]

Perhaps less riddling is his statement that "the highest one can reach on earth [is] Cynicism."[3] One interpretation of this in the context of Nietzsche's difficult ideas is that Nietzsche philosophizes cynically and destructively so as to clear the way for further creation, the creation of a new group of autonomous, free-thinking individuals, who will have the strength to overcome the need for Ideas, God or external truths generally, and will live not merely according to Nature, but according to *their* nature and will. Sardonic and mocking towards lesser castes, this group of *Übermenchen* will laugh and sing, delighting in their own being, for theirs will be a yea-saying, *fröhliche Wissenschaft* analogous in some respects to the carefree but self-assured Cynics.

Nietzsche's focus on power was a major influence on Foucault who in 1983, towards the end of his life, delivered six lectures in Berkeley on *parrhesia* (truth-telling) and the role of the *parrhesiast* (truth-teller), lectures published posthumously as *Free Speech* (2001). Well-grounded in texts ranging over a thousand years from Euripides to the Church Fathers, these lectures argue that Greek and Greco-Roman societies recognized a definite role for the truth-teller, who courageously resists the opinions of the majority and tyrant alike, out of moral concern for their good. Foucault's brief notes on the duty of "speaking truth to power" has wide-resonance in a century haunted by totalitarian regimes that often cowed better-thinking individuals into silence. Hence may stem the interest of Foucault and others in the *moral* courage of ancient truth-tellers like Socrates and Diogenes: the ancient *parrhesiast* clings stubbornly to an individual freedom beyond Party control. In addition, Foucault's notes on the practice of Cynic *parrhesia* points to a more recent interest in the Cynics' non-verbal antics as an antidote to corrupting grand narratives: the bawdy language of bodily lewdness expresses elemental truths that cannot be distorted or forgotten by the cunning constructions of the self-interested intellect.

Distrust of mental constructions is more distinctly pronounced in Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983). This voluminous work explores the trajectory of modern thought up to its present "cynical" state when so many have critiqued so many fine ideals, deconstructing them as forms of self-deception or, worse, cunning ploys to promote the narrow interests of some minorities. For our cogitations so often result only in means for self-promotion: "I think so that I may live" adapts Descartes' proposition in a way compatible with Nietzschean, Marxist and Darwinian perspectives, among others. Against this pervasive disillusion, Sloterdijk recalls the figure of Diogenes as one whose less conceptual thinking promises to restore a space beyond cynical reason. The "cheekiness" and elemental laughter of the ancient Cynics may serve as an antidote to the widespread cynicism that seems a product of modern thought. So Sloterdijk's title points to the significant strand in contemporary thought (e.g. Hadot) that would recall philosophy to its existential roots, and to the practice of the good life, of which (at least in the eyes of their admirers), the Cynics were the masters.

---

[2] *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, §18 (trans. Kaufmann).

[3] *Ecce Homo*, 'Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe', §3. Cf. Nieuhues-Pröbsting 1979: 353-363.

Select Bibliography

Bewes, T. 1997. *Cynicism and Post-Modernity* (London: Verso).
Billerbeck, M. 1991. *Die Kyniker in der modernen Forschung* (Amsterdam: Grüner).
Desmond, W. 2008. "Cynic Legacies," Chapter 6 of *Cynics* (Stocksfield and Berkeley: Acumen and University of California Press), pp. 209-236.
Foucault, M. 2001. *Fearless Speech*, ed. J. Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)).
Hegel, G.W.F. 1995. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, trans. by E.S. Haldane (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press).
Niehues-Pröbsting, H. 1979. *Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus* (Wilhelm Fink Verlag: München).
_____. 1996. "The Modern Reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment," in *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy*, ed. R. Bracht Branham and M.-O. Goulet-Cazé (Berkeley: University of California Press).
Shea, L. 1010. *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).
Sloterdijk, P. 1983. *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt/Main: Surkamp), trans. into English by M. Eldred as *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

William Desmond
Department of Ancient Classics
National University of Ireland
Maynooth, Kildare
e-mail: William.desmond@nuim.ie