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World Views

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Cynicism

Cynicism as we view it today is those who we see as having a general mistrust for society that’s developed by a long standing frustration against those who’s lives are led by strong ambition or greed, which happens to be some of the more powerful people in the world. These people have amassed their fortunes by the exploitation of people, which has led to people having a bad view of the world because it’s been corrupted by these people. This is a bit of a contrast to traditional Cynicism. Cynicism began in Ancient Greece from the school of cynics, in part founded by Diogenes of Sinope. Some of the earliest examples of cynicism come from the ancient Pythagoreans who advocated for simple life style and simple living. Cynicism in its original sense was rejecting conventional means of attaining happiness through money, fame or power. They believed that these were the root causes of evil in the world. Cynics instead were in tune with themselves and with the world around them, attaining happiness through virtue and peace.

Cynics didn’t quite believe that people are greedy by nature, but rather are very easily tempted by greed. This is why they aimed to rid their lives of material possessions, because having things leads to only more greed. They believed that people are too easily tempted by the short term joy that things have to offer, and so they let go of that desire to be in tune with nature and themselves. This desire for things and this greed that people have are what lead to most conflict in society. Whether people wanted power, fame or land, it doesn’t matter, there’s too many people who will go through anyone to try and get what they want. *Radix malorum est cupiditas*; this is a Latin phrase meaning Greed is the root of all evil, something that the Cynics believed. While this is a Biblical phrase, the early Christians seemed to have had a lot of influence from the Cynics, so it’s possible that this came from the Cynic philosophy.

As already said, the Cynics believed that to solve the problem of human greed and ambition, we have to let go of what we own to live a life in tune with others, with nature, and with ourselves. This act of letting go can be seen today with a lot of people coming back to this idea of being minimalistic. While this is often done because it’s becoming “trendy”, a lot of people are trying to disconnect themselves from consumerism and try to maintain the things they own at the bare minimum. A lot of people who decide to become minimalistic often have a sort of cathartic experience in not being tied down by the constant desire to have more stuff. They end up leading lives that are less full of stress and frustration because they just don’t worry about what they do or don’t have. While getting ride of material possession is only one part of the Cynic belief, it can still be seen being done by people and we can see the positive effects that it has on people today. Cynics also eliminated the desire for money from their lives, believing that the less you had, the less you wanted. We see a lot of people who end up becoming very wealthy go out and ruin the lives of other people or take advantage of others for their own profit. This is especially done in big companies moving manufacturing overseas to exploit cheap labor as a means of cutting costs. They take advantage of the poverty in 3rd world countries as a means to make more money, which ultimately leads to a lot of people suffering in poor working conditions with high risks. The greed of one can lead to the suffering of many. Cynics eliminated these desires to always have more to try and cure this problem of suffering. It’s the same case for power, where people who have power always want more. Because of this abolishment of their own power, money and material possessions, cynics we’re those who lived in poverty, living on the streets begging and we’re usually homeless. One of the famous depictions of Diogenes of Sinope is of him living inside a barrel in the city streets, dressed in little more than rags. Because of this aversion to fame or fortune, it’s slightly ironic how Diogenes ended up such a famous man, being visited once by Alexander, the Great and being remembered today, more than 2000 years later.

Cynicism is a very ethical world view. They aim to reject traditional means of attaining happiness since they believe that they are the root cause of a lot of the problems in our world. By eliminating the desire for it from their lives, they believed that they could end the suffering and oppression of people in the world. War and oppression have only ever been caused by a desire for power or influence, so because they we’re rejecting these things, the cynics were often seen as the lowest people in the social hierarchy. They we’re often homeless and made their way through begging and picking from trash. The word cynic is thought to have derived from the word dog, which people would use as an insult towards the cynics for their unconventional lifestyle. It’s hard to say whether or not Cynicism is a rational world view. While eliminating greed from their lives, cynics were able to attain happiness in forms that were in a sense “more pure” than through material possession. However, in the process they ended up homeless and resorting to begging. This meant that getting rid of all their money, they also lost any security they might have in their lives. In the winter seasons, they might end up freezing to death or becoming very sick. If they couldn’t make enough money begging, then they could end up starving and probably in extreme cases, needing to resort to theft. While it’s rational to minimize the amount of things you own and money you have, it probably wasn’t quite as rational to completely eliminate it from their lives. Because of these two arguments for it, it’s difficult to say whether it was rational. It was a good idea, but probably taken a bit to the extreme. It’s also difficult to decide whether or not it is an optimistic world view. They don’t believe that humans are born full of greed, but rather that people are weak against greed and easily succumb to it’s temptation. This results in the majority of human suffering. Because however their view was that this temptation to greed was usually stronger than the people, most people are part of the cause of human suffering. Because most people are part of the problem, the world view can’t really be incredibly optimistic. The world view however isn’t really pessimistic. Unlike how a lot of people today view cynicism and pessimism as being along the same lines, traditional cynic philosophy wasn’t quite the same. Traditional cynicism wasn’t about believing that people are doomed because of their greed, they rather thought that they people needed to free themselves from their greed to avoid their own suffering and the suffering from others, and most importantly that this was something that people could do. While these are fairly similar, there’s also a kind of grey line distinguishing the two points of view that lands modern views of cynicism on the pessimistic side of things, and traditional cynicism straddling the line somewhere, but probably tipping more into optimistic.

While cynicism didn’t last very long, it was an incredibly influential world view at it’s time. It’s believed to have been an influence for a lot of early Christian beliefs, as well as an influence for the Stoic philosophy and the Neoplatonist world view. The cynic philosophy was complicated, being viewed by some as pessimistic and by others as optimistic. They believed that people we’re flawed in the sense that we easily succumbed to greed, and that that was the ultimate cause of human suffering, but they also believed that we could rise above that temptation that we face very day of our lives to become better people and work together to end the suffering, injustice and oppression in the world. Having such an extreme solution to the elimination of greed was probably somewhat irrational, but taking such a strong standpoint against what they believed was wrong in the world also made it a very ethical world view. While it doesn’t pass Albert Schweitzer’s criteria for an acceptable world view due to being somewhat irrational, it could easily be made to be a very good world view by adopting some of less extreme views of modern minimalism in place of the idea of simply abandoning everything.