From: *Paul and the Popular Philosophers*

# Self-Definition among the Cynics

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The Cynics and the Cynicism of the first century A.D. are known to us for the most part through Stoic interpreters, and the temptation is great, on the basis of Seneca's account of Demetrius, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Dio Chrysostom, to draw a picture of Cynicism which obscures the differences between Stoicism and Cynicism and among the Cynics themselves. In the second century, the diversity among the Cynics emerges more clearly as such personalities as Oenomaus of Gadara, Demonax, and Peregrinus Proteus appear on the scene. Unfortunately, only fragments of Oenomaus's writings have been preserved, and only a few comments, mostly negative, are made about him by Julian, and we are largely but not wholly dependent on Lucian's interpretations of Demonax and Peregrinus for information about them. It is therefore fortunate that in the Cynic epistles we do have primary sources for the sect in the Empire. These neglected writings are more than the school exercises they have been thought to be, and enable us to determine the points at issue among the Cynics themselves.

## The Definition of Cynicism

Diogenes Laertius already experienced difficulty in describing common Cynic doctrine, and records that some considered it, not a philosophical school (hairesis), but a way of life (Lives of Eminent Philosophers 6.103). He seems to incline to the view that it is a philosophical school, but notes that Cynics dispensed with logic and physics, and confined themselves to ethics. Cynics have generally been perceived as having an aversion to encyclopaedic learning and placing no premium on education in the pursuit of virtue. As a distinctively anti-social sect, they attached greatest importance to a way of life that gave chief emphasis to personal decision. Yet this generalization holds only partly. While it is true that in the hellenistic period Cynicism did not require adherence to an organized system of doctrine, the major figures known to us, in contrast to the charlatans Lucian describes, were by no means anti-intellectual. Oenomaus reflects a knowledge of philosophical arguments about free will and providence. Demonax is said to have been eclectic although in dress he was a Cynic, Peregrinus is thought to have been influenced by Neopythagoreanism, and the Socratic epistles betray at least an openness to philosophy and its possible contribution to one's progress toward virtue.

Cynics differed among themselves in their philosophical eclecticism as they did in other matters, but a personal preference for or use in debate of one system does not appear to have been a major issue in determining who was a Cynic. What made a Cynic was his dress and conduct, self-sufficiency, harsh behavior toward what appeared as excesses, and a practical ethical idealism, but not a detailed arrangement of a system resting on Socratic- Antisthenic principles. The result was that Cynicism was compatible with views that shared its ethical demands even if they were at cross purposes with its fundamentally different teaching in other matters. The

resulting diversity makes an attempt at a detailed definition of Cynicism difficult, especially if it is based on the idealized presentations of Epictetus, Lucian, Maximus of Tyre, and, Julian. Epictetus's description has often been taken to represent the true Cynic without due allowance being made for his Stoicizing or for the fact that he is presenting an ideal.

Although these accounts do contain genuine Cynic material and viewpoints, it is preferable to identify features that Cynics themselves consider central and to proceed from there. Among other sources, the Cynic epistles represent such information and must be introduced into the discussion. In view of the interest of the symposium, some major features of Cynic diversity in the second century A.D. will be touched on, and an attempt will be made to determine whether one form of Cynicism came to predominate in the third. Here, special attention will be given to the Cynic letters attributed to Socrates and his disciples.

The letters under consideration come from two authors, the former writing in the name of Socrates, probably in the first century A.D. (Epistles 1-7), the latter writing in the names of members of the Socratic circle in the third century (Epistles 8-27; 29-34). The letters may have originated in a school, but their value for the history of Cynicism is considerable. In addition to their propagandistic aim, they represent divergent Cynic views projected onto the Socratics to create an impression of Socrates and his disciples discussing issues important to Cynics. The author of the Socratic letters, with the earlier collection before him, is embarrassed by the public fussing of Cynics among themselves, and it is characteristic of his corpus that attempts are made to modify a radical Cynic individualism and attempt a rapprochement between the protagonists.

Lucian (Demonax 21) records an illustrative encounter between Demonax and Peregrinus. Peregrinus rebukes Demonax for his levity and jesting with people, and accuses him of not acting in the Cynic manner. Demonax replies that Peregrinus is not behaving in a human manner. Lucian's biased interpretation of the lives of the two does not obscure the fact that both were Cynics, and that the argument between them involves the manner of life that can justifiably be called Cynic. Reflected here is a divergence into two types of Cynicism: an austere, rigorous one, and a milder, so-called hedonistic strain. Despite Lucian's caricature of him, Peregrinus emerges as a Cynic of the austere type who modeled himself on Heracles. In his austerity he was not unlike Oenomaus. Demonax, in contrast, was everybody's friend (Demonax 10; cf. 8 and 63) and, while he adopted Diogenes' dress and way of life, did not alter the details of his life for the effect it might have on the crowds. He revered Socrates, except for his irony, and admired Diogenes, but loved Aristippus (6,62). Lucian's stress on Demonax's culture and mildness does not hide the fact that he was not loved by the masses, and that his "witty remarks" in 12-62 are reminiscent of Diogenes's apophthegms preserved served in Diogenes Laertius Lives of Eminent Philosophers 6.24-69. Demonax defended Cynic parresia (50), and even praised Thersites as a Cynic mob-orator (61). While retaining Cynicism's simplicity of life and dress and its indifference to presumed virtues and vices, Demonax rejected its hostility to education and culture, excessive asceticism, and shamelessness.

What can be detected in Lucian finds elaboration in the Cynic epistles, where attempts at self-definition utilize as models early Cynics and heroes from Greek myth, appropriately interpreted to reflect a particular writer's proclivities. Certain letters attributed to Crates and Diogenes represent austere Cynicism. In obvious polemic against hedonistic Cynicism, pseudo-Crates affirms that Cynic philosophy is Diogenean and the Cynic someone who toils according to it, taking a short cut in doing philosophy by avoiding the circuitous route of doctrine. He wears the Cynic garb which is viewed as the weapons of the gods (Epistle 6). The Cynic takes up this armament as a deliberate act to demonstrate that the simplicity of the soul finds expression in his deeds, in which he wars against appearances. In contrast to Odysseus, who is made to represent the hedonistic Cynic, Diogenes is portrayed as consistent in his commitment to the Cynic life, austere, self-sufficient, self-confident, confident, trusting in reason, and brave in his practice of virtue. This brand of Cynicism does not simply consist in indifference to all things, but in the robust endurance of what others out of softness or opinion cannot endure. The Cynic shamelessness is part of this rejection of opinions and conventions, and is the mark of the doggish philosopher. The situation in which men find themselves requires, not philosophers like Plato and Aristippus, who in the doxographic tradition represent hedonistic Cynicism, but a harsh taskmaster master who can bring the masses to reality.

The issues between the two types are sharpened in six of the Socratic letters in which Simon the shoemaker (and Antisthenes) and Aristippus speak for them (Epistles 9-13). The topic discussed is whether the Cynic could associate with a tyrant. Antisthenes asserts that the Cynic should strive for self-sufficiency (autarkeia), and that he cannot associate with tyrants or the masses, for they are ignorant of it (Epistle 8). With biting irony the hedonist Aristippus replies that he was a steward of the teaching of Socrates in Dionysius' court (Epistle 9), and that his position there had resulted in his saving certain Locrian youths (Epistles 10; 11). Simon denies that a life of luxury is Socratic; his cobbling is done to make possible his admonition of foolish men and his austerity is of value in the pursuit of sophrosyne. He takes umbrage at Aristippus's jesting about his way of life (Epistle 12). Aristippus responds in conciliatory fashion. He is not ridiculing the humble life, for there is wisdom in it. But Simon would also have opportunity to practise his craft. and on a larger scale, in Syracuse. Aristippus assures Simon that he is his friend, in contrast to the harsh, bestial Cynics (Epistle 13).

The mild Cynic, therefore, defends his behavior by arguing that it benefits others and is more human. What is to be found in Lucian's description of Demonax thus also appears here. It is the rigorous Cynics who explicitly discuss "Cynicism" in their self-definition, and they do so in terms of their manner of life. The mild Cynic is more conciliatory, although this should not be overstated, and defends his behavior by pointing to its usefulness in influencing a larger audience.

## The Human Condition

Something more, however, than a difference in method used to attain an end seems to have been at the basis of Cynics' self-conceptions. They shared the view that man has to be reformed by being taught to unlearn his vices (Diogenes Laertius Lives of Eminent Philosophers

6.7-8). Unlike vice, which enters the soul spontaneously, they held that virtue was acquired by practice (pseudo-Crates Epistle 12), and happiness consisted in living according to nature (Diogenes Laertius Lives of Eminent Philosophers 6.71; Julian Oration 6.193 D). Virtue could be taught, and, once acquired, could not be lost (Diogenes Laertius Lives of Eminent Philosophers 6.10, 105). What Cynics called for was a decision to improve oneself, to make a deliberate choice to change from one's previous condition (Diogenes Laertius Lives of Eminent Philosophers 6.56). Yet they differed in their assessments of the degree to which the human condition had been corrupted and, consequently, on the methods that were to be applied to effect the desired change.

The rigoristic Cynics had an extremely pessimistic view of mankind, which earned them the charge of misanthropy. This view is especially, but not exclusively, represented by most of the letters attributed to Crates, Diogenes, Heraclitus, and Hippocrates. Most people, they held, are totally deluded, puffed up in their evil, and completely bereft of reason and self-control. Having sunk to the level of beasts in their ignorance and conduct, nature itself hates them, and takes vengeance on them by punishing them. In contrast, the true Cynic, the epitome of virtue, knows nature and imitates it. Whereas nature punishes them in deed, the Cynic does so in his speech (pseudo-Diogenes Epistle 28.5). It is by virtue alone that their souls can be purified of its diseases, and it is the Cynic who is the physician able to bring about their cure. Their putrid condition requires no gentle treatment, but rather the cautery and surgery of scathing Cynic parresia. It is not that the Cynic wishes to be morbid; their wickedness made him sullen and excised his gentleness (pseudo-Heraclitus Epistles 5.3; 7.2-3).

The worse the human condition, the greater is the virtue of the Cynic perceived to be. Not everyone is capable of Cynic virtue, and most people, complaining about Cynic indifference, flee the Cynic regimen when they see how hard it is. The Cynic alone has brought moral practice to perfection, and, when people prove to be beyond cure, he withdraws from them. He separates from the bestial crowd who know neither nature, reason or truth, and associates only with those who understand the word of a Cynic (pseudo-Diogenes Diogenes Epistle 28.8). He may explain, in self-defence, that it is men's vice, and not themselves, that he hates (pseudo-Heraclitus Epistle 7.2), but his hatred for them and for association with them is nevertheless at times stated.

This contempt for the masses raises the question of the harsh Cynic's motivation for speaking to them at all. It has been claimed that, despite the Cynic's consciousness of his superior virtue and his contempt for the masses, in reality he "was influenced by altruistic motives in a far higher degree than his ethics required him to be. The Cynic, filled with philanthropy, according to this view, recognized his goal to be to benefit people. His concern for others did not originate in a sense of duty, but stemmed from a real sympathy with human suffering and the unnatural bondage in which men find themselves. Having freed himself from evils, he was conscious of having a mission to free others.

This is not, however, the self-portrait of the harsh Cynic who hardly stresses his philanthropy, and whose altruism, such as it is, is not a major characteristic. As its proponents acknowledge, this view of Cynic philanthropy seems at odds with Cynic individualism. Julian, whose understanding of Cynicism appears to be correct in this respect, provides us with some clarity on the matter. The Cynics' reproof of others, he says, was not their chief end and aim; rather

> their main concern was how they might themselves attain to happiness and ... they occupied themselves with other men and only in so far as they comprehended that man is by nature a social and political animal; and so they aided their fellow-citizens, not only by practicing but by preaching as well (Oration 6.201C).

The Cynic must therefore begin with himself, expelling all desires and passions and undertaking to live by intelligence and reason alone. Julian is aware that many Cynics failed in this, and allowed themselves to be influenced by the masses (Oration 6.197B-D). The Cynic must free himself from popular opinion, but that does not mean

> that we ought to be shameless before all men and to do what we ought not; but all that we refrain from and all that we do let us not do or refrain from, merely because it seems to the multitude somehow honourable or base, but because it is forbidden by reason and the god within us, that is, the mind (Oration 6.196D).

Julian wishes to retain the Cynic's individualism, and warns against his simply defining himself over against the multitude.

## The Superiority of the Austere Cynic

The harsh, austere Cynics stress their radical individualism, but cannot withstand the temptation to do so by defining themselves in opposition to the multitudes whom they hold in such contempt. At the risk of overstating the matter, it is important to note that their comments on themselves are made when they lambaste the multitude who are beyond the hope of cure, or when they compare themselves with the Cynics of milder mien who hold out some hope for society, whom they accuse of pandering to the crowd. What we meet here is not philanthropy or altruism; rather, the concern with the multitudes serves to highlight the superiority of the Cynic who has committed himself without reservation to the life of Diogenes. That sense of superiority emerges from everything that this type of Cynic does or says.

To begin with, all men are evil, and hate the Cynic (pseudo-Heraclitus Epistles 2; 7.10). Although their folly causes him hardships, and they maltreat him, and he cannot avoid them, still his virtue remains untouched (pseudo-Crates Crates Epistle 35). He is superior to them because he has chosen the difficult, Diogenean, way to happiness. It is hard to find a real Cynic (pseudo-Diogenes Epistle 29.4). One must be born to that life, otherwise one fears it and despairs of it (pseudo-Crates Epistle 21; pseudo-Diogenes Epistles 12; 41). But the Cynic is superior in his moral exercise, is more simple in his life, and more patient in hardship (pseudo-Diogenes Epistle 27). It is, in the first instance, what he is, as exemplified in his deeds rather than his words, that is important. Thus, the Cynic dress, which he invests with great

importance, sets him off from other people by freeing him from popular opinion (pseudo-Diogenes Epistles 7; 34) and effectively separating him from undesirable people (pseudo-Crates Epistle 23).

The Cynic's superiority is also demonstrated in his begging. He begs to sustain himself, but he does so for the right reasons and in the right manner, which set him further apart. Begging is not disgraceful, for it is to satisfy a need arising from voluntary poverty (pseudo-Crates Epistle 17). By surrendering his private property and thus being freed from evil (pseudo-Crates Epistle 7), he shows himself superior to the values of popular opinion (pseudo-Diogenes Diogenes Epistle 9). Furthermore, he is not really begging, but only demanding what belongs to him, for, since all things belong to God, friends have all things in common, and he is a friend of God, all things belong to him (pseudo-Crates Crates Epistles 26, 27; pseudo-Diogenes Epistle 10.2). Nor is he indiscriminate in his begging, for vice must support virtue. Thus, he begs only from people who are worthy of him and his teaching (pseudo-Crates Epistles 2; 19; 22; 36; pseudo-Diogenes Epistle 38.3-4).

The Cynic's offensive public acts are demonstrations of his deliberateness in choice, and, rather than being blamed for them, he should be recognized as the more worthy of trust because of them (pseudo-Diogenes Epistles 42; 44). His goal is to live quietly and not to participate fully in society (pseudo-Crates Crates Epistle 5). He may be ridiculed, yet he does not care what people think of him. The benefit that people will receive from him will not come to them because he had sought them out or tried to please them, but because they had observed the example he presented them in his life (pseudo-Crates Epistle 20)."

**The Mild Cynic**

In comparison with misanthropic Cynics, those of a milder disposition showed less pride. Their comparative tolerance did not place them on the same level with people they exhorted; nevertheless, they were decidedly more modest in the claims they made for themselves. The Cynics of the Socratic epistles are not as preoccupied with nature or as pessimistic in their view of the human condition, yet they are certain that they know human nature, what people's shortcomings are, what is best for them, and that the greatest emphasis is to be placed on virtue (pseudo-Socrates Epistles 5; 6.3,5). These Cynics do not describe themselves, as Lucian does Demonax (Demonax 10), as everybody's friend, but their behavior does reflect a more positive attitude. While their self-sufficiency and rejection of popular values makes them different from the majority (pseudo-Socrates Epistle 6.2-4), on the ground that the "hedonistic" life does not affect their phronesis (Epistle 9.3) they reject the misanthropists' claim that the only appropriate life for the sage is the austere one, and that he cannot associate with the ignorant masses (Epistle 8).

In their various social roles these Cynics differ radically from the anti-social social Cynics. Unlike Peregrinus, for example, they have no desire to upset the social order. A Cynic of this sort will accept no political office or military appointment, for it is beyond his powers to rule men. But he does remain in the city in the capacity that he does have, that of a counselor who constantly

points out what is profitable for the city (Epistle 1.1,10-12). He seeks only that fame which comes from being prudent and just (Epistle 6.2), and remains constant in his endurance and contempt for riches (Epistle 5). He is fully aware of the injustice in the state (Epistle 7) and meets with opposition (Epistle 5), but Socrates is his exemplar, not only of the treatment that the sage may receive at the hands of unjust men (Epistles 14; 16), but also of the benefits that can accrue from his life and death (Epistle 17). This Cynic therefore does not despair of improving society, and consequently justifies his involvement by the potential benefit he might render. Like Demonax, he is mild in the exercise of his parresia, accommodating himself to his audience, and distancing himself from the anti-social Cynics.

Living as a resident Cynic rather than an independent, wandering preacher required special justification, which "Socrates" provides in Epistles I and 6. It is clear that these letters are responding to charges of harsh Cynics that it is out of mercenary motives that the resident Cynic confines himself to esoteric teaching in lecture halls. In response, "Socrates" denies that he is unapproachable or mercenary, and offers a number of reasons for his decision to remain in the city. First, he has done so because God had commanded him to remain (Epistle 1.2, 7). He knows that this argument may be unacceptable to many Cynics, and therefore uses the Socratic tradition to bolster it (Epistle 1.8-9). Furthermore, he claims to meet the needs of his country in the capacity in which he can render some benefit (Epistle 1.5-6), unlike ignorant men who arrogate to themselves power that they do not have, who act disgracefully, are insulted, and then end in the wilderness (Epistle 1.10-11). He is self-sufficient, and does not beg from the masses (Epistles 1.2; 6.1), for he has ample resources in his friends.

The Socratic epistles differ from other Cynic sources of the period in their emphasis on the circle of "friends." Besides the financial assistance these friends render each other, they are pictured as in constant contact with each other, either in person, or by means of letters, which are surrogates for their authors' physical presence (Epistle 18.1), and in which the philosophical discussion is continued. The Socratics are made to represent differing Cynic positions, but their supposed contact with each other presents a picture of a school hammering out its differences in an attempt to come to some kind of harmony.

As the major representative of the milder Cynicism advocated in the letters, Aristippus illustrates their irenic tendency. As already noted, he commends Simon. He is further on good terms with Xenophon and other Socratics (Epistle 18), and the enmity between him and Plato is played down as jesting and a reconciliation is hinted at (Epistle 23.3). By selective use of the anecdotal tradition, rivalries are further played down and a harmonious picture is sketched. For example, although the tradition often records the austere Diogenes's criticisms of Plato, Diogenes does not appear in these letters, and even the less frequently attested opposition between Antisthenes and Plato is omitted, with Antisthenes left to rebuke only Aristippus. The differences among members of the Academy after Plato's death are attributed to personal judgment and disposition (Epistle 4.2-3), and concern is expressed for the preservation and organization of the institution (Epistles 32; 33), yet the letters do not provide evidence for the institutionalization of Cynicism. The effort to bring Cynics into conversation with each other itself draws attention to

their diversity, and there is no evidence that the authors are witnesses to organized Cynic schools. But there is at least an attempt made to mute their differences. The major confrontation that remains is between the harsh and the hedonistic Cynics, but attempts are made to ameliorate it.

## The Cynics and Religion

No convincing generalization can be made about the Cynics' attitude toward religion. Modern opinions range from what is perhaps the classic one, that the Cynics were rationalists who had no patience with the supernatural or popular religion, to one that describes them as conscious of a union with God which empowered them. A mediating view is that two strains can be identified, a positive one accompanied by a moderate view of mankind, and a skeptical one associated with rigorism. The latter view, while it may find support in Oenomaus, runs aground on the fact that Demonax, known for his mildness, was decidedly cool toward religion, and that Peregrinus, the major example of Cynic "mysticism," was known for his harshness. Nevertheless, the Cynic epistles that reflect Cynicism of the austere type do tend toward a skeptical view, and the Socratic epistles, while they do not make much of religion, do evidence a more positive attitude toward it. Thus, in the latter, Socrates offers a cock to Asclepius (Epistle 14.9), Xenophon builds a temple (Epistle 19), Socrates models himself upon God (Epistle 6.4), and is divinely commissioned (Epistle 1.2,7). Still, religion is not at the center of the discussion and, as we have noted, where it does appear to justify Cynic behavior, it does so in a polemical context and is appealed to with the recognition that it may carry no weight with other Cynics.

## Conclusion

The considerable diversity of second-century Cynicism is still evident in the third, although the author of the Socratic epistles does attempt to play it down. Diogenes Laertius, who may have been more interested in biography than doxography, nevertheless notes that some Cynics still preferred the austere regimen of Diogenes.

The evidence from Julian in the century that followed is more difficult to assess. His own austerity, susceptibility to religious mysticism, constant seeking for divine guidance, and the polemical nature of his addresses on the Cynics color his views to an inordinate degree. Some facts, however, do emerge. The Cynics he opposes scorned religion, and Julian uses the occasion to excoriate Oenomaus and present an interpretation of Diogenes as divinely guided, which may reflect his own predilections, but which is also part of the tradition. Julian's own preference is evident when he complains that the Cynics ridiculed Diogenes for his austerity, but demands that they exercise their parresia with charm and grace. Julian could not tolerate Cynic criticism of his administration, which he viewed as subversion of the instituticns of society. Nonetheless, his tirade against Heracleius reveals that Cynics did attempt to present themselves at his court, and that they therefore were not anti-social in the manner of "Heraclitus" or "Diogenes." Through Julian's invective glimpses are caught of rationalistic Cynics of the milder sort.

The fifth century knew Sallustius the Cynic, a man with whom Julian might have been better pleased. He was austere in his way of life, and, although not much is known of his religious outlook, he evidently shared Peregrinus's mysticism and practised divination. In sum, Cynicism, which was essentially a way of life requiring no adherence to a canonical system of doctrine, continued to adapt itself to different viewpoints, and consequently retained the diversity which characterized it from early in its history.