

THE CHALLENGE OF ANCIENT CYNICS TO CONTEMPORARY WORLD: THE RETURN TO THE NATURAL VIRTUE OF TEMPERANCE

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Abstract. *This article analyses the most important and interesting aspects of the Ancient Greek Cynicism: diagnosis of the main disease of Ancient Greek civilization and prescribed medicine for that malignant malady. The article also treats the relevance of that medicine to the modern form of above mentioned malady.*

The article begins with the Ancient Cynics' severe criticism of the Antique Greece civilization. According to Cynics, civilization annihilates temperance – the main feature and essential virtue of human nature. Furthermore, civilization replaces temperance with surplus of pleasures, regarded as the state of dangerous disease. According to Cynics, there is only one remedy for this disease, namely, the return to the natural radical temperance. The only way leading to that is askesis, i.e. practice for both body and soul.

The cult of pleasures is also an evident vice and disease of contemporary commodified civilization. The qualities of this civilization turn radical temperance of Cynicism into a too bitter tablet for the unduly squeamish stomach of a contemporary man. Meanwhile, considerably milder form of temperance, which could promote the sense of proportion in everything, could become a contemporary means of prophylaxis. Similarly, askesis of the Ancient Greek Cynics deprived of its radical dimension could become one of the possible ways to achieve the above mentioned sense of proportion.

Keywords: *Ancient Greek Cynicism, surplus of pleasures, principle of flywheel, radical temperance, mild temperance, reduction of consumption, contemporary society.*

Introduction

The philosophical school of Cynicism founded by Antisthenes (445 BC – 365 BC) and Diogenes (412 BC – 323 BC)¹ is one of the most original and interesting phenomena of the Ancient Greek philosophy. This school earned fame mostly because of the uprising against the whole Antique Civilization, which was the first total uprising against civilization in the history of western thought. According to Cynics, civilization annihilates radical temperance – the main feature and essential virtue of human nature, leading to a healthy, tranquil and happy life, or in modern words, a high quality life. Moreover, civilization replaces natural temperance with surplus of pleasures, which is especially pernicious to the human nature. The means procuring such a surplus (wealth, fame, renown, power, nobility etc.), are as pernicious as surplus itself, also they become significant marks and objectives within the frames of civilization. The cult of pleasures and tools of their hunting is also an evident vice and disease of contemporary civilization sunken in consumption. As Ecclesiast once said, “nothing under the sun is new, neither is any man able to say: Behold this is new: for it has already gone before in the ages that were before us”². Therefore it’s highly plausible that diagnosis of antique variant of perpetual malady of civilization and proposed medicine may be also beneficial to a contemporary society. This article attempts to grasp the above mentioned benefit. All the more so, because this benefit still remains insufficiently explored. For, the researchers of Ancient Cynicism (F. Sayre³, D. R. Dudley⁴, L. Navia⁵ etc.) usually concentrate on its role and place in Antique Philosophy and Society paying only peripheral attention to relevance of cynical radical temperance to modern global world.

1. Ancient Greek Cynicism: Chase of Pleasures as the Main Disease of Civilization

And let us begin with identification of above mentioned malady linking the ancient world with the contemporary one. Why, according to Cynics, the chase of surplus of

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- 1 This philosophical school was founded in Athens at the end of the 5th century BC and ended its existence in 529 AD, when Emperor Justinian I closed all philosophical schools in Athens.
 - 2 Ecclesiastes (Ch. 1, 10). *Holy Bible. Old Testament* [interactive]. Douay – Rheims version: Reims – Douai, 1582 – 1610 [accessed 20-03-2011]. <<http://www.newadvent.org/bible/ecc001.htm>>
 - 3 Sayre, F. *Diogenes of Synope. A Study on Greek Cynicism*. Baltimore: J. H. Furst Company, 1938.
 - 4 Dudley, D. R. *History of Cynicism. From Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* London: Duckworth Publishers, 2007.
 - 5 Navia, L. A. *Classical Cynicism: a Critical Study*. London: Greenwood Press, 1996.

pleasures is such a huge vice and such a complicated disease? Why did Antisthenes maintain: “I’d rather be mad than feel pleasure”⁶? It is not easy to answer this question. For, although philosophical school of Antique Cynicism existed for about thousand years, although Cynical philosophers even created two important literary forms - diatribe and Menippean satire, no writings of Ancient Cynics survived. Only small fragments of these works and testimonies of the other authors about these works and their contents alone that are still extant. Nevertheless, the extant material entirely suffices to find the reason of severe Cynical criticism of pursuit of pleasures. It is the subtle analysis of pleasures made by Cynics that elucidates that reason. Such an analysis noticed fundamental principle, which could be entitled “the principle of flywheel”. This principle runs like this: “the greater surplus of pleasures a person achieves, the greater surplus of pleasures he desires in the nearest future”. Such a person little by little loses his natural freedom and becomes a total slave to surplus of pleasures, he permanently chases for pleasures, constantly desires them, having no possibility to live out of their reach. Nevertheless, no surplus of pleasures can fully satisfy him, no indulgence in pleasures can procure him with happiness – the permanent state of tranquil and undisturbed soul. Cynical philosophers compare the hunter for pleasures with a man possessed with dropsy: this man is constantly being tortured by unappeasable thirst, and the more abundantly his thirst is satisfied, the greater it grows⁷. Such a man is always discontented; he is permanently tormented by anxiety and terror that he will never reach so desirable a quantity of pleasures or even, because of a sinister twist of fortune, will lose the pleasures he already possesses.

According to cynics, the means for pursuit of pleasures also never suffice. There is no limit and, more to say, there can be no limit either for fame, or for power, or even for comparatively small property. These things never suffice, they are never enough, there is no necessary quantity of them. A man is never satisfied with wealth and fame he possesses, there is no end to striving and strengthening of power, and a libertine never finds the ultimate woman to provide him with pleasures in which he could finally calm down. Therefore, all these tools leading to pleasures are not real values at all – the only status they possess is that of pseudovalues. Moreover, these pseudovalues are extremely detrimental. They mutilate human nature, which, having lost its natural temperance, is no longer capable to reach the desirable state of completeness and blissful serenity.

In other words, human nature under conditions of civilization is severely ill. To prevent it from death it is necessary to heal that serious disease. But what kind of treatment is required? Which remedy is capable to overcome this chronic tendency to chase pleasures and their instruments? After Cynics, there is only one medicine for the above mentioned malady. And it is nothing else but return to the natural temperance – the essential human virtue.

6 Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* [interactive]. Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Library edition, 1925. Volume II, Ch. 6, 3 [accessed 20-02-2011]. <http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Lives_of_the_Eminent_Philosophers/Book_VI>.

7 *Joannis Stobaei Florilegium*. Ad manuscriptorum fidem emendavit et supplevit Thomas Gaisford. Volumen I, Ch. 10, 46. Oxonii: E typographeo clarendoniano, 1822, p. 295.

2. Radical Temperance as Medicine for the Main Disease of Civilization

It is important to notice that Cynical philosophers do not mean an ordinary temperance, i. e. the sense of proportion in everything. In fact, they are talking about a radical temperance – the ultimate constraint of human needs. In modern terms such a variant of temperance may be entitled as the ultimate reduction of consumption. According to Cynics, only a minimal quantity of food, drink, sexual pleasures, clothes, shoes and other goods can entirely content human nature. It is a minimal quantity of these goods alone that is capable to provide human being with self-sufficient pleasures not leading to the surplus, which, according to the principle of flywheel, permanently requires more and more new and more intensive pleasures. On the other hand, minimal human needs are the most necessary ones, which actually can be fulfilled always and everywhere. At least they may be easily fulfilled in the living world of Cynics–Ancient Greece, where mild climate and exuberant nature do not allow Cynical philosophers to starve and freeze, where simple barrel can serve as an elementary shelter, as in the case of Diogenes.

Hence, the virtue of radical temperance allows Cynical philosopher to confine himself to the most necessary needs, which, on the other hand, can be always satisfied. Such a minimal number of needs easy to fulfill guarantees the absence of anxiety and fear of the future. In turn, this freedom from fear and anxiety vouchsafes tranquility and good disposition of human soul that, as Cynics believed, is nothing else but human happiness itself⁸.

The ultimate restraint of needs guarantees to a Cynical philosopher happy and careless life protecting him from pernicious pursuit of surplus of pleasures, the main disease of the Ancient Greek civilization. According to Cynics, this radical temperance is the only possible medicine for that disease. But how is this medicine produced? In other words, how is it possible to reach that blissful radical temperance? Cynics offer the only recipe for production of this remedy. In their opinion, it is asceticism (*askesis*) that leads step by step to the desirable temperance.

3. *Askesis* as the Way to Radical Temperance

But what did cynics mean by such a mysterious word “*askesis*”? It is the term of ancient Greek language, and the principal meanings of it are “practice”, “training”, “exercises”. So, Cynical *askesis* was the certain kind of exercises. Namely, exercises strengthening and tempering both body and soul, deliberating human being from yoke of passions and vices, and disaccustoming him from permanent chase of pleasures.

8 For example, Diogenes maintained: “true happiness consists in perpetual tranquility and joy of mind and soul” (*Joannis Stobaei Florilegium*. Ad manuscriptorum fidem emendavit et supplevit Thomas Gaisford. Volumen III, Ch. 103, 21. Lipsiae: In bibliopolio Kuehniano, 1824, p. 294).

Cynical philosophers distinguished two species of *askesis*: training of body and training of soul. For example, “Diogenes used to affirm that training was of two kinds, mental and bodily: the latter being that whereby, with constant exercise, perceptions are formed such as secure freedom of movement for virtuous deeds”⁹. Both kinds of training perfectly complement one another. Moreover, “the one half of this training is incomplete without the other”¹⁰. We face here very important question. Namely, which exercises are designed for body and which ones are attributed to soul? It is a laconic phrase of Antisthenes that delivers the precise answer: “who wants to get a virtuous man ought to strengthen his body by gymnastics and exercises of endurance and his soul by education”¹¹. It is important to notice that such an education must include numerous myths about Antique heroes having practiced radical temperance (Hercules, Theseus, Odyssey etc.) which in modern terminology may be named the stories of success. As for exercises of endurance, they include learning to suffer pain, heat, cold, thirst and hunger. Among exercises, designed to body, cynics also numbered manual work, which was honoured with status of important moral virtue.

So, according to Cynics, it is physical and spiritual *askesis* alone that can lead human being to virtue of radical temperance. As an unknown Cynical philosopher maintained, “temperance is achieved by training and, contrary to vice, does not penetrate into soul by itself”¹². As for the achievement of temperance, Cynics compared this process to acquirement of artisan’s mastership. There Diogenes asserted that “in the manual crafts and other arts it can be seen that the craftsmen develop extraordinary manual skill through practice; again, take the case of flute-players and of athletes: what surpassing skill they acquire by their own incessant toil”¹³, so “if they had transferred their efforts to the training of the mind [in order to get temperance¹⁴], how certainly their labours would not have been unprofitable or ineffective”¹⁵. In other words, regular *askesis* is crowned with attitudes and skills of a moderate life, or, to speak in images, with the craftsmanship of radical temperance.

Hence, in Cynical point of view, a human being may achieve success in temperance only by constant training. Furthermore, the virtue of radical temperance requires practice, which must last lifelong. Why does it take so long? The answer here is very simple. If a person no longer cultivates temperance, this virtue little by little begins to surrender to temptation of passions and vices and, finally, gets forgotten as a verse of *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, which is no longer read nor repeated in memory.

9 Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Volume II, Ch. 6, 70.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ioannis Stobaei Florilegium*. Recognovit Augustus Meineke. Volumen IV. Lipsiae: sumptibus typis B. G. Teubneri, 1856, p. 198.

12 *Epistola Cratetis*. XII. Orioni. *Epistolographi graeci*. Recensuit, recognovit, adnotatione critica et indicibus instruxit Rudolphus Hercher. Parisiis: editore Ambrosio Firmin Didot, instituti Franciae typographo, 1873, p. 210.

13 Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Volume II, Ch. 6, 70.

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15 *Ibid.*

So, radical temperance, being achieved by *askesis*, is undoubtedly the main principle of philosophy of Cynical School. What is more, Cynical philosophers faithfully observed this categorical imperative of temperance. In other words, within the frames of Cynicism philosophical principles were inseparable from the corresponding way of life. The links between the Cynical philosophy and the Cynical way of life were so tight and the practical aspect of that philosophy was so strong that some historians of philosophy even regarded Cynicism as a mere mode of life¹⁶.

4. Echoes of Ancient Greek Cynicism: Mild Temperance as Remedy for the Disease of Modern Civilization

Cynics diagnosed the main malady of ancient Greek civilization, the pursuit of surplus of pleasures. Such a disease is particularly characteristic of the modern consumer civilization. There is no doubt about that. But there is some doubt as to whether the remedy proposed by Ancient Cynics could be pertinent and effective in the modern world as well.

Even in Ancient Greece the imperative of radical temperance sounded extraordinary. Even more extraordinary it would sound in contemporary civilization where human beings have considerably greater number of needs, where consumption is refined, globalized and deified, where the tempo of life is evidently faster etc. True, even nowadays it is possible to meet people with extremely restricted their needs. For example, the author of this article knows a philosopher who walks in the same shabby shoes for 20 years and is very satisfied with that. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine a modern man to utter sincerely the words once said by an unknown Cynical philosopher: “my dress is a thin Scythian cloak, my shoes are the soles of my own feet, my bed is the whole earth, my food is seasoned by hunger alone, and I eat nothing but milk, cheese and meat¹⁷”. It is hard to believe that in cold wintertime the author of this article could walk barefoot, thinly dressed, that *in modo Diogenis* he could live in barrel etc.

Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that permanent consumption, constant chase of pleasures, fast tempo of everyday life, a desire to be, to have, to do more and faster wears and exhausts contemporary human being not allowing him to contend himself with simple things, to enjoy life, to experience the beauty of the moment; sowing continual anxiety and fear to be late, to miss, to lose, not to consume and so on. One of possible means to mitigate these negative aspects could be the choice of more temperate way of life, i. e. the reduction of consumption. True, modern man is accustomed to

16 See Kidd, I. Cynics. *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Volume II. Edwards, P. (ed.). New York: Collier – Macmillan, 1967, p. 284–285; Kidd, I. Cynicism. *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy*. Urmson, J. O.; Ree, J. (eds.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2004, p. 91.

17 Pisma Anakharsisa. 5. Anakharsis – Gannonu. *Antologija kinizma. Antisfen, Diogen, Kratet, Kerkid, Dion*. [Epistles of Anacharsis. 5. Anacharsis to Hanno. Anthology of Cynicism. Antisthenes, Diogenes, Crates, Cercidas, Dio Chrysostom]. Perevod s drevnegrecheskogo jazyka prof. I. M. Nakhova. Moskva: Nauka, 1996, s. 181.

luxurious and comfortable life; he is used to desire, have and consume plenty of things. Nevertheless, it is possible just to try to live more temperately refusing what is not necessary, indispensable, what can be postponed for tomorrow and even declined when tomorrow comes. In any case, at least a minimal temperance, a minimal reduction of consumption could leastwise minimally improve the quality of life bringing more health, sanity, tranquility, stability, consistency and elementary joy. And what is more to say, such a minimal temperance would help people not to feel totally helpless in the face of various local and global crises. Moreover, minimal temperance would undoubtedly contribute to resource efficiency. The latter is an important constituent of sustainable growth, which, as one of the main targets of the modern world, is accentuated in many strategic European and worldwide documents. For example, Communication of European Commission “Europe 2020” regards sustainable growth as one of 3 priorities of Europe’s strategy for 10 nearest years¹⁸.

So, the remedy proposed by ancient Greek cynics would not suit in its original radical form to contemporary consumer civilization. In a figurative sense, radical temperance would be just a too bitter and too tough pill for the over squeamish stomach of a citizen of the modern world. On the other hand, milder and softer form of such a pill could hopefully contribute to facilitate the permanent malady of civilization. Of course, not to heal, but at least to facilitate. Consequently, not radical but a mild variant of temperance, which could be entitled as a sense of proportion in everything; not the ultimate restriction of human needs but just a reduction of consummation could become a contemporary prophylactic.

And what recipe can be proposed for the production of this important remedy? In other words, which way leads to that mild temperance? Ancient Greek Cynics sought their radical temperance by *askesis* – exercises for body and soul. It is widely known that without learning, practice and training it is impossible to achieve positive result in any activity. Temperance is also no exception to this rule. True, reaching no longer for the ultimate constraint of human needs but simply for a sense of proportion in everything, practice of enduring heat, cold, hunger and thirst, so emphasized by ancient cynics, loses its former relevance. Still, body training by gymnastics, moderate exercises of endurance and manual labour, and, on the other hand, training of soul by sciences and letters also nowadays lead to proper sense and attitude of proportion. Therefore, it is safe to say that *askesis* of ancient Greek cynics deprived of its radical dimension could become one of the possible ways to achieve a reduction in consumption – the type of temperance relevant to the contemporary world.

Conclusions

Severe criticism of civilization is peculiar to Antique Greek Cynicism. According to Cynics, civilization is dangerously ill by the chase of surplus of pleasures. Such a

18 Communication from the European Commission: Europe 2020 – A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Brussels, 3.3.2010, COM (2010) 2020 Final, p. 5.

disease annihilates temperance – the main feature and essential virtue of human nature, leading to a healthy, tranquil and happy life, or in modern words, to a high quality life. On the contrary, surplus of pleasures, which, according to the principle of flywheel, never suffices and requires more and more new pleasures, ultimately leads a human being to the state of internal chaos, permanent fear, anxiety and bitter dissatisfaction. In order to overcome this disease, an efficient remedy is required. Cynics maintained that the only possible remedy is the return to the natural radical temperance, the ultimate restriction of human needs. The only way leading to that temperance is *askesis*, i.e. training of both body and soul. According to cynics, this training must last for the whole life of human being.

The cult of pleasures and tools of their hunting is also an evident vice and a disease of contemporary consumer civilization. Nevertheless, the remedy proposed by Ancient Greek Cynics, i. e. radical temperance, would not suit nowadays. The qualities of contemporary world, considerably greater number of needs, refined and deified consummation, evidently faster tempo of life etc., would turn radical temperance into a too bitter and too tough tablet for an unduly squeamish stomach of the modern man. Nowadays another type of temperance is required to mitigate the eternal malaise of civilization. It is a mild temperance, which could be defined as the sense of proportion in everything leading not to the ultimate constraint of human needs but just to a reduction of consumption. Likewise, *askesis* of Ancient Greek Cynics deprived of its radical dimension could become one of the possible means to achieve mild temperance.

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ANTIKOS KINIKŲ IŠŠŪKIS ŠIUOLAIKINIAM PASAULIUI: GRĮŽIMAS PRIE PRIGIMTINĖS SAIKINGUMO DORYBĖS

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Santrauka. *Vienas įdomiausių ir originaliausių antikinės graikų filosofijos fenomenų buvo kinikų mokykla. Ji labiausiai išgarsėjo pirmuoju Vakarų minties istorijoje visuotiniu maištu prieš civilizaciją. Kinikai tvirtino, kad civilizacija naikinanti pagrindinį žmogiškosios prigimties bruožą ir esminę dorybę – saikingumą, užtikrinantį sveiką, ramų ir laimingą, o šiandieniniais terminais kalbant, kokybišką gyvenimą. Maža to, išsižadėjusi prigimtinio saikingumo, civilizacija pagrindiniu orientyru ir siekiniu iškelia žmogaus prigimčiai pražūtingą malonumų perteklių, kurio niekad nepakanka, kuris nuolat reikalauja vis naujesnių ir didesnių malonumų ir galiausiai atveda žmogų į vidinio chaoso, nuolatinės baimės bei nerimo, kitaip sakant, sunkios ligos būseną. Kinikų įsitikinimu, tėra vienintelis vaistas šiai ligai išgydyti. Tai sugrįžimas prie žmogaus prigimčiai būdingo radikalaus saikingumo – maksimalaus poreikių apribojimo. Į šį saikingumą tegalinti atvesti askezė – sielą ir kūną stiprinančios, grūdinančios ir lavinančios pratybos. Jos privalančios tęstis visą žmogaus gyvenimą.*

Malonumų kultas – akivaizdi ir vartojime paskendusios šių dienų civilizacijos yda bei liga. Tad kyla klausimas: ar kinikų pasiūlytas vaistas gali būti tinkamas ir veiksmingas šiuolaikiniame pasaulyje? Šio pasaulio savybės – daug didesnis poreikių mastas, išbulintintas ir sudievinintas vartojimas, daug greitesnis gyvenimo tempas ir t. t. – paverčia radikalų kinikų saikingumą tiesiog per karčia ir kieta tablete gana lepiam to pasaulio piliečio skrandžiui. Tuo tarpu švelnesnis ir minkštesnis šios tabletės variantas galėtų prisidėti prie amžinojo civilizacijos negalavimo sušvelninimo. Tiesa, ne išgydymo, bet bent jau sušvelninimo. Tad ne radikali, o gerokai švelnesnė saikingumo forma, kurią galėtume pavadinti tiesiog saiko visame kame jutimu; ne maksimalus poreikių apribojimas, o tiesiog vartojimo sumažinimas galėtų

tapti modernia profylaktikos priemone. Panašiai ir kinikų askezė, atėmus iš jos radikalųjį matmenį, gali tapti vienu iš kelių į minėtąjį saiko visame kame jutimą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *antikinės Graikijos kinikų filosofija, malonumų perteklius, smagračio principas, radikalus saikingumas, švelnus saikingumas, vartojimo apribojimas, šiuolaikinė civilizacija.*

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