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*Cynicism as a way of life:
From the Classical Cynic to a New Cynicism*

Introduction

Both within and outside the world of academic philosophy, art of living has been increasingly in the spotlight. Objectives such as success, pleasure and happiness are expressly validated in contemporary society, but more philosophically valid objectives such as cultivation of the soul also receive ample attention. On the other side, within academic philosophy, the question for the art of living has also been receiving increasing attention.¹ This revival could arguably be led back to Michel Foucault's genealogical return to antiquity in the second and third parts of his *History of Sexuality*, in turn undoubtedly influenced by the works of Pierre Hadot. Especially classical philosophy has proven a rich source of investigation and inspiration for a philosophy of the art of living. Many currents in ancient philosophy actually proposed different ways of living, based on different values and articulated in different practices.²

One of the central currents throughout a large part of antiquity was Cynicism. This school is accompanied with a number of methodological difficulties. Not least of all, today's connotation of the name Cynicism is radically different from its classical origins. Today, being a cynic is associated with a depreciative attitude, intended to insult and offend, rather than being concerned with any philosophical foundation. A further complication is that little is known directly of classical Cynicism, and what we do know often comes from anecdotes and stories written down by posterity, and not from actual first hand sources of substantial profundity. As a result, Cynicism appears as a reactive movement, limited to being a stubborn resistance and ridicule of existing practice. Cynicism is thus regularly scorned for its apparent superficiality. In the end, it is even questioned whether Cynicism should be considered a philosophical school at all, or whether it is does

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¹ For instance W. Schmid (1999), J. Kekes (2005), J. Dohmen (2002)

² P. Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique*, 19

not in fact deserve equal treatment alongside the other, more established philosophical traditions of antiquity.³

The aforementioned notwithstanding, Cynicism has played a significant and lasting role in Antiquity, and in some distorted ways through to modernity, as the recent reappearance of the concept shows. Although its position certainly was peculiar, Cynicism can hardly be dismissed from research into classical philosophy.

In the present paper, we will investigate Cynical philosophy. By means of introduction, we will elaborate on the theme of philosophy as art of living, a concept that requires proper delimitation. Second, we will turn our attention to ancient philosophy. Greco-Roman philosophy is not only the origin of philosophy; it is more specifically the origin of philosophy as a way of living. Most, if not all, themes treated in this field today can be retraced to their foundations in antiquity.

From this introduction of classical philosophy as a way of life, we can look at Cynicism. First we will present classical Cynicism as a valid philosophical school, in its proper historical context. Thence we can focus on the foundations of a Cynical philosophy as a way of life. In such a proposal, a number of elements are expected. These elements can subsequently be translated to the current context of philosophy as a way of life. When the term Cynicism is used today, we tend to maim or overlook the positive potential of classical Cynicism for today's debate. The contribution of this classical Cynicism could, among other things, prove to be a valuable attack on modern 'cynicism'.

Art of living: a contemporary definition

Philosophy as a way of life is currently receiving renewed attention, both within and beyond contemporary philosophy. Popular proposals for successful living have offered a variety of suggestions to a good life, ranging from increased control over oneself, success in business and love, and pleasure or neo-religious transcendence. This popular art of living is, however, not the focus of our current investigation, although popular art of living will resurface when we attempt to translate Cynicism to today's context.

Within philosophical discourses, the proposal for an art of living is less one-sided. Various philosophers have offered as many considerations on a philosophy applied to people's lives. Hadot seeks to reinterpret philosophy as an ensemble of spiritual exercises⁴, Foucault seeks the possibility to give form to one's life on the

³ For instance, Nussbaum in *Therapy of Desire* does not mention Cynicism, but only elaborates Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism, all three on the basis of an initial analysis of Aristotle.

⁴ Eg. P. Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2003.

limits of existing discourses and power structures⁵, Veenhoven proposes a contemporary hedonism⁶, Onfray a more aesthetic version of such a hedonism⁷, etc. In order to identify the common ground among these and other authors, philosophy as a way of life can first of all be considered a field of philosophical inquiry, comparable to metaphysics or epistemology, with the particular characteristic of annulling any distance between philosophy and everyday life. It is not simply one particular notion, but rather an open field of investigation within which different answers can be given to variations on the question how one ought to live.

More specifically, philosophy as a way of life is a normative ethics, which means that it assumes, in a normative way, position with regards to a person's way of living his life (*èthos*). Within this field of normative ethics, a fundamental triad can be distinguished of reflection, value determination, and acting. Or, to unite the preceding in one fluent definition; philosophy as a way of life is the normative ethical subfield of philosophy concerned with giving form and meaning to one's own life in a deliberate and justified manner.⁸

First of all, philosophy as a way of life is concerned with a consciousness of one's own life and of the personal responsibility to do something with that life. This could be called its proper philosophical dimension. Second, the assessment of values will be of central importance, i.e. to determine what matters in life. Especially on this matter, different proposals will clash, but general agreement will be easily established on the fact *that* any form of life requires its foundation in a set of values. And third, philosophy as a way of life has to do with just that: life. Its ultimate criterion and touchstone is its application to a person's own *bios*, or his existence as such in the world, articulated in an ensemble of acts, manners, exercises, attitudes or other that compose one's actual life.

Philosophy as a way of live in antiquity

Although we can now distinguish with relative ease between popular and philosophical art of living, at the basis of this distinction lies a more profound gap between academic philosophy and everyday life. This gap is common today, but its particularity appears in comparison with classical philosophy. Whereas modern philosophy keeps to its academic context, focusing on issues such as epistemology,

⁵ Eg. M. Foucault, "À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique : un aperçu du travail en cours", in *Dits et écrits*, Paris: Quarto Gallimard, pp. 1428-1450

⁶ Eg. R. Veenhoven, *Het grootste geluk voor het grootste aantal; geluk als richtsnoer voor beleid*, Rotterdam: Erasmus Universiteit, 2002.

⁷ Eg. M. Onfray, *La sculpture de soi; la morale esthétique*, Paris : Grasset, 1993.

⁸ This definition is based somewhat liberally on J. Dohmen, "Philosophers on the art of living", *Journal of Happiness Studies* 4:1, 2003, 351-371.

logic and metaphysics, classical philosophy was instead intended to take place in the very core of the lived life. The philosopher in antiquity was first of all required to respond to the question how one was to live. In other words, classical philosophy was primarily a philosophy as a way of life.

Especially toward the Hellenistic era, a number of schools start to form – in which, it should be remarked, the name of ‘school’ should be understood liberally, referring to a shared conception of the good life and its founding ideals, proposed by a certain number of preeminent representatives, commonly their founders, and together constituting more or less the entire spectrum of articulated proposals for a philosophy as a way of life. Cynicism is one of these schools, alongside most particularly Plato’s Academy, Aristotle’s Lyceum, the Stoic school and Epicurus’ garden.

Socrates is in many ways the most fundamental figure in the history of philosophy. And this is especially due, not to any particular philosophical system, but to the attitude he professed in investigating, articulating and elaborating any and all knowledge, whether it be systematic or other. The first and final question of interest for Socrates was how one should live.⁹ It could be said that Socrates is the first true individual in the history of western thought, inventing individuality and character through himself.¹⁰ His attention was not, like the pre-Socratic philosophers, aimed at deciphering the *arche* or foundations of the cosmos. Instead, Socrates carried out what Hadot called an ‘existential turn’, starting and ending his investigations in the *bios* or the lived life of the individual.

That being said, it should be emphasized that this individualism did not imply egocentrism. On the contrary, Socrates considered the self that was to be cared for to be in close relation with others and with the surrounding world.¹¹ Thus Socrates himself took it upon him to confront friends and acquaintances with their own values and preconceptions. Care for the self and care for the other were intimately linked.¹²

This Socratic care for the other was not only carried out in the maieutic dialogues performed by Socrates on his interlocutors; his very life also turned into an example that could be followed or at least serve as an inspiration. This, perhaps more than the (arguably unknown) contents of his own philosophy, led to the formation of a variety of philosophical schools, each carrying through certain aspects

⁹ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 352d: “We must now examine, as we proposed before, whether just people also live better and are happier than unjust ones. I think it is clear already that this is so, but we must look into it further, since the argument concerns no ordinary topic, but the way we ought to live.”

¹⁰ P. Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique*, 56-57

¹¹ P. Hadot, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie antique*, 67-68

¹² Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 124B-127D

of the exemplary Socrates.¹³ Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates, would be one of these founders, taking on a particular interpretation of the Socratic example in founding the school of Cynicism.

Later Hellenistic philosophy saw a further crystallization in the offer of philosophical schools – in which, as a common treat, the normative ethical stance was considered the point of departure and any and all other theoretical proposals, be they in the field of logic, epistemology, or metaphysics, was always more or less articulated in service of that initial stance concerned with how one was to live one's life. And each of these schools attempted explicitly to link their heritage to the historical figure of Socrates, incorporating some aspect or other of his life or thought into the core of the school teachings.

To this, Cynicism was no exception. The Cynical school may be considered a Hellenistic school. Socrates' pupil Antisthenes is generally considered the first Cynic, although others consider Diogenes of Sinope to be the real founder. In either case, it should be noted that Cynicism can vent on a historical proximity to Socrates, whereas the more well-known Hellenistic schools, namely Stoicism, Epicureanism, and to some extent Skepticism, took shape in later generations. On the other hand, whereas some of the other schools took on considerable weight and receive much attention to date, Cynicism has traditionally been considered an outsider to philosophy in general. The Cynic's refusal to engage in regular philosophical discourse, its highly demanding ethical stance, combined with the intentionally offensive public behavior, led to its general exclusion from serious consideration, both by their contemporary peers and by subsequent academics. Nevertheless, Cynicism was relatively widespread for many centuries and can today be considered to have influenced classical philosophy as a way of life, as well as Christianity and, with that, history in general.¹⁴

Classical Cynicism

Cynicism as a school of thought is not as easy to demarcate as some of its contemporaries. The first generations of Cynics were at the same time the most important representatives, articulating and incorporating the fundamental values and principles. Subsequent Cynicism will take this basis in different directions, notably depending on the historical context, but without really adding any new ideas to this first initiative. In addition, the first appearance of Cynicism was accompanied by its notorious 'shock effect', which allowed for the Cynics to attract attention to their proposal. Once Cynicism turned into something of an accepted phenom-

¹³ P. Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique*, 46-49

¹⁴ Peter Sloterdijk: *Kritiek van de cynische rede*, 456-464

enon, this initial effect was obviously diminished. In the meantime, other philosophical schools had formed and taken their place in society, sometimes in some sort of symbiotic mutual exclusion. Thus for instance, it could be considered that, whereas Stoic philosophy proposed a life in accordance with *Logos* or reason, Epicureanism started at the other end, as a way of life based on the body. (As we shall argue, this opposition between body and soul is neither the only division, nor the most obvious one in its context.)

Added to that is the fact inherent to Cynicism that it explicitly refused to form a school as such. The values that would form the foundation of classical Cynicism were not condensed into an accepted dogma, as was the case with schools such as the Stoics and the Epicureans. Although this contributed to the consistent marginalization of Cynicism by its peers, in addition to its own adherents, it also allowed for these values to take on a life of their own. In a way, their marginalization allowed for their persistence; whereas many other classical schools of thought slowly disappeared, Cynicism made a more lasting mark on history, from late Roman leaders to early Christian hermits.

The origins of Cynicism can be traced back to a select company. Antisthenes, followed by Diogenes of Sinope, Crates of Thebes and Hipparchia of Maroneia, would turn out to be the founders of Cynicism – be it often through the eye of on-lookers and later historians writing down the evidence of the Cynic's way of life. Before turning to the general philosophy of classical Cynicism, in a way disconnected from its instigators, it is worth elaborating on the historical figures at its basis, since, as much as was the case with Socrates, in Cynicism *Bios* and *Logos* are intricately linked.

First off, regarding the name Cynicism, various versions occur as to its meaning and origin. (Perhaps this variety of origin stories is already revealing of the historical ambiguity of the 'school' as such, and a herald to the diffusive trait of Cynicism.) Two versions as to the meaning of the name 'Cynicism' are most significant. On one account, Cynicism would take its place alongside the other classical schools, with the name referring to the location where Antisthenes would usually reside, the Cynosarges, a public gymnasium outside of the city of Athens, reserved for people considered 'unworthy' to be Athenian citizens.¹⁵ The significance of this interpretation is double: on the one hand, it would establish Cynicism as a 'school', an equal among the Academy, the Lyceum, the Porches and the Garden. At the same time, it would represent its status as an excluded party, confirming the Cynic's outsider-position.¹⁶

¹⁵ W. Matson: *A New History of Philosophy*, Fort Worth: Harcourt College Publishers, 187

¹⁶ Cf. Herodotus, *Histories*, 6.116, confirming the Cynic's heritage toward Heracles through the very location.

On the other hand, the name Cynicism is often linked to its etymological proximity with *kynos*, or dogs.¹⁷ Dudley identifies a number of implications in this reference:

“There are four reasons why the *Cynics* are so named. First because of the *indifference* of their way of life, for they make a cult of indifference and, like dogs, eat and make love in public, go barefoot, and sleep in tubs and at crossroads. The second reason is that the dog is a shameless animal, and they make a cult of shamelessness, not as being beneath modesty, but as superior to it. The third reason is that the dog is a good guard, and they guard the tenets of their philosophy. The fourth reason is that the dog is a discriminating animal which can distinguish between its friends and enemies. So do they recognize as friends those who are suited to philosophy, and receive them kindly, while those unfitted they drive away, like dogs, by barking at them.”¹⁸

In identifying as a dog, the Cynic is using (inadvertently, or consciously), the same reference as Plato in his *Republic* with regards to his guardians.¹⁹ Especially the last two points made by Dudley emit the same image as Plato: the dog as an animal both loyal to his friends and fierce to his enemies, an essential requirement to Plato’s “men of spiritedness”. The Cynic, it appears, is as a man of *Thumos* – which would distinguish him from his Stoic (*Logos*) and Epicurean (*Eros*) peers. And, in addition to Dudley’s analysis, it could be proposed that, although the Cynic will turn out to be propose a life of shamelessness and indifference, these aspects are very much intentional, and thus a product of culture and not a simple return to nature: the Cynic stance is one of intentionally transgressing society’s norms and boundaries, not of being oblivious to them. This is what would distinguish the classical Cynic from his later ascetic imitators: referring back to the first possible interpretation of the name Cynicism, the Cynics chose to take up residence on the outskirts of Athens, not in the wilderness. The Cynics assumed an explicitly offensive attitude towards society and its conventions, represented even in their appearance.²⁰

Cynicism: a brief history

As mentioned before, Antisthenes was one of Socrates’ fervent followers.²¹ Hellenistic Stoicism insisted on his being the founder of Cynicism, as this allowed for

¹⁷ Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV-13. See also: J. Philipon, *Sur les catégories*: “[...] The group led by Antisthenes took its name from the way of living typical of the Cynics.” Quoted in Paquet, Léonce, *Les Cyniques grecs; Fragments et témoignages*, 50 (the translation is ours).

¹⁸ D. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism*, 5-6

¹⁹ Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 466C-D

²⁰ D. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism*, 59

²¹ Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VI-2: “From Socrates he learned his hardihood, emulating his disregard of feeling, and thus he inaugurated the Cynic way of life.”

them to retrace their own lineage directly to the grand Athenian.²² It can at least be confirmed that, as various other students of Socrates, Antisthenes intended to carry through the Socratic heritage. For him, this consisted more than anything in living a virtuous life as an attainable goal and the primary concern. As a result, the philosopher's concern is above all with his own ethical disposition, something that can be perfectly well realized without worrying about the sciences or metaphysics, and that is best aided by renouncing exterior dependencies. The ideal that the Stoics would later recognize in this proposal, was that of *ataraxia*, or imperturbability. Antisthenes was thus one of the first to propose reaching a state of disinterest with regard to anything that might impede a proper care for the self. In particular, Antisthenes included social conventions among these potential impediments.

Antisthenes' pupil Diogenes of Sinope is the most well-known representative of the school.²³ Whereas there might be some doubt about Antisthenes, Diogenes is the true Cynic *par excellence*. Much could be said about this colorful figure, but we will limit ourselves to what is most relevant. First of all, this very form of fame is worth mentioning. Roman historian Diogenes Laertius would dedicate some twenty pages of his history to this "Socrates gone mad".²⁴ This gives us both very much and very little to go by: although the stories give us a rich insight into Diogenes, the reliability of such a collection of anecdotes is proportionately unreliable in relation to their extravagance. The parallel with Socrates, himself a historical figure who did not write himself, but was written about by people after his death, is notable.²⁵ In both cases, the historical and the poetical or mythical figure end up being indiscernible.

In any case, values such as a conspicuous disregard for accepted social norms and materialist matters are translated into theatrical and offensive acts. Diogenes more than anyone seems to have looked for confrontation with his fellow Athenians, confirming the Cynic's identification with the dog-like conception of virtue, both literally as a barking and biting being, and reproducing Plato's conception of justice as willing good to one's friends. The Cynic's life aimed not only at personal excellence, but was also very much directed toward helping others improve themselves, perhaps less in providing a viable example to follow than to disrupt accepted convictions. Socratic *aporia* taken to its extreme.

The same limited insight into the Cynics' heritage through posterior anecdotes combined with a lack of original works affects subsequent adherents, nota-

²² Ibid, 3-4

²³ P. Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique*, 170

²⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VI-54

²⁵ P. Sloterdijk points out that the exclamation quoted above by Plato, although intended as an insult, in fact placed Diogenes on the same level as Socrates himself, related the two in a remarkable dialectical way. Peter Sloterdijk: *Kritiek van de cynische rede*, 185

bly including Crates of Thebes, his wife Hipparchia (arguably one of the first female philosophers), and Crates' student Zeno of Citium. The latter would found Stoicism, thus establishing the line of heritage affirmed earlier. Combined with the Cynics' apparent refusal to adopt the regular form of a school, this appearance of Stoicism (although in a way it might be argued that Stoicism is a more acceptable and *light* version of Cynicism) contributes to the relative obscurity of Cynicism in the second and first centuries before Christ.²⁶ Only in the first century A.D., Cynical philosophy comes to us, in the form of philosophers such as Demetrius, Dio Chrysostom, Demonax, Oenomaus and Peregrinus.²⁷ It may be noted, however, that these Hellenistic Cynics did not add any substantial new content to their philosophy, apart from writing down and reinterpreting the established heritage.

Cynicism as an art of living

It has already been ascertained that Cynicism is regularly excluded from equal recognition as a proper philosophical school in antiquity. This is no surprise. In its own time, Cynicism consciously profiled itself in a very peculiar manner. To this, it is often added today that Cynicism does not have much to add to philosophy proper. The more accepted philosophical traditions of antiquity already provide ample examples of values such as indifference toward social order and material luxury, exercises and self-sufficiency. In addition, these other schools provide better articulated theories in defense of these values.

The intention of the present article is to propose a reconsideration of the value and impact of Cynicism in classical philosophy and beyond. In the next part, we will work out the particular values and methods of classical Cynicism. Possibly the most fundamental difference between Cynicism on the one hand and the various other philosophical lineages in antiquity, is that Cynicism was before anything a *reaction*. Whereas most schools would work out their theories and proposals into a coherent and independent whole, Cynics appeared without any such articulated knowledge but with the primary intent to carry out a certain way of life and to denounce practices and values in others. Furthermore, the influence of Cynicism throughout history should not be too easily dismissed. Beyond classical philosophy and early Christianity, it might be argued that the core of Cynicism as a way of life and as a school of thought has continued to resurface in some form or other throughout history, ranging from religious movements as the Franciscans and the Dominicans, to founders of modernism such as Rousseau in his nostalgia for a return to nature.²⁸

²⁶ D. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism*, 117-124

²⁷ *Ibid*, 125-185

²⁸ *Ibid*, 209-213

Returning to our earlier tentative definition of philosophy as a way of life, consisting of reflection, determination of values, and a way of acting, the objections to Cynicism turn out to accentuate precisely its importance. Cynicism is first of all a way of life, taking its form in the act, in methodology. Behind these acts, we may identify an ensemble of determinate values that form the point of departure for the Cynical way of life. And third, it might be worth distinguishing reflection from philosophy. Reflection, in this context, refers to a contemplated way of living, the shape of which is based on a structured whole of values, and the consciousness of the relation between those values and the actual life. Although Cynicism spends little or no effort in working out a philosophical *corpus* or in philosophizing as a separate activity, their attitude toward life was all the more a result of reflection. In other words, Cynicism was a philosophy as a way of life *par excellence* and commences exactly where current philosophy of the art of living looks to: at consciously and justifiably giving form to one's life.

The Cynic Philosophy as a Way of Life

Much like the other classical and Hellenistic schools, Cynicism looks to Socrates as the founding father of a philosophy in which wisdom, ethical excellence and the good life meet. But his example is a very demanding ideal, including continuous effort, time, reflection, dialogue, and much more. The Cynical tradition will follow Socrates' example, but not in its entirety. The Cynic will consider his own heritage of Socrates to be the "short cut" to a good life, worrying less about its properly philosophical foundations and more about a healthy way of living in accordance with nature and about confronting their fellow-citizens with their own ignorance (the Socratic *aporia*).²⁹

This is to say that Cynicism will not dedicate itself to working out coherent and comprehensive philosophical systems including physics, epistemology, and the likes. The Cynic considers his own philosophy to be a short cut to a good life precisely because it does not concern itself with complex and redundant ontological or epistemological frameworks. In leaving out such time-consuming sophisticated exercises, more time remains to direct one's attention to finding and practicing a good life.

Added to this general disinterest for philosophical disciplines considered to be redundant is the Cynic's explicit opposition to philosophical discourses, to which we will come shortly. The result of this very practical philosophy as a way of life at the cost of, or even contrary to theoretical elaborations, is a simple depreciation of theoretical profundity and consistency. Although this could, to some, weigh in against Cynicism, it is precisely an essential trait of the Cynic's propos-

²⁹ Bracht Branham: *Cynics*, 754

al for a normative ethics. In placing itself outside the accepted academic tradition, Cynicism offers an entirely new way of practicing philosophy.³⁰ The Cynic will primarily intend to act in a certain way in a given context at a given time and place and in a particular company. In this, he will not be hindered by criteria such as consistency or argumentative validity, but exclusively with the concrete situation.

This is not to say that there is no way of identifying some consistencies in Cynicism. The leading principle is, after all, the conception of the good life, along with its most essential values. The point is that any justification for Cynicism as a philosophical way of life will have to go through its practice, rather than through its theory or worldview.

Values in Cynicism

What, then, are the values that the Cynic does consider to be indispensable in giving form to a good life? In the first place, it can be generally stated that the Cynic bases his values on a reevaluation of all existing values.³¹ Despite (or actually confirming) the Nietzschean tone of his transvaluation, Cynicism shows itself to be exemplarily reactionary. But in this reactionary nature lies perhaps the most fundamental aspect of Cynicism. It denounces existing values, unmasks their allegedly absolute truth, and confronts them with dialectically opposed alternatives. Only by going against existing values will it become possible to consider or even perceive any alternative and seek for change. The various depictions of Diogenes defacing the existing currency refer to this Cynic's approach to disrupting the existing order and allowing the perception of the relativity of accepted values.³²

Subsequently, the Cynic's first positive criterion for a personal system of values, consists in what may be called a life in accordance with nature. This refers to two distinct but related values. In the first place, a Cynic's life is one that seeks to be in concordance with nature as it surrounds him, i.e. with the natural world as we encounter it. Virtue, to the Cynic, comes natural, whereas vice is identified with cultural corruption of that natural state. Although this proposal is to be read, on the one hand, within the aforementioned defacing effort, and thus is a reconstructed version of nature that serves this purpose, it is not, on the other hand, a modern romantic version of nature perceived as a pristine purity of goodness and innocence.

³⁰ Peter Sloterdijk: *Kritiek van de cynische rede*, 180-184

³¹ Michel Onfray: *Cynismen*, 24

³² Cf. Diogenes Laertius: *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VI-20: "When the god [Apollo at Delphi or the Delian oracle] gave him permission to alter the political currency, not understanding what this meant, he adulterated the state coinage [...]." In addition to the devaluation of the coinage discussed here, the similitude with Socrates's linkage between his philosophical investigations and a previous religious commandment is worth pointing out.

For the Cynic, the value of nature resounds in such appreciations as of any foods that nature offers and weather situations as they arise. These and other natural phenomena should be embraced in a practical way of living.³³ Man descended from nature and therefore should also be able to live in accordance with nature.

One of the most important corollaries of this valuation of nature is the Cynic's coinage of the idea of cosmopolitanism. In the context of the Greek city-state and its omnipresent determination of the Greek citizen as a *zoon politikon*,³⁴ Cynicism insisted to feel connected not with walls and limits of cities and nations, but that he considered himself an inhabitant of the "cosmos", of the universe as a whole.³⁵ Here, the deconstructive use of the value of nature becomes very much visible, putting the Cynic in direct opposition with traditional Greek identification of man as a political being.

In the second place, the Cynic's reference to nature can refer to the inner nature of the individual. On the one hand, this justifies a life in accordance with one's natural tendencies and desires. Man is a natural creature, and thus his desires should be considered as natural. This applies those natural desires such as food, defecation, and sexuality.³⁶ The distinction between natural and unnatural desires professed by Epicurus³⁷ is here taken to its very extreme: whereas natural desires should be freely satisfied at any time or place, unnatural desires should be completely rejected.

Next to that, the value of a life in accordance with one's inner nature implies that one's own life should be lived thus as the *individual* givenness requires. With that, the Cynic's proposal for philosophy as a way of life proposes an explicitly individualistic form of living. Against the background of the ancient Greek city-state, the Cynic's message was aimed at the dominant cultural conventions where the social and public spheres were considered primordial. Up and against this status quo, Cynicism proposed that the individual should first of all be himself, based on his own individual nature.³⁸

³³ Diogenes Laertius: *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV-22: "Through watching a mouse running about, says Theophrastus in the Megarian dialogue, not looking for a place to lie down, not afraid of the dark, not seeking any of the things which are considered to be dainties, he discovered the means of adapting himself to circumstances. [...] he used any place for any purpose, for breakfasting, sleeping, or conversing [...] And in summer he used to roll in it over hot sand, while in winter he used to embrace statues covered with snow, using every means of inuring himself to hardship."

³⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a3

³⁵ Diogenes Laertius: *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV-63

³⁶ Diogenes Laertius: *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV-69: "It was his habit to do everything in public, the works of Demeter and of Aphrodite alike."

³⁷ See note 51

³⁸ Cf. M. Onfray, *Cynismen*, 49. Onfray identifies in Cynicism what he calls 'ethical voluntarism', or the attempt to stylize one's own life according to personal criteria. In the same line, we may read Aristotle's reference to Antisthenes in his *Politics* in theorizing of the life of the virtuous, who would be godlike, and as such someone who "prescribes his own law", cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1284a9-17

Now, Cynicism was mostly formulated retroactively in the first and second century A.D., and so it is plausible to consider this individualism was ascertained from the perspective of that time and projected onto its originators.³⁹ As a result, it appears to be all the more relevant that this individualism was not a goal in itself, and the Cynic did not seek to isolate himself from society, on the contrary. Foucault's study of Dion Chrysostom's fourth discourse "On Kingship" is precisely aimed at showing the socio-political ambition of classical Cynicism: the Cynic was ultimately interested in teaching his peers, and not simply to be left alone, as the start of Dion Chrysostom's discourse might make one suspect.⁴⁰ To put it in different words: classical Cynicism was not aimed at simply living in accordance with one's natural desires, as Epicurus would have it. The Cynic's proposal was in fact much closer to *Thumos* than to *Eros*: it sought to invest itself in the service of the spirited part of the self and address that part in others. Hence the Cynic's subordination – but not absence – of reason on the one hand and his appeal to the *Thumos* of his interlocutors on the other. Both are perfectly illustrated in Dion Chrysostom's discourse studied by Foucault: Diogenes' first method of teaching is one of insult, appealing to the anger Alexander the Great might experience at being called a bastard. Anger is, of course, an emotion of *Thumos*. And second, when this fails, Diogenes shows himself prepared to enter into a more sustained philosophical discourse in order to try and convey his message to Alexander.⁴¹

More than is the case in any other competing philosophical school of their time, Cynicism professed to carry out these values in an actual practice of living. A Cynic philosophy is above all a Cynic practice. At least of equal importance as the values, then, are the methods practiced in the Cynic way of life.

Practices of Cynicism

More than anything, Cynicism is a practical philosophy as a way of life. The values that might be at its basis are both confirmed and reenacted in the acts and the life of the Cynic. This giving shape through doing is a fundamental element of Cynicism.

A central recurring element in the Cynic's methodology is his well-known resistance to society, although the concept of society may be elucidated. Cynicism

³⁹ Cf. M. Foucault, "Parrhesia and Public Life: the Cynics", in *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia; The Practice of Parrhesia*.

⁴⁰ Dion Chrysostom: "The Fourth Discourse on Kingship", 13-14: "On that day it happened that Diogenes was all alone in the Craneion, for he had no pupils at all nor any such crowd about him as the sophists and flue-players and choral masters have. So the king came up to him as he sat there and greeted him, whereat the other looked up at him with terrible glare like that of a lion and ordered him to step aside a little, for Diogenes happened to be warming himself in the sun."

⁴¹ M. Foucault, "Parrhesia and Public Life: the Cynics", in *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia; The Practice of Parrhesia*.

is not in fact a declaration of war against society as a whole, as for example nineteenth-century romanticism pretended to attempt. The Cynic's attack was aimed against those aspects of society which he deemed restricted or deprived the individual.⁴² This once again confirms the primary point of focus for the Cynic: in the *individual* task of giving form to one's own life. Cynicism departs from an individualistic perception of self and world, resulting in the required first step of liberating oneself of existing social structures that determine the individual in a way that does not concur with that individual's natural being.

Now, this resistance is not carried out outside of or beyond society, like later Cynic-inspired Christian hermits would attempt. On the contrary, the classical Cynic actively seeks out people and society. This embeddedness illustrates that the Cynic is not merely attempting a return to nature for himself; his more fundamental aim is to help others. On the one side, this help to others passes through his "discourse". The presupposition here is that conventions are usually deeply rooted in people's consciousness. The philosopher's task is to free them from these conventions and guide them to *aporia*, in direct heritage of Socrates, consisting of a surprised uncertainty about what had appeared certain. As opposed to Socrates, however, the Cynic considers that sometimes more is needed to achieve this goal than theoretical discourse. The Cynic will not shun offensive and theatrical methods to unmask the unnaturalness and contingency of existing conventional ways of living.

Second, the Cynic lives his life in public, not only looking for that confrontation, but also to set an example. The Cynic actually *lives out* and *enacts*, his way of life.⁴³ He does this not only because he considers it the most natural way of living, but also because it is the best means to show his peers his way of living. In other words, the Cynic does not only live his own way of life, he also explicitly assumes the role of educator – although an unorthodox one at that. His way of life is enacted in the sense that it is *intended* to be noticed.

Additionally, the Cynic's attention to exercise is worth mentioning. Although Cynicism pursues a life in accordance with nature, he also actively seeks out confrontations with nature when the opportunity arises. Heracles is considered the Cynic's forefather and role model to a life of exercise and hardship, in addition to being a natural life.⁴⁴ The Cynic's exercise can be opposed to its Stoic counterpart, for example. The Stoic philosophical exercise focuses on a mastery of the self and on

⁴² Diogenes Laertius: *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV-35: "He used to say that he followed the example of the trainers of choruses: for they too set the note a little high, to ensure that the rest should hit the right note."

⁴³ Cf. Diogenes Laertius: *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IV-41: "He lit a lamp in broad daylight and said, as he went about, 'I am looking for a man.'"

⁴⁴ Diogenes Laertius: *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VI-2

preparing for all hardships that life will or could throw at us. In the Stoic exercise, the control of emotions is central.⁴⁵ Cynic exercises do not concern themselves with emotions, and the Cynic's objective will not be to prepare for any and all hardships. For instance, one well-known anecdote shows that the Cynic sees no difficulty in masturbating to free himself of an erection, rather than training for an ascetic negation of what he considers a natural urge.⁴⁶ Exercise serves the development of a life in accordance with nature, thus excluding unnatural exercises and repressions. This is affirming the Erotic part of the human soul as being a natural given, corrupted only subsequently by unnatural societal influences and deviations. And it must be stressed, this is one of the many typical examples in which the offensive goes hand in hand with the personal; the Cynic seems once again not only concerned with his natural desires and their exercise, but also with the use thereof to shock his peers, moving them to *aporia*.

While Cynicism is frequently omitted from historical reconstructions of classical philosophy, when it comes to regarding philosophy as a way of living, this "school" that refuses to be a school is worth including up and against its contemporary opponents. As opposed to an ascetic in the ascending sense of the word starting with Plato, Cynicism proposes a radically anti-ascetic askesis. In the first place, the difference between Plato's proposal and that of the Cynic, is the attainability of the good life.⁴⁷ Whereas Plato will suggest, in his figure of Socrates, a nearly unattainable ideal that stands at odds with regular human capabilities and his functioning in society, Antisthenes, on the other hand, will offer up his interpretation of the Socratic ideal as a short cut to the good life. In this regard, Stoicism would resemble Plato's example more closely than Antisthenes'. And second and more importantly in the present context, Cynicism opposes the Platonic confidence in rationality.⁴⁸ Plato proposes a care for the self that explicitly bases itself on use of the faculty of reason. In relation with the classical tripartite division of the soul, it is reason

⁴⁵ See for instance Seneca, *De Ira*, III.10.1, III.36.1-4; Epictetus, *Enquiritidion*, 34; *Dissertations*, II.18, III.8, III.12

².X.1, 3.XXIV.1

⁴⁶ Michel Onfray: *Cynismen*, 42

⁴⁷ Cf. Plato: *Republic*, 497A-B: "[Adeimantus:] But which of our present constitutions do you think is suitable for philosophers? – [Socrates:] None of them. That's exactly my complaint: None of our preset constitutions is worthy of the philosophic nature, and, as a result, this nature is perverted and altered, for, just as a foreign seed, sown in alien ground, is likely to be overcome by the native species and to fade away among them, so the philosophic nature fails to develop its full power and declines into a different character." The theme of the unattainability of the philosopher's nature is a recurring theme throughout the *Republic* and other works.

⁴⁸ Peter Sloterdijk: *Kritiek van de cynische rede*, 180-181

or *Logos* that should manage or dominate the passions, or *Eros*, either with the help of, or along with the spirited part or *Thumos* of the soul.⁴⁹ The Cynic seems to aim rather at disrupting the methodology of *Logos* as it distracts us in its deviations toward complex metaphysics and theoretical models that do not, in the end, help us in actually living a better life. Dismissal, then, of the Platonic and subsequently Stoic proposal for a life in accordance with reason.

Epicurean philosophy was one of the first schools to explicitly judge the worth of a philosophy by the help it gives people in their lives.⁵⁰ The Epicurean proposal was based on a corporeal reduction the *condition humaine*, eliminating such speculative issues as a life after death and a divine being or reason in accordance to which we could seek to live. Instead, Epicurus sought to distinguish our passions and drives according to their being natural and necessary, or not.⁵¹ In their focus on bodily issues to the exclusion of transcendental reason, Epicureanism seems closer to Cynicism than Plato and the Stoics. But an important difference places is right into the Cynic's unique place in the spectrum of philosophical proposals for the good life. For, whereas Epicurus would turn inward, literally, into their garden and an individual, a-political way of living, the Cynic chooses to stay in the city. His aim is not simply to cut the ties with society and concentrate only on the self. Instead, the Cynic's philosophy as a way of life is pointedly political. The Cynic not only seeks to reinstate the passions, he seeks *recognition* for this reinstatement. Masturbation, eating habits, exercises, refutations of reason: they all serve not simply one's own good life, but are instead socially embedded. The Cynic's art of living is one motivated neither from reason or *Logos*, nor wholly from the passions or *Eros*, but from their spiritedness. It is an art of living based on *Thumos*.

Cynicism today

Modern and new cynicism

In modern times, the term cynicism is quite common: a recurring contemporary reproach is that today's society and individual are 'cynical'. This generally refers to the idea that norms and values are no longer accepted, that respect for others

⁴⁹ Cf. Plato, *Phaedrus* 253C-254E.

⁵⁰ "Empty is that philosopher's argument which by no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sickness of bodies, so too there is no use in philosophy, if it does not throw out suffering from the soul." Epicurus, *Us*. 221; cited in Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, 102.

⁵¹ "We must also reflect that of desires some are natural, others are groundless; and that of the natural some are necessary as well as natural, and some natural only. And of the necessary desires some are necessary if we are to be happy, some if the body is to be rid of uneasiness, some if we are even to live." Epicurus, *LM* 127.

has been lost, that society today consists of what would be called cynics. However, it is now apparent that this betrays a misuse of the term cynic, in which exactly that which could be classical Cynicism's contribution to the contemporary debate on philosophy as a way of life is neglected. By clearly distinguishing between what might be called modern cynicism and its classical homonym, an opening may be created to consider a 'new Cynicism', reclaiming its ancient roots.

Modern cynicism has been named different things in distinction from its ancient homonym. Michel Onfray identifies forms of what he calls "vulgar cynicism".⁵² In these expressions of modern cynicism, Onfray recognizes the incorporation of some methods of classical Cynicism, without including its corresponding values. Rude behavior, cynical styles of argumentation and other methodological aspects of classical Cynicism are being reused in entirely different frameworks of values, such as religion or politics. In this way, Onfray signals, cynical methods are applied in service of a "hypocritical efficiency" that would not have been accepted in classical Cynicism.

Peter Sloterdijk distinguishes between cynicism and Kynism. When referring to classical Cynicism as professed by Antisthenes, Diogenes and their followers, he talks of Kynism, where modern cynicism is the result of a sort of "polarity reversal of Kynism".⁵³ Diogenes was still a 'true' Cynic (a 'kynic', in Sloterdijk's terminology), whereas today, cynicism has fallen prey to a series of divisions, inconsistencies and ironies.⁵⁴ Thus cynicism and Kynism turn out to be, although sometimes methodologically similar, fundamentally opposed.

Following these thinkers, modern cynicism is to be clearly opposed to classical Cynicism as a way of lie. In order to further clarify this distinction, the threefold determination of philosophy as a way of life can be of service. This could be summarized by understanding philosophy as a way of life as consisting in giving form to one's own existence in a reflective and justifiable way. Classical Cynicism perfectly fits this definition, although it might be observed that the reflective part receives minor attention. Classical Cynicism very much attempts to give form to one's own life, and the justification thereof can be articulated through the Cynic's values we presented earlier, such as being true to both outer and inner nature, and serving the citizenry through shock and example. These are *Cynical values*. The Cynic's methods, which are well placed within the *giving form* to one's own life, are related to these values. They cannot be applied separately; that would no longer be Cynicism, but some contemporary variant as Onfray or Sloterdijk describe them.

⁵² Michel Onfray: *Cynismen*, 137-152

⁵³ Peter Sloterdijk: *Kritiek van de cynische rede*, 346

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 278

On the one hand, modern cynicism differs from classical Cynicism in its absence of values – except perhaps for some radical individualism, but even that would be in its perverted form, and very much opposed to the individualism in service of the polis we saw in classical Cynicism. Modern cynicism is limited to acting (and non-acting), to empty and hypocritical attempts to shock and offend. The basis of this acting, previously anchored in the Cynic's values, has been hollowed out. Modern cynicism seems to refer to a perverted form of nihilism, and not in the least to an actual philosophy as a way of life. Diogenes professed a *revaluation* of all values, not a simple abandonment of values altogether. This does appear to be modern cynicism's proposal.

As a consequence of this corrosion with regards to content, Cynicism's methods are also changes. While classical Cynicism aimed at a holistic attitude, a way of living, modern cynicism is most often limited to the occasional unmannerly acts. Classical Cynicism could even be considered to contain a certain aesthetic.⁵⁵ This is hardly the case in modern cynicism. The flaws of contemporary cynicism can perhaps be best illustrated by proposing a new Cynicism. This new Cynicism would most likely actually turn *against* modern cynicism.

Possibilities for a new Cynicism

In a preliminary exploration of a new Cynical philosophy as a way of life, the aforementioned distinction should be retained. A new Cynicism will not be the same as modern cynicism and will most likely even be in direct opposition with it. It should be underlined that Cynicism, as a reactionary way of life, took its form within and opposed to a particular situation; it was both a reaction against existing philosophical propositions such as Plato's Academy based on reason, and Epicurus' garden based on the passions, and a concrete means to respond to a number of givens and changes in the socio-political domain. As such, Cynicism was a proposal based on *Thumos*, taking a certain view of Socrates as its example to carry out in turn in both an exemplary and a confrontational manner. Much in the same way, a new Cynicism will take form in reaction to its contemporary social and political context, implying fundamental differences and particularities, probably above all in reaction to modern cynicism.

Following the tentative definition of philosophy as a way of life and the distinction between method and values, the essence of a new Cynicism can be articulated as follows. The values will articulate the normative orientation of the proposed philosophy as a way of life, whereas the methodology will refer to the most important aspects of its acting out.

⁵⁵ Michel Onfray: *Cynismen*, 37, 59

Values

The values that a new Cynicism might introduce, could at least be the following. In the first place, it could propose a reevaluation of existing values. Such a reevaluation of values is fundamentally different from modern cynicism's relativism and dismissal of all values. A new Cynicism will not succumb to nihilism, but instead seek to forcefully oppose it, to unmask the implicit appreciations underneath its surface. Cynicism is reactionary and as such will consist in a reaction to the modern status quo. Whereas classical Cynicism defaced the individual submission to society as a *zoon politikon* and professed a new individualism, a new Cynicism would probably challenge today's atomistic-individualist anthropology.

Following this line, classical Cynicism did propose the value of individualism. This individualism could be incorporated in a new Cynicism in two ways. On the one hand, it could lead to the importance of rearticulating one's own identity. Modern cynicism's individuality is often less personal than it might appear. The modern individual often appears to lend its identity not so much from itself, but rather from adopting a life style or pertaining to a particular subgroup. A new Cynicism could take on the challenge of defacing this weak individualism.

On the other hand, classical Cynical individualism was a result of a certain concept of nature. The individual appeared as a sort of microcosm that needed to live in accordance with the macrocosm. In other words, individualism was the expression of an inner *nature*. This too will have lost its pertinence in a new Cynicism, and from its standpoint such neoromantic references could rather be criticized. The aforementioned lifestyles are not a product of nature, but rather of culture, and we adapt ourselves to those cultural models, rather than coming forth from an inner natural self. Even the search for our own 'nature', our 'authentic self', in all its inherent failure, is a lesson a new Cynicism could teach us.

A third value is that of nature not as a microcosm in ourselves, but as a macrocosm of which we are a part. The classical Cynic attempted to live in accordance with the natural world surrounding him and preceding society. Modern cynicism seems to have replaced nature with culture and it has chosen to remain within its boundaries, limiting itself to acts of revolt and offense, but implicitly confirming the limits of culture. The modern cynic accepts and subsequently perverts the givens of society. Perhaps a new Cynic would radically abstain from such cultural boundaries, not in an attempt to return to a state of nature, but to simply denounce the cultural context as well as its already regulated and thus affirmative and ultimately false transgressions.

In the act

In the Cynic's way of acting, his social criticism stands out before anything else. Classical Cynicism is an all-out behaviorally embedded resistance to society and its accepted norms. The values elaborated above are not only formulated, they are carried through: in philosophically working out his own life, the acting Cynic will constantly take position simultaneously within and against society. Classical Cynic philosophy as a way of life is a *Thumos*-driven stance against society, in service of that society. The modern cynic, we mentioned, rather accepts and distorts society, surcharging its results while dismissing or negating the underlying values. Modern cynicism's social criticism thus bases itself on culture. Classical Cynicism, on the other hand, sought to be critical of culture wholesale. In doing so, it did not base itself on society, but sought for an external position. A new Cynicism could emphasize such an outsider position as the basis for its attitude.

A second aspect central in the classical Cynic's way of living out his philosophy, was the importance of exercise and endurance. A life in accordance with Cynic values is not the easiest life, but requires constant practice and effort. This is diametrically opposed to the modern cynic's laziness and ease. Living in accordance with nature, be it internal or external, and critical independence from culture's normative and degenerative impositions, is not as easy as some may believe. Escape routes such as entertainment, drugs and virtual realities are no more than that: escape routes. A new Cynicism would face up to the temptations as well as the challenges proposed by contemporary culture and take a stance up and against such a background, despite or through the effort that this requires.

A third trait of the classical Cynic's attitude is more directly related to the philosophical aspect of his way of life: reflection. Reflection makes use of our intellectual faculties and the methods that derive from it, such as dialogue and argumentative discourse. The classical Cynic added to this his own unorthodox methods, which would even transgress the limits of rationality. This heritage allows a new Cynic to include in his attacks another aspect of today's context: the separation between philosophical examination and life itself. Modern philosophy has shut itself up in a rationalistic construction, limited to the academic world. The acting subject has remained absent. A new Cynicism could reintroduce the acting subject into philosophy: through his acts – which, it need not be reminded, do not shew from shock and disruption – the new Cynic could shake modern philosophy's ivory tower.

The other side of this is the Cynic's acceptance of his role of educator. The classical Cynic did not only live to his own values, he did this *en plein public*, aiming at shaking up his peers and setting an example. One's own life as a tool and a

model. This not only fits ill with the atomistic egoism of modern cynicism, it is at once a *practical* attempt to bring philosophy and philosophical teaching back into the lives of people around us. Cynicism as a philosophical way of life is thus not only a philosophical discipline seeking to reform philosophy, it is also a way of life that aims to reintroduce philosophy into the lives of people.

This education-oriented method further shows a more general value that is central to Cynicism. In Cynicism, much like and perhaps even more than in other classical and Hellenistic schools of thought, life and philosophy concur. On the one hand, the Cynic's example can serve the wider purpose of contemporary philosophy as a way of life to introduce a reform in philosophy itself. On the other hand, a new Cynicism could reintroduce reflection in ordinary life. The modern cynic has only superficially copied methodological curiosities of insult and offence, but has failed to flesh out a coherent set of values and reflections. In comparison with this modern cynicism, a new Cynicism would reinstate itself as a coherent philosophical whole, in which reflection, (re)valuation and the lived life come together. In short, a new Cynicism would be an exemplary effort to reintroduce life into philosophy, and philosophy into life.

Conclusion

We have investigated the proposal of classical Cynic philosophy as a way of life. Although Cynicism as a theory may be considered of disputable pertinence both in antiquity and in modern times, its importance appears more clearly when treated in the normative ethical field of philosophies as a way of life. A new Cynicism might be capable of reinvigorating philosophy, and reevaluating the contemplated life. As such, Cynical philosophy as a way of life is deserving of more profound investigation, to which the present article may be considered a preliminary.

In the first place, classical Cynicism could be revisited. Such a reconsideration would not be limited to its theoretical discourse, but would rather focus on its triad of values and practice as well as reflection. It would take place both in the context of society and in relation with other philosophical traditions and schools, but also as an independent current in its own right. As such, the study of classical Cynicism could lay bare its philosophy, its central values and its methods.

The next step leads from classical Cynicism to a new Cynicism today. The foundations, values, and practices could be reformulated and adapted to the contemporary context and discourse. There, it could serve as a foundation for a critique of the phenomenon of modern cynicism. In philosophy, it would lead to a plea for a new philosophy as a way of life, and for a philosophical view on life itself.

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