Review of International Studies (2010), 36, 201–223 *© 2010 British International Studies Association*
doi:10.1017/S0260210510000902 *First published online 31 Aug 2010*

Ancient cynicism: a case for salvage

PIERS REVELL

Abstract. Taking a quote from President Obama as its starting point, this article examines the usages of the word cynicism in politics, business and International Relations. It distinguishes five different forms: accusative; reflexive; projective; cathartic and ancient. When used accusatively, the cynic is an archetype we see in others whose character or actions we wish to reproach. When used reflexively, the cynic is a social archetype we identify with ourselves. Projective cynicism is the means by which an impertinent discourse may be playfully distanced. Cathartic cynicism is a means by which mental conflict is mediated. Ancient cynicism was a utopian attempt to negotiate the contradiction between cosmopolitanism and the overwhelming reality of slavery. The article concludes that it may be worthwhile comparing and contrasting all these forms of cynicism out in the public sphere.

Piers Revell is an Associate Lecturer at the University of Plymouth where he teaches International Political Economy, Environmental Politics and International Political Theory. He took his PhD in International Relations at the LSE in 2007.

Some people will tell you that I've got my head in the clouds, that I'm still offering false hopes, that I need a reality check, that I'm a hope-monger [. . .] Nothing worthwhile in this country has ever happened unless somebody somewhere is willing to hope, when somebody is willing to stand up, somebody who's willing to stand up when they're told 'no you can't' and instead say 'yes we can'. That's how this country was founded [. . .] That's how slaves and abolitionists resisted [. . .] That's how women won the vote, how workers won the right to organise [. . .] and sit in, and go to jail, and some were beaten, and some died for freedom's cause. That's what hope is. That's what hope is, Madison, that moment when we shed our fears, and our doubts, when we don't settle for what the cynics tell us we have to accept, because cynicism is a sorry kind of wisdom.[1]

The purpose of this article is to set aside some time to reflect upon the sorry kind of wisdom referred to so powerfully by Barack Obama during his campaign for the presidency of the US. It is with some trepidation that we set out on this course, because cynicism is a word that can evoke deep emotions in people that can be hot to handle. The decision to go ahead is based upon the observation that cynicism is where a lot of the action appears to be when it comes to contemporary popular consciousness about problems of structure and agency in politics and International Relations. Therefore, at least in principle, cynicism has the potential to help us rethink some very old problems in international political theory using a vernacular that should be readily accessible to a wide audience in global civil society. The plan of what follows is first to survey the semiotics of contemporary cynicism and then juxtapose this with a case for the salvage of ancient cynicism.

[1] Barack Obama, 'Remarks on February 12th Primaries', Wisconsin University: Madison (12 February 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What do people mean when they use the word cynicism? Perhaps the first thing to note about the words cynic, cynicism and cynical is that they are polysemous. That is to say, in modern discourse these words have a variety of possible meanings that may ostensibly seem inconsistent. That does not mean that these meanings are utterly discrete, in fact, the whole point of this article is to reflect upon the ethics of cynicism in a holistic manner.[2] When words are polysemous, careful interpreters will look for the context of the discourse within which a word is embedded in order to determine meaning. I find it useful to break these contexts down into five groups:

1) Accusative;
2) Reflexive;
3) Projective;
4) Cathartic;
5) Ancient.

Obviously this typology is not necessarily meant to be exhaustive. Other people might wish to cut the cake differently.

1. Accusative

When the words cynical and cynicism are used in an accusative context the cynic is a social archetype we see in others whose character or actions we hold up for deep reproach or condemnation (for example, 'they're so cynical', 'the cynicism of this decision beggars belief', 'this example of negative campaigning is pure cynicism', etc.).

A cynical character is often evoked when people want to conjure up an image of the misanthrope who has a disposition to find fault or see the worst in somebody, or the worst in humanity in general. This individual has an unattractive propensity to disbelieve in the possibility of human sincerity or goodness, particularly when it comes to the conduct of politics, business and International Relations. This is allied with a tendency to sneer or snipe at those who are greater than oneself, or those who are attempting something greater than oneself. In this manner, the great and the good amongst us are brought down by the small and the mean.

On the right the cynical character often appears as the enemy within, who has a propensity to turn national and international self images, identities, institutions and principles into objects of ridicule:

> What is that threat? It is the New British Disease: the self destructive sickness of national cynicism. It is spread by so called opinion formers within the British elite. The disease shows itself in a readiness to denigrate our country and praise others; to devalue our achievements, and envy others, to hold our national institutions in contempt, to deride every one of our national figures [. . .] Too many politicians, academics, churchmen, authors, commentators and journalists exhibit the full-blown symptoms of this disease.[3]

[2] To my knowledge, the first person to attempt this in a systematic manner was Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (London: Verso, 1988).
[3] Michael Portillo, 'Cynicism, the new British disease', *The Observer* (16 January 1994).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The cynic is not just a negative irritant, but a clear and present danger to national security. He is a disease in the body politic. He is a perennial problem for political authority because he undermines that essential bond of trust between the statesman and the people upon which authority and government is based.

On the left the cynical archetype will usually appear as an apostle of apathy, with a formidable talent for persuading humanity to submit to the overwhelming power of circumstances. One of his habitual vices is mockery toward those who seek to make things better by tilting at the way things are. This makes the cynic a natural ally of the *status quo*. The task of the progressive modern prince is thus to isolate and cast out the mocker:

> It's the same message we had when we were up, the same message when we're down, that out of the many, we are one, that our destiny will not be written for us, but by us, and that we can cast off our doubts and fears and cynicism because our dreams will not be deferred, and our future will not be denied, and our time for change has come.[4]

Ah yes, that sorry kind of wisdom. Cynicism may be a kind of wisdom, but it is sorry wisdom in that its only contribution is to work upon doubts and fears that induce incredulity toward hope for positive change. It is sorry because its highest ambition can only ever be to be a counsel of despair:

> We must awaken and ignite in our people the hope that change can bring, because the last weapon the Tories have, you know their final weapon, is despair and cynicism. It's telling people well it doesn't matter who's in power 'cos they're all the same, it'll make no difference, nothing can ever change. Rubbish. Of course things can change. When they say 'don't let Labour ruin it' I say to them 'Britain can be better than this.'[5]

In such discourses, the cynic is thus a perennial problem for progressive politics because he always threatens to sap the strength of will for collective action for the common good. Major victories against him thus deserve to be celebrated. This mood was evident, for example, in the early 'new dawn has broken' salad days of the Blair government:

> On the 1st May 1997, it wasn't just the Tories who were defeated. Cynicism was defeated. On the 1st May 1997, fear lost. Hope won. The giving age began.[6]

But evidently, cynicism can never be defeated decisively, once and for all, because fighting cynicism became a perennial theme of the Blair government. When campaigning for Africa, Blair was fighting 'the cynics back home'.[7] When speaking in the Commons in favour of military intervention in Iraq, Blair was defending the 'coalition of the willing' against European cynicism about its motives.[8] And then, in his last speech as Prime Minister, came that final plaintive appeal:

> We devote reams of space to debating why there is so much cynicism about politics and public life. In this, politicians are obliged to go into self-flagellation, admitting it is our own

[4] Barack Obama, 'Remarks on February 12th Primaries', Wisconsin University: Madison (12 February 2008).
[5] Tony Blair, excerpt from a Labour Party general election broadcast (24 April 1997).
[6] Tony Blair, 'Speech to the Labour Party Annual Conference', Brighton (September 1997).
[7] Jackie Ashley, 'Party Chiefs to Tackle Cynicism', *The Guardian* (11 February 2002).
[8] Blair's PM speech in the debate over the House of Commons amendment approving the use of 'all means necessary to ensure the disarmament of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction', *Hansard* (18 March 2003), column 771.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fault. And, believe it or not, most politicians come into public life with a desire to do the right thing not the wrong thing.[9]

This common desire of all politicians to do the right thing, the virtue ethics imperative, brings us neatly to the question of cynical action. When it comes to action, the cynic stands accused as the agent who can transcend the inhibitions of public shame or private conscience. The cynical agent acts against better knowledge. The cynic is someone who has done wrong knowingly, or is capable of doing wrong knowingly ('they know what they do'). This conception of cynicism is deeply embedded within the psychological engine room of Western norms about political agency.

For example, the convention of ministerial responsibility, a central plank of British constitutional theory, holds that governments are made accountable through its ministers to Parliament. In order to hold ministers accountable to Parliament we have an agreed set of rules known as the *Ministerial Code*.[10] Under section 1 of this code principle 3 states that:

> It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity. Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister.[11]

The 'unwelcome adverb' *knowingly*, as Tomkins calls it, was inserted by John Major in a deft response to the Nolan Committee on *Standards in Public Life*.[12] In politics it is not necessarily fatal if you do wrong in error or ignorance (in fact to admit this will sometimes get you off the hook), but if you are successfully accused of doing wrong knowingly you are usually in trouble, because you have been caught committing a *cynical act*.

It is around the subtle adverb *knowingly* that the Scott, Hutton and Butler inquiries all danced around the controversy over democratic accountability in British foreign policy. Scott perhaps came closest to the accusative, stating that a minister had been 'designedly uninformative' to Parliament about the decision to sell various components of weapons of mass destruction to Iraq, but then undermined this with the paradoxical conclusion that he had no 'duplicitous intention'.[13] With Lord Hutton, the judgement was that the Government did not knowingly add false claims to the JIC dossier on Iraq. Famously, a psychoanalytical distinction between the conscious and the unconscious was used to account for some of the evidence which might have led to an alternative judgement. Hutton considered that the 'possibility cannot be completely ruled out' that the Prime Minister had:

> subconsciously influenced Mr Scarlett and the other members of the JIC to make the wording of the dossier somewhat stronger than it would have been if it had been contained in a normal JIC assessment.[14]

[9] Tony Blair, 'Our Nation's Future – On Public Life', Speech delivered at Reuters on Canary Wharf, London (12 June 2007).
[10] *Ministerial Code: A Code of Ethics and Procedural Guidance for Ministers*, published by the Cabinet Office, July 2005. Available at: {http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk}.
[11] Ibid., p. 1.
[12] Adam Tomkins, *The Constitution After Scott: Government Unwrapped* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 41–5.
[13] Sir Richard Scott, *Report of the Inquiry into the Export of Defence Equipment and Dual Use Goods to Iraq and Related Prosecutions* (London: HMSO, 1996), see paras D3.107 & D3.124.
[14] Lord Hutton, *Report of the Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of David Kelly* (London: HMSO, 2004), para. 467, pp. vi & vii.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In some dark recess of his unconscious mind then, the Prime Minister may have half suspected that he was attempting to cajole the nation into an unpopular war through the misuse of unreliable intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, but in this clarification of the convention of ministerial responsibility it is only the conscious mind that can be held to account. Meanwhile, for Butler, it is acknowledged that the intelligence released to the British public was misleading, but this was due to collective errors of government and there is no evidence of deliberate distortion.[15] In short, in order to commit a cynical act you have to be conscious that you are acting against better knowledge when you are doing it.

2. Reflexive

When the words cynical and cynicism are used within a reflexive context the cynic is a social archetype who, in contrast to the accusative sense above, we claim to recognise in ourselves, or with whom we can identify strongly ('I am cynical', 'we are cynical', or 'they have reason to be cynical'). Often this reflexivity is used rather crudely as a counter-accusative position. If we pick up the example of debate over British foreign policy again, for example, it was common for people to admit that they were cynical, but then argue that responsibility for this lay with the cynicism of those who took Britain into war. 'Cynicism breeds cynicism' is generally the message. But the internalisation of cynicism, once initiated, does tend to take people on a journey, and thus what was once just a simple reflex can quickly become rather more complex.

Let us follow this journey for a short while.

Experience of life somehow drives the cynic to the conclusion that hypocrisy matters a lot and this compels him to draw attention to any evidence of it. Suggestions that the motivation behind this is a desire to tear down the authority of morality are not quite right. Rather, ethics has become a serious business, perhaps too serious, and cannot live easily within its own contradictions. The reflexive cynic tends to profess contempt for the promulgation of ethics with limited liability. Reflexive cynicism involves an irresistible temptation to observe contradictions between words and actions – between what is said and what is done. In reflexive cynicism, the conscious mind is always already on the lookout for betrayal by the unconscious, being only too alive to the human capacity for self-deception.

The reflexive cynic will often be the conscious subject of alienation and disillusionment. Surprise! The gap between words and actions is more universal than we had previously thought. The gap also exists for people on my own side. This is a road that leads to many destinations of disillusion. Once bitten, twice shy, the cynic begins to develop a stance of incredulity toward countless national and transnational self-images, identities, institutions, organisations and values. The cross she has to bear is that of being the perpetual party pooper, with a compulsion for blurting out truths that are not welcome. One way of offsetting this, of course, is playful self-deprecation about the contradiction between one's own words and actions.

[15] Lord Butler, *The Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction* (London: HMSO, 2004).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The reflexive cynic becomes a world weary advocate for experience over hope and has an acute sensitivity to the human capacity for making things worse by trying to make things better. He will frequently invoke the law of unintended consequences. The default disposition is to question the wisdom of action, and of course the deeper motives behind seeking to act. The reflexive cynic becomes wary of the call to arms for progress. Watch out, this could be bad for your health! He will also warn you against the futile gesture. Stand up and be counted? Don't be a fool! Keep your head down and wait 'til all the fuss has blown over. There is a corresponding intolerance toward facile optimism. Pessimism of the intellect allied with optimism of the will? Give me a break!

The way reflexive cynicism translates into action is not always predictable. Sometimes it can lead, as has previously been argued, towards a conscious stance of inaction: apathy rules ok! Why bother to do anything when it only encourages them? Baudrillard once lambasted righteous indignation about this form of political action and toyed with its possibilities.[16] The mass withdrawal into the private sphere and the ensuing collapse in participation produces a silence that refuses to be spoken for in its name. The game of political representation consequently implodes into the TV centre studios. The story starts to become about how well the political parties are presenting their story in their reality game-show. Baudrillard's armchair gambit was that there comes a tipping point where apathy ceases to be an asset to the powerful and starts to mature into a crisis of legitimacy.

On the other hand, reflexive cynicism can often express itself as agency with stamina. This archetype is the reflexive cynical activist who has 'seen them come and go' and somehow survived the relentless disappointments of active service. The survival of cynical agency amidst disillusionment thus becomes a daily anti-heroic act. The health of civil society relies on this psychological strategy for survival in action perhaps more than most people seem to realise. After all, who would you rather have fighting on your side: the naïve idealist who may not turn up tomorrow or the hardened veteran who has learned to 'expect the worst' and 'be ready for anything'?

Most of us cannot afford to give up the day job though, and so a lot of reflexive cynicism tends to express itself at work. Cynicism in the workplace will often be low level disillusionment with what one is doing. Reflexive cynicism can occur where we know what we are doing and can see where it will all lead us in the end, but we still do it because:

> in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling us that it has to be so. Others would do it anyway, perhaps worse.[17]

Take the new initiative that comes from the top that everybody knows will end in chaos but has to be implemented anyway. Together we boldly strive to go through the motions of compliance whilst struggling to contain that burgeoning bubble of disbelief. Take the dodgy dealings we might be asked to overlook or the exploitative relations that must be tolerated until we might be able to manoeuvre ourselves into a position to do something about it. In order to survive at work,

[16] Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York: Semitext, 1983).
[17] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

people have to choose their fights carefully. Together we learn how to cope with the psychic fallout that comes with the pragmatic compromise of making such calculations in everyday life. This is all fruitful ground for the formation of reflexive cynicism.

Other reflexive cynical actors tend to flourish in jobs where people are employed to mop up and pick up the pieces shattered by a crazy world. The classic film MASH played upon this phenomenon. As the characters demonstrate in action, cynicism can be a healthy tactic for dealing with the grotesque absurdity of certain extreme situations, like trying to provide healthcare in a war zone. Some employees of NGOs are perhaps amongst the most thoughtful reflexive cynics one could ever have the pleasure to meet. Reflexive cynics in action often like to think they will be the ones left behind to 'keep the show on the road' when 'the shit hits the fan' and 'all the optimists have gone off to be optimistic somewhere else'.

3. Projective:

Here the cynic is neither the object of condemnation nor identified with the self, but an imaginary other who gives voice to scurrilous thoughts. The cynic becomes an anonymous citizen upon whom insolent observations may be safely projected. This is common in the media where the interlocutor has half a mind on the private thoughts of his viewer or listener, but the habit is a hardy perennial at all levels of civil society. Projective cynicism is the means by which an impertinent discourse may be playfully distanced (for example, 'I suppose a cynic would say you are just [. . .]', 'a cynical friend of mine said to me the other day that this is all about [. . .]'). The projective cynic is the hypothetical nobody who, because he only exists in the inter-subjective ether, can tell the emperor what many are thinking in private but which few are prepared to tell him directly. The clever emperor will often tolerate or even play along with this up to a point, partly because this information is useful (how else is he going to find out?), and partly because the news is sugared by the playful humour of distance. Every emperor needs to patronise a joker in his court. But the spell is broken if the joker lets the pretence of anonymity slip, because that is a direct challenge and thus a potential threat.

4. Cathartic

With cathartic cynicism the stakes have been raised markedly, because it is the flip side of 'they know what they do'. Once sensitised, one can also learn to listen out for 'I know what I do'. Here we are usually talking about people with real power over real lives, where reflexive cynicism is burdened with a much heavier caseload.

Sometimes it is best here to see the cathartic cynic as a mediator in a mental conflict, where all those years of power have brought changes that have divided the mind against itself:

In mental conflict a mind is divided against itself, and becomes a battleground of opposing beliefs or desires. The conflicted mind is characterised by relations not just of difference and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> divergence, but of contention and confrontation. It feels not so much attracted from outside by incompatible alternatives between which it has to make a choice, as torn within itself by hostile forces between which it cannot make peace. It is aware not just of contrasting considerations that need to be brought together in an exercise of judgement, but of colliding tendencies that refuse to co-exist within a single perspective.[18]

The mind splits, but the two rival parties still somehow have to live under the same roof. It is like an old couple who cannot bear to speak to each other anymore but use their children in order to communicate. In politics, business and war, 'it is easy to get one's hands dirty and it is often right to do so'.[19] But an occupational hazard for those whose profession is to shoulder responsibility for the 'dirty work' is the compulsion to be frank. The problem of course is that in mental conflict, as in any conflict, truth is the first casualty of war, but sometimes the dissonance reaches levels of such intensity that a desire grows to turn the truth back into a simple concept again.[20] The low ethics puts out a feeler toward the high ethics and seeks an armistice in order to talk. Rival parties within a mental conflict then meet to be frank with one another under the supervision of a trusted third-party. In this instance of cathartic cynicism the cynic often acts as if he is speaking to you, the third party, but slowly it becomes obvious that he is actually talking to a rival part of himself.

In other cases cathartic cynicism is rather looking for confirmation in another. That is to say, a low ethics seeks conspiratorial release with the low ethics of a fellow subject. The first tentative moves toward this kind of catharsis are often subtle, humorous and deniable (did he really mean that or didn't he?). But then, if a cynical signal is reciprocated, the game of mutual disinhibition can begin. The wry observations, witticisms and confidences of a governing consciousness that has learned 'how not to be good' starts to flow, maybe after a couple of drinks:

> For there is such a gap between how one lives and how one ought to live that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation: for a man who wishes to make a vocation of being good at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain his position to learn how not to be good.[21]

Cathartic cynicism could thus be seen as a habitual discourse for dealing with the cognitive dissonance that takes place when principles and norms encounter the necessity of their violation. Usually this takes place in confidence within the private sphere, which is why it is not easy to gather concrete evidence to ascertain how widespread cathartic cynicism is. It is usually best represented in fictional literary characters whose words somehow capture the essence of people's own private encounters with cathartic cynicism. One indicator of the prevalence of cathartic cynicism can thus be judged by the literary success of a cathartic cynic in fiction – by the zeitgeist that he personifies. Think the Grand Inquisitor. Think Harry Lime. Think Gordon Gecko.

[18] A. W. Price, *Mental Conflict* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 1–2.
[19] M. Walzer, 'Political action: the problem of dirty hands', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 2 (1973), quoted in C. A. J. Coady, 'Politics and the Problem of dirty hands', in Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion To Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
[20] As Iain McDonald, head of the Ministry of Defence's Defence Sales Secretariat wistfully put it in oral evidence to the Scott Inquiry, 'Truth is a difficult concept'. See Richard Norton-Taylor, *Truth is a Difficult Concept: Inside the Scott Inquiry* (London, Fourth Estate, 1995).
[21] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. XV.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Sometimes though, the low ethics becomes so confident of its position in the structure of things that the high ethics feels like a cumbersome mask, and so it is allowed to slip – a holiday is taken away from the tiresome obligation to legitimate. So you really want the truth? Well here it is. How do you like it?

> In its cynicisms hegemonic power airs its secrets a little, indulges in semi- self-enlightenment, and tells all [. . .] The more a modern society appears to be without alternatives, the more it will allow itself to be cynical. In the end, it becomes ironical about its own legitimation.[22]

Where there is only one game in town, cathartic cynicism often feels it can afford to be less careful about its confidences. At last! The low ethics can come out of the closet, flaunt its amorality and tell the truth about itself – often dressed as wit. We can sometimes identify it as cathartic when it makes us laugh and then, momentarily, we pause with shocked wonder at our laughter.

5. Ancient cynicism

A fascinating thing about ancient cynicism is that it has semantic links to all the disparate meanings of cynicism above – the root of them all. Of course we have to acknowledge Saussure's point that the history of a word does not necessarily mean everything and that each word in any given language has a valid existence apart from its etymology.[23] Nevertheless, juxtaposing modern cynicism with ancient cynicism is, I would argue, an important step for transforming our 'sorry kind of wisdom' into a more life-affirming one.

The first thing we need to understand is that ancient cynicism was about inclusion and exclusion in the classical *polis*. The word cynic is derived from the Greek word for dog (*kun*). It was applied to a social movement that began in the 4th century BC and persisted late into the Roman Empire until it was crowded out by the rise of Christianity. To be a cynic was to be a dog. To be cynical (*kunikos*) was to be 'dog-like'.[24]

In human thought, the perceived traits and characteristics of animals have often been used to describe or express normative judgements about people. If we think someone is greedy, we might call him a pig. If we think someone is lazy, we might call him a sloth. If we think someone is crafty, we might call him a fox. And so it goes. Nowadays, most of us are aware that these metaphors are anthropomorphic even as we use them, and that they say more about our feelings toward human nature than they do about the animals themselves. We know that the pig is not really greedy, the sloth is not really lazy, the fox not crafty, etc. Rather, animals often represent aspects of ourselves.[25] So, what aspects of the human condition were the people of classical antiquity referring to when they classified the adherents of a particular social movement as 'dog-like'?

[22] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 111–2.
[23] Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 20.
[24] C. T. Onions (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary Of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 240.
[25] James Serpell, 'From paragon to pariah: some reflections on human attitudes to dogs', in James Serpell (ed.), *The Domestic Dog: its evolution, behaviour and interactions with people* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 254.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

From the extant literature, it would seem that Hellenic attitudes toward the dog strongly resemble those of many other societies since human beings first struck up an alliance with it back in the Upper Palaeolithic, including our own. Sometimes the dog is a paragon amidst the animal kingdom, at other times a pariah and outcast.[26]

On the plus side, the dog was an important guardian within a human society where security was an important value. The barking of dogs gave the *polis* and the *oikos* advance warning of the approach of the potentially predatory foreigner. At the micro-political level of the *oikos*, they could also be bred and trained to be an effective deterrent in themselves. In Homer's *Odysseus*, for example, we find an instance where 360 fatted hogs are guarded at night by:

four dogs, as savage as wild beasts, trained by the master swineheard.[27]

The dogs fly toward Odysseus when they catch sight of him approaching, and the swineherd has to call them off:

'Old man, that was a narrow escape! The dogs could have almost torn you to pieces in a moment'[28]

360 fatted hogs is an awful lot of money in Homer's world, and the poet himself assures us in the narrative that Odysseus might have suffered a savage attack. Security was a serious business and these dogs were trained to maim or even kill.

Secondly, dogs often made a contribution to the wealth of the Greek household. The hunting dog actually helped to put food on the table. Some have argued that the human and the wolf domesticated each other through a mutually beneficial hunting alliance between the two species.[29] When Odysseus returns to his homestead after twenty years of exile he meets Argus his old hunting dog who, in his prime, had gone after wild goats, deer and hares:

'you'd be astonished at his speed and power. No game that he gave chase to could escape him in the deepest depth of the forest. He was a marvel too at picking up the scent.'[30]

Thirdly, the dog was the master's loyal companion and friend. When Argus sees Odysseus he pricks up his ears and wags his tail. He is the only sentient being that can still spontaneously recognise the master of the household despite his beggar's rags and the ravages of time. The faithful dog is always pleased to see his master, will always provide the affection that is not contingent upon worldly success or outward appearance, and the master will usually be delighted to receive it because it provides him with feelings of unconditional acceptance.[31] In this respect the dog may often be closer to its master than any other member of his household. Argus can remember Odysseus better than the archetypal loyal son Telemachus, quicker even than his own wife Penelope. The feeling seems to be mutual. As Argus dies, Odysseus the sacker of cities, archetypal hard man of the Western world, brushes 'away a tear'.[32] Our master loves his dog.

[26] Serpell, 'Paragon to pariah', pp. 246–7.
[27] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 207.
[28] Homer, *Odyssey*, p. 208.
[29] James Serpell, 'Paragon to pariah', p. 247.
[30] Homer, *Odyssey*, p. 263.
[31] Lynette A. Hart, 'Dogs as human companions: a review of the relationship', in James Serpell, 'Paragon to pariah', p. 164.
[32] Homer, *Odysseus*, p. 263.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

On the other hand, the ability of the Greek dog to inveigle his way into the heart of his master was also capable of inspiring human suspicion, denigration and hostility. Ever since his first alliance with hunter-gatherers some 12,000 years ago, the dog has patrolled that uncertain boundary line that divides nature and man.[33] The dog is thought to be the first animal to be domesticated by man and as such, represents the domestication of nature and the domestication of the human subject himself. Consequently, when the dog absentmindedly reveals too much of his animal nature and fails to live up to his quasi-human status (for example when he shits or shags in public, sniffs or licks his genitals) he reminds humanity of the animal within man. Sometimes, the dog also represents the beast lurking under the skin of domesticated nature waiting to exploit the fragility of civilisation. In the *Iliad*, whenever Homer really wants to drive home the pathos of human conflict, he begins to talk about the eating habits of dogs in times of war.[34]

The dog's loyalty, its boundless affection, its eagerness to please, its readiness to accept the master as the dominant partner, also appears to have provoked mixed feelings. As in our own society this was part of what made the Greek dog so therapeutic and appealing, but on a bad day such behaviour might be construed as fawning, sycophantic and obsequious.[35] Sometimes friendship between the unequal can begin to cloy. On other bad days the faithfulness of the dog might also begin to press ethical claims upon its master that engenders a burdensome sense of guilt when it comes to treating him just like any other domesticated animal. If times were hard a good dog might have to be sold, abandoned, killed or even eaten. Cynicism is partly about the fact that humans are capable of constructing complex psychological defence mechanisms to protect a divided mind from conflict. Perceiving dogs in an ambivalent light made it easier to both love them and dispose of them with a clear conscience. The Greek word for dog, when projected onto humans, thus logically accumulated insulting or disparaging connotations, denoting baseness, illegitimacy, shame or inferiority.[36]

In ancient Greece, there were also populations of feral dogs, without any owner or a home to go to. As with modern feral populations, such dogs had to fend for themselves, scavenging off the carrion and the rubbish thrown out by the *oikos* and the *polis*. According to Serpell, feral populations of dogs were commonplace just beyond the walls of the classical *polis*. The word dog could thus also be used as an insult when a group of people were getting ready to *other* someone into a human outcast, exile, refugee or migrant. This person would thus have to live a dog's life of scavenging and begging along the margins of Hellenic society.

We have tried to convey something of the ambivalence that the Greek word for 'dog' signified when applied to the human subject. What remains to be described is why a social movement might be prepared to step forward and actually call itself 'doglike' with pride and self-assurance. What did the Greek think he was doing

[33] James Serpell, 'Hair of the dog', *The Domestic Dog*, p. 261.
[34] For example, when Priam contemplates defeat in the Trojan war, he forecasts that: 'the dogs I reared in the house and at my own table to guard the doors will lie in the gateway with their hearts excited by gnawing my bones [...] when an old man has been killed and the dogs are mutilating his grey head and grey beard and private parts, this is the most pitiful sight that poor mortals can see.' Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Martin Hammond (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 352–3.
[35] James Serpell, 'From Paragon to Pariah', p. 252.
[36] Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 414.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

when he agreed to collude with and even encourage the identification of himself as a cynic?

All social movements are complex things that contain a large number of individuals with a huge variety of sometimes contradictory desires, motivations, and objectives. To abstract is to vulgarise, to fail to do justice to the richness of social movements, all the characters who participate in them, and all the scholars who write about them. Ancient cynicism is no exception to this rule, but if I had to put my head on the block and sum it up in one sentence I would say it was a utopian attempt to find a resolution to the mental conflict which arose from the contradiction between the concept of the unity of mankind in Greek thought and the overwhelming reality of slavery.

This assertion is contestable on two counts. Firstly, it is generally accepted that a concept of the unity of mankind did emerge in antiquity, germinating out of Homer and the pre-Socratics, and evolving into a more mature stage in the thought of the Stoics.[37] But it is not always accepted that the development of the idea of the unity of mankind prompted any critique of the ancient institution of slavery. Indeed, a more common view is well articulated by Fogel:

> For 3,000 years – from the time of Moses to the end of the 17th century – virtually every major statesman, philosopher, theologian, writer and critic accepted the existence and legitimacy of slavery. The word 'accepted' is chosen deliberately, for these men of affairs and moulders of thought neither excused, condoned, pardoned, nor forgave the institution. They did not have to; they were not burdened by the view that slavery was wrong. Slavery was considered to be part of the natural scheme of things.[38]

Such views are not so very difficult to counter. The classic reference is to Aristotle's *Politics* (1253b20–23). Here Aristotle candidly states that he *has* been burdened by arguments suggesting that slavery is wrong:

> Others say that it is contrary to nature to rule as master over slave, because the distinction between slave and free is one of convention only, and in nature there is no difference, so that this form of rule is based on force and is therefore not just.[39]

Aristotle was clearly convinced that such arguments were worthy enough for him to have to pick up the challenge. He then sets about his famous defence of slavery, arguing that it is not only necessary but natural and just. The game of critique and counter-critique seems to be well under way, and the opening moves have already been worked out for Aristotle's students to learn and practice.

Unfortunately, Aristotle does not tell us who the critics of slavery were. The second reason why my assertion that ancient Cynicism was an attempt to resolve the mental conflict arising from the contradiction between the emergence of cosmopolitan thought and the existence of slavery is contestable is that modern classical scholarship usually identifies the Sophists as the prime suspects.[40] In

[37] The classic narrative is H. C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

[38] R. W. Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract*, p. 201. Quoted in Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 9.

[39] Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair (London: Penguin, 1962, p. 63.

[40] See, Robert Schlaifer, 'Greek theories of slavery from Homer to Aristotle', in M. Finley (ed.), *Slavery in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge: Heffer, 1960); Giuseppe Cambiano, *'Aristotle and the anonymous opponents of slavery'*, in M. Finley (New Jersey: Totowa, 1987); Joseph Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

support of this a fragment known to be written by a Sophist called Alcidamas is usually cited:

God has set all men free; nature has made no man a slave[41]

Sometimes this is backed up with another fragment from the Sophist Antiphon:

By nature we are born alike in all respects, barbarians and Greeks[42]

These may then be compared with quotes from the tragedian Euripides, who was said to have associated with and been influenced by prominent Sophists, and whose plays furnish a wealth of instances where the victims of slavery appear to be represented in a sympathetic manner. On top of this it has been pointed out that the arguments cited by Aristotle bear the tell tale signs of an Older Sophist at work. The distinction between nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*), for example, were classic Sophistic terms used for debating matters ethical and political.

I certainly would not care to dismiss the view that the Sophists made a major contribution to the development of Cosmopolitan thought and that they may have been the first to express profound doubts about the legitimacy of slavery. However, what I would like to suggest is that by the time Aristotle was sitting down to write the *Politics*, he would have been aware of two philosophers who had both the motivation and the ability to take the critique of slavery to a new level of sophistication. The first of these was Antisthenes and the second was Diogenes.

We don't know much about Antisthenes, but what we do know is suggestive. We know that he was first a student of Gorgias, one of the most eminent Sophists after Protagoras, which would have made him a fellow student of Alcidamas, whose anti-slavery fragment we have already mentioned.[43] After this Antisthenes was said to have become a follower and close companion of Socrates. In the *Phaedo*, Plato is happy to relate that Antisthenes was with Socrates in prison in the last few hours of his life. We know that he was the bastard son of an Athenian and a Thracian slave, and was thus not entitled to register as an Athenian citizen.[44] This is an interesting contradiction between the historical Socrates and the Platonic Socrates, because in the *Republic* Plato repeatedly has Socrates warn that bastards should not be admitted into higher education.

Why is the foundation stone of Western political theory so keen to exclude the bastard? One possibility is that it was because the Athenian bastard sits at the *nexus* between politics and International Relations. Therefore, an educated bastard might prove to be a very volatile agent in a society structured according to the division between the foreign slave and the native master. Being the fruit of a power relationship between his master father and his slave mother Antisthenes, like all Athenian bastards, would have contained the primary contradiction of Hellenic society at the very core of his being.

Sometimes fate would determine that the bastard would fall into the slave side of the Greek household. In other cases fate would smile on the bastard and he

[41] Quoted in Giuseppe Cambiano, 'Aristotle and the anonymous opponents of slavery', p. 24.
[42] Cambiano, 'Aristotle and the anonymous opponents of slavery', pp. 30–1.
[43] Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 305.
[44] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2, trans. R. D. Hicks (London: Heinemann, 1925), trp. 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

might actually become the object of paternal love, though this love, like the master's love for his favourite dog, would inevitably be mixed with feelings of ambivalence. Out of such prospects some bastards were able to eke out a relatively comfortable existence. There are characters in Greek tragedy, for example, where the bastard son does find a *niche* within the classical *polis*. As for the bastard's feelings toward his mother, this must surely have been the wild card of antiquity. Most would surely have taken the easier option of disowning the shameful status of the breasts at which they had once so eagerly suckled. But what if an upwardly mobile bastard was capable of retaining this love for his mother as well as developing a genuine respect for his father? And what if such a man subsequently falls into a circle like the one led by Socrates and is given the tools of logical reflection? What on earth is such a consciousness going to make of the society that made him?

It does seem that there was a critical mass of bastards in Athenian society which might thus have been capable of generating such an aberration. Various sources report that Antisthenes was in the habit of teaching philosophy at a venue called the 'white dog', which was a gymnasium and temple reserved especially for Athenian bastards.[45] In ancient Greece, white dogs were synonymous with 'mongrels'. In the Platonic dialogues the dialectic takes place between sovereign minds. Knowledge is generated through interpersonal debate. But in Antisthenes it appears that an internal dialectic was going on between two halves of the self and self knowledge is generated through intrapersonal debate. Thus one anecdote about him that has survived is that he was once asked what advantage had accrued to him from his studies in philosophy. His reply was 'the ability to hold conversation with myself'.[46] Of his writings, none of which have survived, one of them was said to have been entitled 'Of freedom and slavery'.[47]

We don't know much about Antisthenes' philosophy. What we do know is pieced together from references to him by other ancient authors whose works have survived. Navia suggests that as with Plato, the manner of the death of Socrates must have had a profound effect upon Antisthenes.[48] Like Plato, the initial reaction seems to have been disillusionment and withdrawal from public life. Given that Antisthenes was a bastard non-citizen, this probably didn't mean much as far as Athenian politics was concerned. What it probably meant was that he finally gave up on his ambition to earn a living as a Sophist, or in other words a higher education teacher of excellence to rich students aiming for a public career in law and politics. He became impatient with preachy lectures about the principles of virtue without practical attempts to embody them. He began to define virtue as a rhetoric communicated through body-acts rather than speech-acts or, to be less obscure, Antisthenes began to adopt a stance of 'do as I do' not 'do as I say'.[49] In this respect, he began to behave in a manner that would later be interpreted as 'doglike', experimenting with the idea of living a life outside the *oikos*. The idea of

[45] Luis Navia, *Classical Cynicism: a critical study* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 15.
[46] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, p. 9.
[47] Ibid., p. 17.
[48] Navia, *Classical Cynicism*, pp. 53–6.
[49] R. Bracht Branham, 'Defacing the currency: Diogenes' rhetoric and the invention of cynicism', in R. Bracht Branham & Marie-Odile Goulet-Gaze (eds), *The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 83.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

living a life outside the *oikos* was important because, as Aristotle makes clear in the *Politics*, the *oikoi* were the primary economic units within which slave ownership and production was organised.[50] In other words, Antisthenes was attempting to embody a break with surplus accumulation through slavery to well being through sufficiency.

We move on now to Diogenes about whom we know a little more than Antisthenes. Diogenes was born in Sinope, a Greek colony lying along the northern coast of Turkey on the Black Sea, probably around 413 BC.[51] Diogenes thus came from the eastern margins of Greek settlement, traditionally looked down upon by the Greeks on the Western coast of the Aegean. Sinope was an important trading post between the ancient West and East, an alternative to the shipping routes along the Levant. Like Antisthenes, Diogenes' mother was probably a woman of uncertain origin:

> Snubbed by a man of noble descent for the lowly origins of his mother, Diogenes replied: 'In my case, the line of my nobility begins with me, whereas in yours it ends with you.' [52]

According to the legend, the philosophical career of Diogenes began after a scandal at the mint of Sinope. For some reason that is unknown Diogenes, who worked at the bank under the supervision of his father, took the rap for the deliberate defacing of the currency. The precise interpretation of this act is a matter for debate, because in antiquity coins were often clipped or adulterated for personal gain, but in other cases the faces of coins were struck through in such a way as to represent some sort of challenge to the authority of those who had assumed power over the issue of money and credit. Either way, in this case the act ended badly for those who committed it and, like the endearingly loyal Greek dog perhaps, Diogenes was disposable when it came to the crunch. He was prosecuted after an inquiry into the affair, convicted, and banished from the city of Sinope. The young man then drifted toward Delphi to ask the Oracle what he should do with his life now that the bottom had dropped out of it, whereupon the Oracle told him that he should 'devalue the currency'.

Conviction and exile seems to have been a life changing experience that alienated Diogenes from the values of the city he had been brought up in. He had participated in an attempt to deface the city's primary measure of value, but the subsequent disgrace had brought him in despair to Delphi. Later on in life, when taunted with the fact that he had been exiled for defacing the currency his reply was:

> 'Nay it was through that, you miserable fellow, that I came to be a philosopher.'[53]

Taking the cue from the oracle, Diogenes thus set out on a philosophical odyssey to devalue the currency of norms and values upon which his society was based and replace them according to alternative conceptions of well-being.

His journey takes him to Athens, where he begins to rub shoulders with the philosophers there. After seeing, hearing or reading about the example of

[50] Doyne Dawson, *Cities of the Gods: Communist Utopias in Greek Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), ch. 2: 'The cynic way: a life without the household'.
[51] Navia, *Classical Cynicism*, p. 85.
[52] Dimitri Gutas, 'Sayings by Diogenes preserved in Arabic', in M. O. Goulet-Caze & R. Goulet (eds), *Le cynisme ancien et ses prolongements: Actes du Colloque international du CNRS* (Paris, 1993).
[53] *Gutas*, 'Sayings by Diogenes', p. 51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Antisthenes, Diogenes begins to emulate his lifestyle and makes a virtue out of his fate. He claims that his ostracism is a blessing because it has forced him to construct an autonomous life that is free of the *polis*. When reminded of his fall from grace when Sinope had condemned him to exile, Diogenes replied:

'And I them, to home-staying.'[54]

The citizens of Sinope, enclosed within the culture of communitarian life, are thus condemned to the unhappiness of a life lived without reflection. His alienation from Sinope leads, according to Diogenes, to his emancipation.

As with Antisthenes, the thought of Diogenes is communicated through the rhetoric of acts rather than through dialectic. But his acts seem more 'dramatic'. He seems to turn his life into a performance that borrows ideas from the tragicomedy of Greek theatre. He draws our attention to this in yet another act:

He was going into a theatre, meeting face to face those who were coming out, and being asked why, 'this', he said, 'is what I practise doing all my life.'[55]

When the people come out of the theatre, Diogenes goes into the theatre. In other words he brings theatre out onto the streets of Athens. He is a thinker who has turned his life into a stage. Upon this stage Diogenes enacts dramas that, like the comedies of Aristophanes, attempt to use wit to convey a serious message. His favourite costume is that of the homeless beggar, using props that the Athenians would have recognised from the Homeric character of Odysseus when testing the ethical patience of the people of Ithaca.

There is insufficient space here to present enough of these little dramas to do proper justice to the philosophy of Diogenes, but let us unwrap just a few. Firstly, we should note that Ancient Cynicism initiates a Western tradition of contempt for the follies of great power rivalry and predatory hegemony. Diogenes lived his adult life in the immediate aftermath of the tragic disaster of the Peloponnesian war – the consequence of a break up in the *original* Western Alliance as depicted by Thucydides. The disillusionment with power politics that this wrought in Athens, Corinth, and all the other cities Diogenes visited must have made many of its people receptive to his cynical message, and that is presumably why so many anecdotes about him survived through word of mouth. The response of Diogenes to the tragedy of great power politics was a conscious attempt to turn Greek tragedy on its head. In the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, exile and homelessness is shown to be a disaster. To lose your *polis* and your *oikos* means social death and slavery. But Diogenes makes the utopian point of showing that he thinks that the *polis* and the *oikos* are things that humanity can do without. He is a poor homeless beggar, but he believes himself to be happy, because he is free from the tyranny of the *polis*.

The fact that the city state system was in decline and was giving way to the empire building of Alexander probably made it easier for Diogenes to promote his message of indifference toward communitarian values. The retreat of the city state in terms of wealth and power in the political economy of antiquity must have had some impact on tolerance toward philosophers promoting alternative identities.

[54] Diogenes Laertuis, *Lives*, p. 17.
[55] Ibid., p. 67.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The identity flaunted by Diogenes though, was revolutionary. When asked where he came from, Diogenes replied:

'I am a citizen of the cosmos'[56]

Diogenes lifted the term cosmos from the astronomical speculations of the pre-Socratic philosophers and applied it to the realm of human society. He thus became the first person to call himself a cosmopolitan.[57] But the cynicism of Diogenes was very clearly advocating a 'cosmopolitanism from below' which was very consciously opposed to the *cosmopolis* from above that Alexander had just set out to build through his campaign of imperial war and coercion.

The anecdotes which most people remember, if they have ever heard of Diogenes at all, are from when the lives of Diogenes and Alexander crossed at Corinth. When Alexander arrived at Corinth, its public officials and philosophers came in 'from all parts' to pay court to him, but to Alexander's disappointment Diogenes did not bother and remained where he was in the 'suburb called the Craneum' sunning himself. Alexander went to the district and sought Diogenes out:

Alexander came and stood next to him and said, 'I am Alexander the great.' 'And I', said he, 'am Diogenes the Dog.'[58]

The humour of this was not lost on their contemporaries. The meeting dramatises the gulf between two different worldviews. On the one side we have the Western man whose cosmopolitanism is personified in an unquenchable thirst for power. On the other we have the Western man whose cosmopolitanism is much better served by loafing around like a dog in the sun:

Alexander came and stood over him and said, 'ask of me any gift you like.' To which Diogenes replied 'stand out of my light.' [59]

The encounter illustrates the indifference of Diogenes to the political changes which were about to sweep across the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East. Alexander is setting out to be king of the world. Meanwhile, the old man Diogenes has begun to set out his stall as the king of everyday life.

Some people have tried to characterise the philosophy of ancient cynicism as a kind of apathetic hedonism, a lifestyle which shrinks from the sphere of the political. This is why it is important to highlight some of the anecdotes which dramatise the cynical position on slavery – the institution which was the primary contradiction of classical political economy. As we have already intimated, the rationalist philosophers of Greece had a problem. They had a contradiction on their hands which, if repressed into the unconscious, could easily turn into protracted mental conflict. This is the 'weakening' of the Western spirit which the more reactionary side of Nietzsche the classicist railed against. On the one hand there was a common belief in the principle of the unity of mankind, and on the other there was the empirical observation that a lot of wealth accumulation in Greece was based upon the international institution of slavery. The cynical solution

[56] Ibid., p. 65.
[57] This point is pursued further by John L. Moles, 'Cynic Cosmopolitianism', in R. Bracht Branham & Marie-Odile Goulet-Gaze (eds), *The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).
[58] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, p. 60.
[59] Ibid., p. 41.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to this problem was very simple and pragmatic. It might be summarised as the art of communicative action by seizing opportunities to make public spectacles out of inconvenient truths.

For example, in the early days of his exile Diogenes was accompanied by his slave Manes but, seeing the plummeting socio-economic status toward which Diogenes was heading, Manes decided to cut and run. When asked why he does not pursue the runaway slave Diogenes replies:

> 'It would be absurd if Manes can live without Diogenes, but Diogenes cannot get on without Manes.'[60]

The political ideology behind the slave-master relationship in classical antiquity is overturned. The legitimation of slavery was based on the principle that it was natural for slaves to need a master. As Orlando Patterson notes, Diogenes made an important contribution to the value of freedom in Western culture, because he consciously tried to demonstrate that it could not rationally be based on the institution of slavery:

> With his notorious sense of irony, Diogenes saw, millennia before Hegel, that in the domination of the slave the master exposes himself to a kind of slavery more real than that of his slave, because he ends up being dependent on him.[61]

On seeing a master whose shoes were being put on by his slave, Diogenes remarks:

> 'You will never be truly happy until he wipes your nose as well; and that will come, when you have lost the use of your hands.'[62]

The critique of slavery then takes another twist when, on a short voyage to Corinth Diogenes is captured by pirates and put up for sale. When asked what he can do so that he may be found a buyer Diogenes replies:

> 'Govern men.'[63]

He then tells the crier to ask if anyone would like to purchase a master for himself, and someone does buy him, for the purpose of educating his two sons. The new slave is put in charge of the curriculum. Amongst other things, Diogenes teaches them to wait on themselves.

Ancient Cynicism is often depicted as a rather ascetic creed, promoting a monkish life of austere abstinence. But this is not quite right:

> When someone declared that life is an evil, Diogenes corrected him: 'Not life itself, but living ill.'[64]

The story is rather of someone who, by force of circumstances, has had to embark upon a rapid downsizing of expectations. For Diogenes, perhaps to his surprise, this appears to have become a very liberating experience. Losing his property in Manes the slave turns out to be not so bad. Diogenes is relieved to discover that he can free himself from his dependency upon Manes. When he arrives in Athens, Diogenes latches on to Antisthenes' conception of sufficiency and applies it with rigour:

[60] Ibid., p. 57.
[61] Orlando Patterson, *Freedom: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, vol. 1 (London: Tauris, 1991), pp. 185–6.
[62] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, p. 47.
[63] Diogenes Laertius, p. 31.
[64] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, p. 57.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Through watching a mouse running about [. . .] not looking for a place to lie down in, not afraid of the dark, not seeking any of the things which are considered to be luxuries, he discovered the means of adapting himself to circumstances.[65]

For accommodation, Diogenes begins by improvising a rather dangerously secular joke about a vacancy in its temples by pointing to the portico of Zeus and the Hall of Processions, declaring the Athenians had built him places to live in. It is a play upon his name, meaning 'from Zeus'. After squatting in these for a while, Diogenes takes up residence in an old tub.

These anecdotes should be seen as dramatic performances which convey the ideal of sufficiency rather than the piety of poverty. He likened his example to the trainers of choruses who set the note a little high to ensure the rest hit the right note.[66] Moving toward the cynical goal of sufficiency was more about the feeling of release that comes with shedding wealth which has become an obstacle to happiness than about abstinence.

It is also worth emphasising that Diogenes advocated sufficiency and not 'self-sufficiency'. He was in no position to fall into the trap of believing that human security could be achieved by some sort of collective withdrawal from our common fate of interdependence. Diogenes was all too aware of his dependency upon the fragile Mediterranean political economy, as the many anecdotes about his recourse to beggary in order to pursue his philosophy testify. These anecdotes have often prompted some to allege that cynicism was in denial of the old nostrum that there 'is no such thing as a free lunch' – in effect that it was a school for scroungers. The response of Diogenes needs to be seen in the context of an old debate in Greek antiquity about the political economy of knowledge. Ever since Aristophanes and probably before, scepticism had been expressed about whether knowledge could ever be bought and sold as a commodity. The charge was that men gave money to the sophists simply in order to find out how to win in the assembly, the law courts and in the diplomatic and military affairs of state, not for their philosophy. Plato's Socrates also spends much of his time joshing at contemporary Sophists who claimed to be in the business of selling wisdom. The prevailing view seems to have been that to really fall in love with knowledge one had to be an aristocrat with independent means, thus free of the pressure to take it to market. Needless to say, this option was not available to the likes of Diogenes, and his improvised solution added a delightfully ironic twist to this debate that reminds us of Rawls' contemporary gambit of the 'veil of ignorance':[67]

Being asked why people give to beggars but not to philosophers, he replied 'because they think they may one day be lame or blind, but never expect that they will turn to philosophy.'[68]

Up until his fall into slavery at least, the philosophy of Diogenes appears to have survived by embedding itself within an informal social economy that supplemented the logic of the *oikos*, the *polis* and the *agora:*

He was begging of a miserly man who was slow to respond, so he said 'my friend, it's for food that I'm asking, not for funeral expenses.'[69]

[65] Ibid., p. 25.
[66] Ibid., p. 37.
[67] Rawls (ed.), *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 136–42.
[68] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, p. 57.
[69] Ibid., pp. 58–9.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This, together with other examples of unabashed chutzpah in the beggary of Diogenes suggests a self-confidence that comes from a well worked out position. He really thought he was providing a service by offering the citizens of Athens and Corinth an alternative philosophy, funded by demands for evidence of common humanity upon which his *cosmopolis* would have to be built, if it were ever to be built.

This brings us to the question of hope in ancient cynicism. Antisthenes and Diogenes were evidently able to cast aside their fears and doubts to think, say and do some brave things, given the prevailing structure of everyday life in which they lived. What kind of hopes for the future were these acts of courage based upon? Well, they did have a utopian conception of cosmopolitan society to cling to, but it was only a highly ironical, almost surrealist folk utopia, inspired by the music of festivals popular amongst the *demos* of cities like Athens and Corinth at the time.

In the *Works and Days* of Hesiod, his song lays out a myth of the ages of men in which the prospects for humanity just keep on getting worse and worse. But a bygone early age in the ages of men was the age of Cronos, a great age for human well-being. The sons of Cronus then go to live 'with a carefree heart in the Isles of the Blessed', where the 'grain giving soil bears its honey sweet fruits thrice a year'.[70] Ostensibly, this is not a particularly promising point of origin for hope, given that it springs from a myth that is the very antithesis of our modern conception of progress. Nevertheless this fantasy of the age of Cronos and the Isles of the Blessed thrived, for example at the harvest time festival of Cronia in Attica, where masters and slaves would playfully exchange places for a day in some sort of homage to the mythical equality of Cronus' time.[71] Then there are the fragments from Greek comedy during the festival of Dionysus, that contain passages about the age of Cronus, when rivers would run with barley-cakes and the fish would jump out onto pans in order to fry themselves.

When the cynics started to call themselves 'the sons of Cronus' they were clearly trying to evoke this tradition. Cynical utopianism was thus leavened heavily with the surreal humour of the carnival day and the satyr tragedy, embedding itself in a culture within which it could survive the overwhelming power of prevailing circumstances by making humour out of its lack of realism. In this way, by invoking the satyr 'fools privilege' that the Athenian demos had learned to internalise through their festival traditions such as the City Dionysia, the cynics discovered a means to publicise their critique of slavery that would have been effortlessly crushed and then forgotten if it had been expressed otherwise. If this was hope, it was a rather sorry kind of hope, but impressive enough when one considers the legitimate fears and doubts it must have had to overcome. It was impressive enough too, if our thesis is correct, for Aristotle to find himself having to acknowledge it and thus preserve it for posterity in the *Politics*.

The fact that they called themselves the 'sons of Cronos' begs another question. Evidently, ancient cynicism was not quite so easy to sustain with the responsibilities of fatherhood or motherhood. This is perhaps the Achilles heel of ancient cynicism, where we start to deal with the question of its gendering. Of course we

[70] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 169–70.
[71] Doyne Dawson, *Cities of the Gods* (Oxford: University Press, 1992), pp. 13–4 & 146.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

have already reasoned that cynicism was the fruit of a power relationship between master fathers and slave mothers. This possibly explains why Diogenes also became famous for his disavowal of a main plank of Hellenic patriarchy, advocating:

> a community of wives, recognizing no other marriage than a union of the man who persuades with the woman who consents.[72]

Uncharacteristically, however, there is no anecdote suggesting that Diogenes ever embodied this argument himself. And though the shamelessness of the cynics when it came to sexual mores scandalised and titillated antiquity in equal measure, their existential position generally appears to have condemned them to a defiant loneliness that excluded the possibility of partnership and family. This left their political philosophy open to the charge of being great for youthful bohemians, but not quite so brave when it came to the frailty of age and experience. In exchange for the joys of the family, the proud cynic must surely have to crawl back with some humility under the communitarian security of the *polis* and the comforting wealth of the *oikos*? This point was made very early by Epictetus. When the cynic marries:

> he must get a kettle to heat the water for the baby [. . .] wool for his wife [. . .] oil, a cot, a cup, and many other pieces of crockery [. . .] What then will become of our Cynic-King, whose duty it is now to be overseer over the rest of mankind – who have married; who have had children: who is treating his wife well, who ill: who quarrels: which house stands firm, which does not; making his round like a physician feeling pulses. See what straits we are reducing our Cynic, how we are taking his kingdom away from him.[73]

How the mighty are fallen! Which is why, perhaps, classical cynicism had to invent Crates and Hipparchia. Or were they invented? Can it really have been possible for a young woman from the patriarchal aristocracy to fall in love with a cynic, defy the wishes of her parents and demand marriage to Crates, and then become accepted as the only female philosopher of antiquity whilst giving birth to three children? Was it really possible for such an eccentric couple to bring up three children on a shoestring, maintain the cosmopolitan idyll of well-being and yet retain the famous cynical sense of humour too? No, surely this is stretching our credulity much too far. . .[74] There were rumours that the happy couple took one or two hand-outs from father. And so we begin the passage toward all the compromises of Stoicism.

Conclusion

So what have we learned then, about Obama's sorry kind of wisdom? Now that we have endured our tour of some of its primary twists and turns, what can be done with it? What might it contribute? What might come next?

One thing that will be avoided here is any attempt to set out some sort of 'research programme'. Anyone who could seriously contemplate that hasn't really got it yet. Many of the cynicisms described above would doubtless make great

[72] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, p. 75.
[73] Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1998), p. 51.
[74] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, pp. 89–108.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mirth out of such academic earnestness. Cynicism could never really be something we set out in search of, with all our epistemological and methodological butterfly nets. Rather, cynicism is something that comes searching for you, usually unsolicited, and so the question is more about how best to handle our cynicism when it finally catches up with us.

Another thing that must be avoided at all costs is any attempt to present cynicism as some kind of 'new perspective'. Lord knows, we probably have enough of them in international political theory already. Cynicism is not so much a way of seeing the object of international studies, more about the well-being of the subject who is doing and seeing. More often, curiosity about cynicism is not aroused in order for it to ossify into a perspective, but to turn the page and move on.

Perhaps a better way would be to see Cynicism (with a capital C) as a potential resource for the cynical (with a lower case c). Those who have never been touched by it, obviously, would not need to draw upon such a resource. But for those who have, there may be some value in bringing the various forms of cynicism together out into the public sphere. Precisely because it perceives itself as 'a sorry kind of wisdom', it is often reproduced as a private disposition that reveals itself only with discretion.[75] This explains why the different meanings of the word are often used in apparent innocence of their coexistence with other meanings, to the extent that misunderstanding is not uncommon. This furtiveness is potentially harmful in that it forecloses debate about the diversity of options for when hope becomes tempered by disillusionment. Therefore, it may be worth challenging the assumption that cynicism is somehow beyond the pale.

As Obama has recognised so eloquently, hope has always been the animating principle behind any collective political action that has achieved positive change. Hope has always been that endearing trait in human nature that insists upon taking a wrecking ball to some of the most painstaking calculations of our brightest rational choice theorists. It also happens to be a motivating principle behind much critical international theory. Whenever hope fails to turn up, it immediately becomes apparent how incredibly boring international political theory can be.

Nevertheless, the sad fact is that it is inherent in the structure of things that the odds are usually stacked against hope, and so hope loses more often than many would care to admit.[76] Where there is hope, there will be casualties, and so the question then becomes: how do we cope with the wounded? For those who have been there but who have somehow managed to avoid the most *clichéd* path ('if you aren't a liberal when you are young you haven't got a heart – if you aren't a realist when you are old. . .etc.), it is irresponsible not to think about this question at all, especially when one considers how dangerously bitter the fallout can often become for old friends who once seemed so much more radical than ourselves. Arguably, some of the most destructive reactionaries emerge from the ranks of wounded idealists, so this question has a tactical aspect too. Now, with the incipient decline and fall of neo-liberalism, and the ideological vacuum that arises as a consequence, these lessons may have to be learnt all over again.

[75] Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (London: Verso, 1988), p. 7.
[76] As a young student in an international theory seminar once remarked: 'Critical Theory is for losers!' – which made everyone laugh.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As was intimated in our opening paragraph, cynicism is where the action appears to be when it comes to popular consciousness about problems of agency and structure. This is the common thread that links its great diversity of expression. So in a sense, Obama hit the nail on the head when he called it 'a sorry kind of wisdom'. But as the example of ancient cynicism demonstrates, we have choices when the structure of things confronts us with commensurable experiences of disillusionment. Some choices made within cynicism appear to be self-inhibiting or even self-destructive, whilst others exhibit rude health. The oldest of them all unleashed a cosmopolitan perspective that has had the stamina to inspire courage for two and a half millennia. Maybe, armed with our knowledge of all these, we can hope to trump the former with the latter.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510000902 Published online by Cambridge University Press