

DON'T SHOOT THE MESSENGER! RETHINKING CYNICISM AND  
THE VALUE OF POLITICAL CRITIQUE

by

Suvi Maaria Irvine

A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Baltimore, Maryland

December 2014

©2014 Suvi Irvine  
All Rights Reserved

## Abstract:

That Americans have become cynical about politics is often taken for granted in both popular and scholarly discourse. But what does it mean to be cynical? The answer to this question is far from simple and requires an investigation into the concept's origins, which reside in the ancient Greek philosophy known as classical Cynicism. Diogenes of Sinope, who remains the paradigmatic Cynic, was an abrasive figure in ancient Athens whose sneers and sarcasm were essential to his commitment to „living according to nature.“ And for Diogenes, this meant living in accordance with the truth. He distrusted the social and political motivations of his fellow Athenians, and he called them out on their hypocrisy in ways that both amused and aggravated them. But what Diogenes did, above all, was demand room for honesty and the truth in the public sphere. I propose that his example is valuable in the context of contemporary American political culture, where honesty is rare and the truth is regularly disregarded.

This dissertation presents an analysis of what cynicism can *do* for American political culture. I first address the question of what it means to be cynical and assess how much cynicism has changed since the days of Diogenes. While it may not mirror the original in all of its aspects, I argue that at root what it means to be cynical has not changed significantly, and that we can still identify cynics in our midst through their commitment to seeking and sarcastically speaking the truth. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century journalist H.L. Mencken is a case in point. Like Diogenes, Mencken aimed to be provocative and to initiate a *response* from his readers. And while he is not a cynic, Stanley Cavell's work on Ralph Waldo Emerson's non-conformism compliments the cynics' commitment to truth seeking and speaking. Contrary to contemporary popular

and scholarly assumptions, cynicism has not morphed into a pervasive political ideology or mood in America. Rather, it constitutes a valuable critical practice that provokes us to investigate our assumptions and to develop the capacity to care for our selves, others and the world.

## Acknowledgments:

Before acknowledging the many people who have provided me with guidance and support throughout the process of writing this dissertation, I would like to start by acknowledging the man who first set me on the path to graduate school. That would be the late Norman Jacobson, my mentor as an undergraduate at *The University of California, Berkeley*. When I met him at the outset of my senior year, I was a) determined to write a thesis on Nietzsche, b) totally at a loss as to what, specifically, I was going to write about, and c) desperately searching for a voice, for a way to *say* something about American political culture, that I was not at all sure that I had. Professor Jacobson's intellectual generosity and kindly spirit took all of this in stride, and he helped me through the process of first finding and then thinking and writing about a subject that I cared about deeply and that eventually led me to pursue graduate studies in political theory at *Johns Hopkins University*. To put things bluntly, Professor Jacobson believed in me at a time when I was struggling wildly to believe in myself. And for that I will be forever grateful.

Graduate school proved to be a whole new world in many respects, and I am deeply indebted to Jane Bennett for being such an incredibly caring, considerate, and, last but certainly not least, intellectually inspiring adviser and mentor. Jane has the almost uncanny ability to tease out the threads that I need to develop in my work when it seem to me to be in a state of total disarray. She has always pushed me as a thinker and a writer to set the bar just a bit higher, and in terms of my dissertation she gave me the freedom to try things even when she had doubts as to whether they would work out in the end. Some ideas worked and some did not, but I am beyond appreciative for having been given

ample room to explore them. When I reflect back on the work that I've done as a graduate student, both in seminars and over the course of the dissertation process, I can see how much my thinking and writing has changed, and the person that I have to thank for that, above all, is Jane. Her comments and criticism has not so much shaped as guided me towards developing the kind of written „voice“ for my cares and concerns and reflections on American political culture that I first looked for at Berkeley. She is a first-rate adviser and mentor, and I am privileged to also count her as a friend.

I also want to thank Adam Sheingate for his comments and advice throughout the course of this project. It was Adam's seminar on „American Political Development“ that gave me the initial groundwork from which to consider the role of „truth“ in American political culture, and it was Adam who first pointed me in the direction of H.L. Mencken as a potential candidate for my discussion of American cynics. Mencken wound up playing a crucial role in the dissertation as a whole, setting a tone for my consideration of the role of the „rude“ truth in American politics. Adam was also always open to my interest in value of rudeness in American politics, and was there with suggestions when I was at a loss as to where to turn next. I appreciate his insights and encouragement throughout the entirety of the project enormously, and am so happy to have had the chance to work with him on this project.

I did not expect to write a dissertation on cynicism, and for the initial nudge in that direction I must thank Benjamin Ginsberg, who not only served as an examiner on my dissertation committee but whose theory of cynical realism I first became familiar with while working with him as a teaching assistant for his course on American politics and government. The more that I learned about cynicism, the more intrigued with the

philosophical and historical roots of the concept I became, and I think Ben and I share similar frustrations with the prevalence of mendacity in American political culture. I also want to sincerely thank Angus Burgin for joining my dissertation committee and for his insightful comments on my manuscript, as well as Niloofar Haeri for signing on as a committee member and for her very helpful reflections on my use of the concept of cynicism in my work.

It has been a pleasure to count Bill Connolly as a mentor since my first year at Hopkins. His seminars opened me up to ways of thinking about politics and identity that continue to influence my work, and I am incredibly grateful for all the comments, advice and encouragement that Bill has provided me with as well as for the lively discussions that I have been included in both inside and outside of the classroom. I also want to thank Michael Hanchard for all of his guidance over the course of my years at Hopkins. He has challenged my thinking in important ways and has taught me invaluable lessons about the rigors of academic life, not the least of which includes pushing me to quite literally voice my thoughts and ideas. What once seemed impossible has since become much easier, and I am glad that he insisted that I push through my fears in his classroom. In addition, Joseph Cooper, Jennifer Culbert, Siba Grovogui and Mimi Keck have all, in various ways, generously shared their knowledge and offered encouragement and advice, whether in a seminar setting or beyond.

Noora Lori has been my fellow graduate student, continues to be a candid intellectual interlocutor like no other and an unwavering source of support, and is hands down the best friend that a person could wish for. For all of this, I cannot thank her enough, and I can say in all seriousness that I would not have made it through the

program without her. I also want to thank Jeremy Arnold and Mabel Wong, first for being amazing people and wonderful friends, but also for being there in the clutch. Jake Greer, Mike McCarthy, Adam Culver, Daniela Ginsburg, and Chas Phillips have likewise not only inspired me intellectually but also, and just importantly, have provided me with great friendship, wonderful memories, and many, many laughs. Gregory Kadajski, Lana Labermeier, and Jessica Jones, you also fit into this crew! I feel incredibly lucky to count you all as friends, and the one terrible thing about finishing graduate school and leaving Baltimore behind is that we do not get to see each other nearly as much as we should.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge and express my deepest gratitude to my incredible family, who have been there for me through thick and thin. Rock, Eeva and Kiira Irvine, Daniel Avina, Blair and Barbara Irvine, and Amelie, Ted and Alice Irvine, thanks for everything. You inspire me, you encourage me, and you are rarely offended by my sometimes overly sarcastic sense of humor (indeed, you are all, in different ways, very skilled at throwing it right back at me). There truthfully are no words to properly describe how much I love and appreciate each and every one of you.

--Davis, California 2014

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction: Cynicism and American Political Culture .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Rethinking cynicism .....	9
<b>Chapter 1: Can We Learn New Tricks from an Old Dog? The Cynicism of Diogenes .....</b>	<b>14</b>
Misidentifying cynicism .....	17
Troubling the ancient/modern dichotomy .....	25
Diogenes the Dog .....	29
<i>Parrhesia, autarkeia</i> and ‘living according to nature’ .....	33
Rascal with a cause .....	43
Learning from Diogenes.....	50
Truth and democratic pluralism .....	56
<b>Chapter 2: The Diogenes of his day—H.L. Mencken’s American cynicism .....</b>	<b>63</b>
Flash, flair and fun.....	67
The makings of a ‘national menace’ .....	69
The cynic in his own times.....	75
On words, weapons and wars.....	80
Making sense of Menckenism .....	85
Paging ‘Dr. Rhetoricus’? .....	94
Liberty, equality and hypocrisy in America.....	97
<b>Chapter 4: Provoking Perfectionism—Stanley Cavell on Doubt and Democracy .....</b>	<b>101</b>
On speaking the rude truth.....	106
From cynicism to Cavellian skepticism .....	117
The importance of the ordinary.....	122
Understanding acknowledgment and avoidance .....	131
Doubt and democracy .....	137
<b>Conclusion: Politics, the Public and Perceptions of ‘America’ .....</b>	<b>141</b>
The promises and problems of publicity .....	150
Politics, responsibility and speaking the rude truth .....	156
Cynicism and America .....	160
<b>WORKS CITED.....</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>CURRICULAM VITAE .....</b>	<b>173</b>

## Introduction: Cynicism and American Political Culture

---

*“I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.”—Henry David Thoreau, 1854*

It was little surprise that the 2012 presidential race ended with a frenzied blitz of advertising and campaigning on behalf of both President Barack Obama and his rival, Mitt Romney. Yet what was, perhaps, surprising was that as each candidate struggled to convince voters that he was the right man for the job and that he (and his party) had solutions for America’s most pressing problems, the truth was conspicuously absent from many of the claims that were offered up as proof. Neither campaign made much of an effort to deny this, shrugging off inaccuracies as well as blatant distortions of the truth as „politics as usual.“ When alarms were raised, for example, regarding the veracity of a number of vice-presidential candidate Paul Ryan’s statements at the Republican National Convention, no one rushed to qualify or even explain his claims.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the Romney team was defiant in the face of its questioners, and the campaign’s lead pollster Neil Newhouse went so far as to announce that they were “not going to let [their] campaign be dictated by fact-checkers.”<sup>2</sup> While dishonesty is often taken as a given in American politics, the 2012 election cycle saw the truth not only altered and abused but also brazenly *disregarded*. This raises important questions about the relationship between

---

<sup>1</sup> For examples, see: Madison, Lucy, Paula Reid and Stephanie Condon, “Fact Checking 6 Claims in Paul Ryan’s Convention Speech,” *CBS News*, August 30, 2012; and Kohn, Sally, “Paul Ryan’s Speech in 3 Words,” *Fox News*, August 30, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Bennet, James, “We’re Not Going to Let Out Campaign be Dictated by Fact-Checkers,” *The Atlantic*, August 28, 2012

truth-claims and American political behavior. When a purported „fact“ is revealed to be an outright lie, does the public care? Is political mendacity taken into account and punished on Election Day?

The answers depend, in part, on whether voters can agree upon what constitutes an outright lie, and the line separating fact from fiction is particularly difficult to draw in a political atmosphere characterized by intense ideological division. But they also depend on the extent to which American political culture places a premium on the truth itself. Andrew Norris and Jeremy Elkins argue that “we live in a political culture that is deeply ambivalent about truth,” where the principles of individualism and political plurality are in constant tension with competing truth claims (coming from both the left and the right) that all present an image of the truth as something definitive and unitary.<sup>3</sup> Yet is the American stance towards truth best described as „ambivalent“? In a *New York Times* editorial published on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 and titled “The Whole Truth and Nothing But,” Thomas Friedman presents a different take on the stance towards truth in American political culture, one that suggests not ambivalence but avoidance. Friedman argues that democracy in America is failing, and that our leaders have been telling us lies.<sup>4</sup> But he also claims that the American people share the responsibility for this state of affairs, and not only because they fail to hold politicians accountable for lying by voting them out of office. It is also, Friedman states, because we, the people, have not been willing to face hard truths about the state of our nation. Rather, we actually expect our

---

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Norris and Jeremy Elkins, “Politics, Political Theory, and the Question of Truth,” in *Truth and Democracy*, eds. Andrew Norris and Jeremy Elkins (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “The Whole Truth and Nothing But,” *The New York Times*, September 9, 2011.

leaders, and particularly our presidents, to tell us what we want to hear: that solutions to our problems, economic and otherwise, can be had without sacrifice on our part.

My intention in commenting on this editorial is not to weigh in on the specifics of Friedman's arguments about American decline, but I would like to draw attention to the request he makes of Obama: "For once, Mr. President, let's start a debate with the truth."<sup>5</sup> What Americans need, Friedman concludes, is the "cold, hard truth," and we need it despite the fact that we have come to assume that "honesty is suicidal in politics" and that therefore politicians do not (even cannot) "tell it like it is." And while he asks Obama to begin a "debate with the truth," Friedman also implores us, as members of the American public, to engage the President in such a debate. To do so would first require setting aside the assumption that political honesty is an oxymoron. And it would also require the public to *listen* and *respond* to what Obama has to say. Can we make room for honesty in contemporary American political culture? Friedman is hardly trying to paint a rosy picture of transforming politics into a virtuous practice, nor is he defending Obama and others from charges of political mendacity. But his discussion of the need for truth in American politics is noteworthy because of his attention to *why* politicians lie. One of the primary reasons, Friedman proposes, is that the truth is not what the public wants to hear; politicians know that telling the cold, hard truth does not translate easily into political currency and consequently they have see little incentive to seek it or to speak it. Is the American public willing to engage our leaders in a debate with the truth by taking a real interest in it and actively considering the validity of their truth-claims? If the answer is no, then it seems that any truths that Obama might utter, "hard" or otherwise, will largely fall upon deaf ears.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

And if all of the questions above seek to ask not just whether the American public thinks there can even be such a thing as truth in politics, but also whether we *care* about the truth itself, then the role that cynicism plays in the political sphere and its influence on public perceptions of American politics must be assessed. Indeed, one of the central claims of this dissertation is that American political culture is not cynical enough. This is a claim that challenges contemporary representations of the concept of cynicism that are frequently tossed around by politicians, political pundits, and the press. Take, for example, Obama's rhetoric on cynicism. He frequently presents it as a road-block to progress and as an emblem of political negativity, and he proposes that it's a sentiment that needs to be fought if we, the people, want America to get „back on track.“ In a speech delivered on the Democratic campaign trail in Kansas in July 2014, the President had the following to say on the subject:

Cynicism is fashionable sometimes. You see it all over our culture, all over TV; everybody likes just putting stuff down and being cynical and negative, and that shows somehow that you are sophisticated and you are cool. You know what-- cynicism didn't put a man on the moon. Cynicism didn't earn women the right to vote. Cynicism didn't get a Civil Rights Act signed. Cynicism has never won a war. Cynicism has never cured a disease. Cynicism has never started a business. Cynicism has never inspired a young mind. I do not believe in a cynical America. I believe in an optimistic America.<sup>6</sup>

Obama goes on to suggest that cynicism fosters the status quo, and he argues that if Americans want real change we had better start thinking more positively. Yet as I aim to demonstrate, this portrayal of cynicism is unfounded, and in attacking cynicism Obama is fighting the wrong fight. Historically, cynics have always been out-spoken enemies of the

---

<sup>6</sup> James Dornbrook, "Obama Speech Fights Cynicism, Presses for Optimism," *The Kansas City Business Journal*, July 30, 2014.

status quo, and it is my contention that their provocative practices of political and cultural criticism *can* inspire not only „young minds,“ but also wider political engagement.

To understand why Obama’s characterization of cynicism is off the mark we must first take a closer look at what he means by it. Jon Favreau, formerly Obama’s chief speechwriter at the White House, describes the President’s understanding of the concept as follows: “Cynicism is the idea that the game is rigged, everyone is in it for himself, and there’s no point in trying to make a difference.”<sup>7</sup> Obama’s use of the term makes allusions to pessimism, to a general distrustfulness of others, and to disbelief in the possibility of political sincerity. Cynicism, he says, is something that we should “never give in to”—it is something that, like an addiction, we should resist.<sup>8</sup> And if we could resist or even eradicate it, Obama maintains, the American people might once again believe in our democracy and our leaders, reviving our hope and our material prospects for the future. (Incidentally, „believe“ and „hope“ have been two of his signature campaign slogans, so given his weak understanding of cynicism as a condition of negativity, distrust and disbelief it is no wonder its influence on American political culture concerns him. While I do not aim to endorse or discount the honesty or truthfulness of his campaign rhetoric, I do think that he honestly does not understand the meaning of the concept.) For Obama, cynicism seems to be something of a malicious and malignant mood, a spreading affliction that is eroding the American public’s confidence in government, elected officials and the political process.

David Axelrod, one of Obama’s longtime political advisers, offers a slightly different take on the concept, though one that is compatible with Obama’s

---

<sup>7</sup> Amy Parnes, “Obama: Don’t Be So Cynical,” *The Hill*, August 8, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Katie Zezima, “President Obama Brought Back „Hope and Change“ This Summer — And Exported it to Estonia,” *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2014.

characterization. For Axelrod, cynicism has become a profitable tool in the hands of the media as well as politicians—he likens it to a „marketable asset,“ stating, “There’s an impetus to create fear and then market it, exploit it. And that’s true on the part of the media, and that’s true on the part of the politicians.”<sup>9</sup> Axelrod implies that cynicism, as a mood of public distrust in government and politics, is tied to fears about the state of the nation and the world, and he complains that both politicians and the press capitalize on these fears and use them to manipulate the public. In this description of cynicism, Axelrod blames political leaders, political hopefuls and the media for generating a public mood of distrust in government and then exploiting it to their own advantage. Similarly, Jon Stewart, the political satirist and host of *The Daily Show* (himself a member of the media) accused Congress members of being “childish and cynical” in a September 30, 2014 clip, stating that they have learned to turn legislative bills into campaign ads. For Stewart, rather than working to create actual laws, Congress members have taken to using proposed bills as fodder with which to attack one another in an effort to gain votes in the next election cycle, and he attributes this behavior to childishness and cynicism. The term, it seems, holds a decidedly pejorative air in contemporary political discourse. Stewart’s fellow satirist Stephen Colbert offers the following description of cynicism, which, like Obama, he proposes is the antithesis of optimism: “Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it...Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us.”

But is this really a proper assessment of what it means to be cynical? I argue that it is not, and that cynicism can in fact provide an antidote to the self-imposed blindness bemoaned by Colbert, as well as the negativity, fear-mongering and brazen selfishness

---

<sup>9</sup> Peter Baker, “Nation’s Confidence Ebbs at a Steady Drip,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 2014.

that concern Obama, Axelrod and Stewart. Cynicism constitutes not a malignant mood of distrust and doubt but a practice of loud and courageous truth-telling whose roots lie in the ancient Greek philosophy of classical Cynicism. The cynic, to be fair, *does* distrust and doubt the sincerity and the motivations of most human beings, but he or she hardly shrinks from others and from the world on account such feelings. Rather, a cynic *responds* to such feelings. Cynics take iconoclasm and irreverence to the extreme—they challenge the establishment in the name of freedom and the truth, and they always act alone. So, it is inaccurate to attribute cynicism to a widespread mood, a marketing device, or a grab for power. And indeed, it is precisely because the practicing cynic is disappointed with the social and political worlds that he or she assumes the position of an outspoken (and often outrageous) critic. As William D. Desmond notes,

For all the gloom attached to the word, wits of many periods have delighted in fashioning their own definitions of the cynic—sometimes as an exercise in self-analysis. Oscar Wilde’s often-quoted quip is that a cynic is „a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.“ H.L. Mencken sees the cynic as a person „who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin,“ and (Mencken adds mischievously), „a cynic is right nine times out of ten.“<sup>10</sup>

Cynics *are* mischievous. They are also always highly controversial, and when it comes to society and politics their criticism does not adhere to ideological lines. Stewart and Colbert could both be categorized as contemporary „wits,“ and they both may, in fact, be more cynical than they recognize or acknowledge. But neither is controversial enough to be described as actual cynics, who are few and far between.

For Diogenes of Sinope, widely considered the father of classical Cynicism, sneers, sarcasm and an irreverent non-conformism were essential to his commitment to

---

<sup>10</sup> William D. Desmond, *The Greek Praise of Poverty* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2006), vii-viii.

„living according to nature,“ which ultimately meant living *honestly* and in accordance with the truth. Why is free-spokenness required of the ancient cynic? Because when Diogenes was asked what the most beautiful thing in the world was, his response was “freedom of speech.”<sup>11</sup> Diogenes noisily challenged the status quo and asserted his disdain for and independence from the norms and customs of ancient Athenian society as a means of manifesting his freedom. And like Diogenes, cynics today are still identified by their sarcasm and their sneers, but what is rarely acknowledged is their commitment to seeking and speaking the truth (and in particular cold, hard and unwanted truths). Cynics may sometimes be the bearers of „bad“ news. But I argue that the ancient cynics“ commitment to the pursuit of a „truly human“ life of virtue through a rejection of the status quo was not only courageous and is still worthy of emulation, but that we also should not be too quick to assume that contemporary cynics“ do not share some of the same commitments as Diogenes. To be sure, there is a tendency in the scholarly literature on so-called „modern“ cynicism to posit a decisive break between the past and present meanings of the concept, where modern cynicism lacks the affirmative elements of its ancient counterpart. Yet I do not find any more evidence in said literature that we Americans are cynical and that the concept“s meaning has changed significantly than I do in the accounts of Obama, Axelrod, Stewart or Colbert.

This dissertation, then, is not so much an investigation into the effects of cynicism in contemporary American political culture as an assessment of what it can *do* for it. Cynicism gets a bad rap, I argue, because it is misunderstood, and what it can deliver is a cry like that of Thoreau“s chanticleer in *Walden*: a wake-up call that demands attention

---

<sup>11</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Volume II, trans. Robert Drew Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925): VI.69.

from the American public, and that can generate a response to and engagement with pressing political issues. Friedrich Nietzsche describes the concept as follows:

Cynicism is the only form in which common souls come close to honesty; and the higher man must prick up his ears at every cynicism, whether coarse or refined, and congratulate himself whenever a buffoon without shame or a scientific satyr speaks out in his presence.<sup>12</sup>

Diogenes was one such „buffoon without shame,“ and Mencken serves as a more recent example. They both spoke the „rude“ truth to an audience that for the most part did not want to hear it, but they did so out of respect for the truth and out of a commitment to preserving (by example) the freedom to tell it. Cynics did not and do not believe that there is such a thing as truth in politics, but they did and do believe in truth. And it is precisely because the relationship between truth and politics is tenuous that cynicism has a valuable role to play in democratic processes.

## Rethinking cynicism

In Chapter One, I provide an assessment of the degree to which the meaning of the concept of cynicism (and its contemporary implications for American politics) differs from that of Diogenes, and a consideration of what the legacy of the ancient Cynics can do for politics today. Heartily embracing his most common nickname, „the dog,“ Diogenes was an abrasive figure in ancient Athens who was famous (and infamous) for his sneers, his sarcasm and his earnest commitment to „living life according to nature.“ Yet what did the living of such a life entail? Why did he consider his sneers and his sarcasm to be demonstrative of his capacity to live naturally, and on what principles or

---

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, cited in Robert Bracht Branham, “Defacing the Currency: Diogenes' Rhetoric and the Invention of Cynicism,” in *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy*, eds. Robert Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 81.

precepts did Diogenes base his practices and philosophy? Luis E. Navia includes “rationality, lucidity, disciplined asceticism, freedom of speech, shamelessness, indifference, cosmopolitanism, [and] philanthropy” as key elements within the “Cynic Weltanschauung.”<sup>13</sup> While all of these elements play a part in Cynic philosophy, I will focus on two: freedom of speech (or *parrhesia*, the practice of truth-telling and free-spokenness) and „disciplined asceticism“ (or *autarkeia*, as self-sufficiency). For Diogenes, to live virtuously „according to nature“ was to live a happy life, and as he claimed that courage is “the hue of virtue,”<sup>14</sup> the key to virtue in cynic philosophy is to be brave enough to become the „master of oneself.“ Put another way, in order to live one’s life in accordance with nature, which according to Cynic philosophy is to live a truly human life, one needs to have the qualities or characteristics Navia lists above and the courage to conduct oneself accordingly—regardless of the hardships and risks that doing so might entail.

In Chapter Two, I consider the life and work of H.L. Mencken, the journalist and writer whose fame (and infamy) reached their height in the 1920s, and whose cynical observations of American life caused quite a public stir throughout the entirety of his career. Mencken’s social and political commentary was received with a mixture of reverence and disdain (and his reputation is still mixed today), but it is my contention that this cements rather than challenges his reputation as a cynic. Insisting that “very few human beings really esteem or crave freedom,” Mencken made a point of expressing his commitment to exercising his civil liberties, and primarily his right to freedom of

---

<sup>13</sup> Luis E. Navia, *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), ix.

<sup>14</sup> Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers II*, VI.54

speech.<sup>15</sup> Like Diogenes, Mencken was not looking for followers, and what he set out to do was to provoke his fellow citizens into *responding* to his criticism of American political and social culture. This he did quite effectively, and it is my contention that he offers a worthy example of political and civic engagement *because* of his commitment to haranguing both public leaders and members of the public for failing to uphold and to practice the principles that they preached. Freedom of speech was a key virtue in Diogenes’ practical philosophy, and exercising it required finding the courage to confront one’s peers with the rude truth, with truths that they do not want to hear. And Mencken wrote and spoke freely and frequently because, while he believed that “no normal being wants to hear the truth,” he took it upon himself as his duty to his society to tell it.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, he called attention to important issues that were impacting the social and political landscape of the nation during a tumultuous time in American history.

I argue that one of cynicism’s most compelling qualities is its capacity (indeed, its demand) for engagement. Like Thoreau’s depiction of himself as chancleer, one of the aims of the cynicism of both Diogenes and Mencken was to „shake up“ their fellows by harassing them into responding to their criticism. This brings me, in Chapter Three, to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay *Self-Reliance*, and to the reading of Emerson offered by the American philosopher Stanley Cavell. Cavell is not a cynic, but his reading of Emerson’s work and his vision of Emersonian Perfectionism share affinities with cynicism that are worth exploring. As Emily Miller Budick argues, “Cavell tries to discover how and why Emerson, while affirming his total freedom to turn away from

---

<sup>15</sup> H.L. Mencken, *Minority Report: H.L. Mencken’s Notebooks* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 211.

<sup>16</sup> H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Series* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2010), 480.

society, chooses nonetheless to return to society and to re-engage it.”<sup>17</sup> In this effort, Emerson is quite a bit like not only Thoreau but also Diogenes and Mencken. And Cavell is quite curious as to what motivates this move to re-engage; it is a move that hinges, I think, on what Cavell reminds us is the human need to convene (a need that does not entail conceding one’s freedom). For the purposes of the present study, Cavell’s work on skepticism and on Emersonian Perfectionism ultimately offer a discussion of why *we* and not just *I* matter—a discussion that the cynics tend to bypass. Diogenes and Mencken were not selfish per se. But they did tend to dismiss the interdependencies between the self and the community, a subject that Cavell takes on at length.

Cavell proposes that on the subject of individualism, Emerson is widely misread. “The endlessly repeated idea,” he states, “that Emerson was only interested in finding the individual should give way to or make way for the idea that this quest was his way of founding a nation, writing a constitution, constituting its citizens.”<sup>18</sup> Emerson, Cavell argues, sees the founding or constituting of a nation as imbricated in the processes by which its citizens search for what constitutes their own selves. For Cavell, Emerson’s response to the question of what it means to be an American pushes us to re-consider and respond to this question as we think about what it could (or should) mean. Cavell proposes that this process of questioning and responding is not only philosophical but also political. Indeed, he suggests that philosophy’s great task is responsiveness, meaning that the practice of philosophizing requires engagement with one’s self, one’s society and one’s world, and such engagements are essential to any consideration of politics.

---

<sup>17</sup> Emily Miller Budick, “Sacvan Bercovitch, Stanley Cavell, and the Romance of American Fiction,” in *Cohesion and Dissent in America*, eds. Carol Colatrella and Joseph Alkana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 58

<sup>18</sup> Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989), 93.

Emerson, Cavell argues, is unduly denied the designation of an American philosopher, and he states that there is nothing that “could be more significant of his prose than its despair of and hope for philosophy.”<sup>19</sup> And Cavell also refuses to accept that philosophy’s task is not coupled with some of the same tasks that human beings grapple with in the practice of politics. As James Conant notes, “philosophy for Cavell (its claim to be philosophy depending on its capacity to speak in the universal voice notwithstanding) must not shrink from the recognition that whoever seeks to speak for everyone must first speak as the particular person he or she is—rooted in the particularities of his or her time.”<sup>20</sup>

To return to the themes of truth, lies and responsibility in contemporary political discourse, I argue that cynicism is not the detriment to democracy that Obama and others contend. Rather, its critical capacities can offer a healthy and hearty response to political mendacity, as well as the problem of popular ignorance in American political culture. Throwing up our hands in disgust at the disregard for truth in politics does not absolve us of the responsibility to weigh in on political issues, and perhaps political leaders would be more willing to engage in „debates with the truth“ if the public showed an interest in hearing it. Diogenes and Mencken, and, I think, Emerson and Thoreau, assumed this responsibility by confronting conformism and conventionality. And, when we add Cavell into this mix, what they all offer—albeit in somewhat different ways—is a sense of care and concern for the individual’s relation to a community, as well as a care and concern for the nature of communities and the politics that impact them.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>20</sup> James Conant, “The Recovery of Greece and the Discovery of America,” in *Reading Cavell*, eds. Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh (New York: Routledge, 2006), 240.

# Chapter 1: Can We Learn New Tricks from an Old Dog? The Cynicism of Diogenes

*“Cynicism is an unpleasant way of saying the truth.”—Lillian Hellman, 1939*

The most common contemporary definition of a cynic, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a person who shows a disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and is wont to express this by sneers and sarcasm.”<sup>21</sup> This definition is not inaccurate but it still needs fleshing out, and doing so is no simple task. A deeper understanding of cynicism must not only acknowledge the history of classical Cynicism but also assess the extent to which the meaning of the concept has changed since Diogenes of Sinope first pledged to „deface the currency“ of ancient Athens in the fourth century BC. Diogenes“s provocative behavior “aimed to shock his interlocutors out of their complacency,” and classical Cynicism has a rich historical and literary legacy.<sup>22</sup> Though he maintained that the human individual could find freedom and redemption from the trappings of the social and political worlds, Diogenes insisted that this could only be done in open and explicit opposition to society, and never by means of attempts to create a better one. The ancient Cynics, therefore, had no faith in „the sincerity or goodness of human actions or motives“ when it came to society and politics, and the norms and conventions that dictated these actions were the principle targets of their relentless criticism. Furthermore, if, as the OED says, a cynic can also be described as “a sneering fault-finder,” or “a person disposed to rail and find

---

<sup>21</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Robert Brach Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, “Introduction,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 27.

fault,” then it is my contention that the contemporary definition of a cynic still characterizes the figure of Diogenes and those who followed him.<sup>23</sup>

David Mazella, however, argues that these definitions are inadequate when it comes to assessing cynicism today, and that the concept’s meaning has changed considerably. For Mazella, the OED’s definitions reduce the cynic to a character type, which he feels is insufficient because „modern“ cynicism “does not simply refer to an individual’s psychological state.” Cynicism, Mazella suggests, is “a social concept, a term that describes interactions, not individuals or their states of conscience.”<sup>24</sup> While I agree with Mazella that cynicism’s sneering and fault-finding are interactive, I think it is an overstatement to say that cynicism does not refer to a character type. The classical Cynics were most definitely characters, and their philosophy was highly individualistic in its approaches to criticism. They were decidedly anti-social rather than asocial—though ardent individualists, their sneering, fault-finding and outrageous behavior was meant to provoke interactions with others instead of avoiding them. Indeed, the Cynics were known in ancient Greece for their “most stigmatized traits, including misanthropy, personal satire and railing,” and these are traits that we continue to use to identify the cynics in our midst despite claims that we all reside in a wider cynical culture.<sup>25</sup> This underscores the importance of honing in on what “cynicism” and being cynical actually means if the goal is to assess whether or not it can be considered the dominant ethos in American political culture.

Diogenes was a controversial figure in ancient Athens, celebrated by some, despised by others, but recognized (it seems) by most of the Athenian public. So on what

---

<sup>23</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition.

<sup>24</sup> David Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 67.

grounds does Mazella case his claim that cynicism has morphed into a new phenomenon.

He argues as follows:

the notorious difficulty of defining cynicism, or of coordinating its various conflicting meanings, stems from the fact that it refers to an ensemble of mutually reinforcing attitudes rather than a single attitude uniformly held within the ensemble. Its power and persistence reside in its ability to sustain itself as an ensemble even while absorbing various attempts to change the dynamic.<sup>26</sup>

But could it be that because we have assumed it to represent „an ensemble of mutually enforcing attitudes“ the concept of cynicism has taken on the aura of an ideology? We hear and say that politicians *are* cynical, that the public *is* cynical, that one should or should not *be* cynical, that everyone *is* cynical, and so forth and so on. Indeed, some might argue that the frequency with which these words are bandied about in political discussions and contests is proof in itself that we currently live in a cynical age. In many cases, however, the term „cynical“ is used incorrectly as a synonym for other concepts. Corruption, disbelief, disillusionment and apathy, for example, are almost automatically summoned to mind at the suggestion of cynicism (the first as the cause of the latter three), but so are anger and frustration, and these are not necessarily correlated with the first four (or with cynicism, for that matter). Cynicism has come to be used to describe a diverse selection of sentiments relating to politics, society and human nature, and the fact that cynicism and its grammatical variants is taken to mean different things in similar political and social contexts is significant if we consider corruption, disbelief, apathy, anger and frustration to have real political effects. The use of the term “cynical” and the concept of “cynicism” to signify all of these sentiments clouds our capacity to assess and mitigate the political impact of each sentiment individually.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 8

Rethinking cynicism and its critical practices offers us tools to grapple with the political effects of the sentiments listed above, and the tendency to present ancient and „modern“ cynicism as opposites bars us from the still-useful lessons of Diogenes and later Cynics who embraced his spirit of rebellion against convention. Cynicism did (and still does) describe individuals, individuals who were (and still are) constituted through their acts of disclosure in the public sphere, and its practices were (and still are) active and relentless in their criticism. This is a far cry from the weary and resentful picture of the ideology of „modern“ cynicism that is often invoked today. While I propose that what it means to be „cynical“ has changed much less than contemporary popular and scholarly discourse would suggest, my aim is not to equate a „modern“ version of cynicism with the ancient one. However, I do think that we limit cynicism“s critical potential if we ignore the similarities. At root, Diogenes“ sneering, sarcastic and outrageous mission to „deface the currency“ in order to live in accordance with the truth remains the central tenet of cynicism today.

## Misidentifying cynicism

Peter Sloterdijk“s *The Critique of Cynical Reason* is often credited with starting the discussion of the effects of cynicism in contemporary politics, so it is worth offering a brief description of his treatment of the subject here. First published in Germany in 1983, Sloterdijk“s book defines „modern“ cynicism as an „enlightened false consciousness“ characterized by two related aspects: an awareness that we are all living within a lie with regard to the professed ideals and principles of politicians, and widespread tolerance for this state of affairs. While Sloterdijk“s work focuses on cynicism in the European context,

his claims imply that modern citizens in general are so wearied by their knowledge of the rampant corruption and deception in political and social relations that they lack the strength or motivation for real critique; instead of speaking out against corruption and deception, he argues, we „moderns“ choose to simply buy into (or submit to) the practices that perpetuate them. In essence, Sloterdijk suggests that we are too exhausted to even *care* about truth. And Slavov Žižek’s discussion of cynicism and ideology makes comparable claims: Žižek argues that in today’s “era of cynicism, ideology can afford to reveal the secret of its functioning (its constitutive idiocy, which traditional pre-cynical ideology had to keep a secret) without in the least affecting its efficiency.”<sup>27</sup> For Sloterdijk and Žižek, „modern“ cynicism is qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from the ancient practices, and the break between the two is posited as both a symptom and a source of high levels of political disaffection. The political system, they suggest, has learned not only to cope with public disillusionment but also to take advantage of it: if nobody cares, then politicians will not be held accountable for their actions or inaction.

Focusing on the American context, William Chaloupka calls „modern“ cynicism „the condition of lost belief,” a condition characterized by an angry and frustrated citizenry that not only distrusts government but has also given up on changing the politics that shape it.<sup>28</sup> (In this respect his portrayal of cynicism is similar to Obama’s.) In *Everybody Knows*, Chaloupka argues that Americans have become cynics *par excellence*, and that if cynicism is measured by anger, frustration and disillusionment then one could cite ample evidence to support this claim. It certainly does seem to be the

---

<sup>27</sup> Slavov Žižek, cited in Sharon Stanley, “Retreat from Politics: The Cynic in Modern Times” *Polity* 39, no. 3 (July 2007): 385.

<sup>28</sup> William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xv.

case that the vitriolic character of political partisanship in Washington, the proliferation of media outlets vying to report the next political scandal, and the real fears of American citizens about the material effects of their leaders' decisions on themselves, the society, and the planet have led many to not only distrust but also to disdain the political system. Chaloupka argues that in many ways, Americans do not even recognize or understand their own cynicism, but he states that it is now so deeply entrenched in the political system that attempts to challenge it often just reinforce the cynical mindset. In this vein, he claims that because calls for civility in politics are not considered trustworthy, the more we hear them the more disillusioned with the system we become. We do not know what to believe so we do not know what, specifically, we should fight against, and consequently "the confusions produced by our thin understanding of cynicism only make matters worse" when we try to generate hope for a better future.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Jeffrey Goldfarb's The Cynical Society defines modern cynicism as "a form of legitimation through disbelief," and claims that "the single most pressing challenge facing American democracy right now is widespread public cynicism."<sup>30</sup> He ties the problem to the rise of mass society and the accompanying growth of the media and advertising, but his conclusion is similar to Chaloupka's: the more we see and hear, the less we believe. It is hard to argue against many aspects of this picture of contemporary political and social culture. Sadly, it does often seem that the only things we can affirm together as a public are (a) that the professed ideals of our political leaders are empty, and (b) that this is „how the system works“ and there is nothing to be done about it. What options do we or could we have in such a state of affairs, other than simply learning to cope with lies and

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Goldfarb, *The Cynical Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1.

corruption? We do in fact have other options, but recognizing them requires a better understanding of what cynicism is and how it operates, as well as a debunking of the ideology that cynicism has purportedly become. While I agree with Chaloupka and Goldfarb that we often don't know who or what to blame for the troubled state of American politics, our „thin understanding“ of cynicism is not the issue at hand. Rather, the reification of the concept itself hobbles attempts to change the political culture. Even Sloterdijk's suggestion that the remedy for the melancholy of an exhausted critical consciousness lies in adopting a „cheeky subversiveness“ to the status quo is more a coping mechanism than a strategic challenge to the problems of dishonesty and disbelief.

Mazella suggests that contemporary cynicism erodes our capacity to find hope for the future, blinding us, as members of the American public, to possibilities for social and political change. Following the work of Alan Keenan, he proposes that there are three „ideal“ cynical types in contemporary American political culture:

(1) the “master-cynic,” who wields power within the political system; (2) the cynical (though disempowered) insiders, whose publicity helps sustain the political system; and (3) the powerless, „outsider-cynics,” who operate as the passive, excluded “public” of the political system.<sup>31</sup>

For Keenan and Mazella, „master-cynics“ are the ruthless, manipulative and self-serving political leaders (those who, following the OED's description of cynicism, disbelieve „in the sincerity or goodness of human motives or actions“ and aim to exploit and capitalize upon this insincerity), and the cynical insiders serve the masters to gain what advantages they can through their associations with power. The „outsider-cynics,” by contrast, are members of the disempowered „public,” who are sometimes angry, sometimes apathetic but always distrustful of politics and government. Yet other than a general distrust in

---

<sup>31</sup> Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, 9.

human sincerity and goodness, I do not see the connection between these three ideal types and cynicism. The Cynics were only ruthless in their commitment to ranting and railing, they would never have acknowledged (much less served) a „master,“ and they most certainly were not disempowered. Keenan and Mazella may be accurately describing three hierarchical political categories—masters, insiders, and the public—but they are not describing cynics, and cynicism in America is not the pervasive political problem that it is branded as today.

Indeed, according to Benjamin Ginsberg’s theory of cynical realism, American political culture could do with *more* cynicism, and in fact we have *too much* faith in the sincerity of politicians and the democratic system of representation. For Ginsberg, one of the hard truths that any politically savvy individual must accept is that politics, like power, corrupts, and that therefore it would be absurd to trust in the words of an elected official (or, for that matter, those of a political candidate). His theory is based on three related notions: (a) that politics revolves around self-interest, (b) that its goals are to secure and/or increase wealth, status or power, and (c) that ideals or „issues“ are used as weapons in political contests.<sup>32</sup> This certainly fits with the „realist“ aspect of the theory, but how does the concept of cynicism fit with it? For Ginsberg, what cynicism adds to the theory is a call to question and to confront political leaders rather than simply taking their self-interested motives and behavior for granted (or worse, buying into their claims). Ginsburg’s theory is based on a different conception of cynicism than those offered above, one that fits closely with that of the late nineteenth-century journalist Ambrose Bierce who described it as follows: “Cynicism is that blackguard defect of vision which

---

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Ginsberg, *The American Lie: Government by the People and Other Political Fables* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007), 4

compels us to see the world as it is, instead of as it should be.”<sup>33</sup> The cynical realist, then, says that it is necessary to accept that politicians and truth are incompatible in order to see (and live in) the „real“ world. And “when it comes to understanding politics,” Ginsberg writes, “one cannot be too cynical.”<sup>34</sup>

Ginsberg’s theory, then, adheres to the idea of cynicism as an active and outspoken practice of political and social critique, and thus his understanding of the concept and practices of cynicism suggests that their meaning has not undergone a substantial change from the original. Indeed, he presents cynicism as not only a healthy but also a *necessary* response to the reality of political corruption and mendacity; we *should* distrust the system, but we should also stand up to it when it becomes oppressive. According to this theory, then, we actually need more cynics to see through the lies of our political leaders and to (presumably) identify and speak out against what it is that they are trying to hide from us. For the cynical realist, cynicism is not a danger to democracy—indeed, it is a rare but essential critical attitude that must be cultivated rather than combated. Following in this vein, it is worth considering Lillian Hellmann’s assertion that “Cynicism is an unpleasant way of saying the truth.” Her definition suggests not an exhausted awareness of lies and deception but rather an unsolicited act of truth-telling. Hellmann’s statement is ambiguous as to whether the announcement is unwelcome because of the specifics of the message (the truth) or the „unpleasantness“ of the delivery, but, as will be shown, this ambiguity actually aligns her definition closely with the concept’s foundations.

---

<sup>33</sup> Bierce, Ambrose, *The Unabridged Devil’s Dictionary*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001)

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

Mazella notes that one factor that has fostered Cynicism's attraction throughout the centuries is "its programmatic hostility to political power, conventional values, and rival philosophies."<sup>35</sup> While this is true, I also want to point out that Diogenes was neither a political dissident nor a rabble-rouser—his contempt for the ideals and practices of his day was dispersed quite equally: he was as quick to criticize the poor for coveting the wealth and privilege of the rich and powerful as he was the rich and powerful for valuing their money and privilege above the „true“ sources of happiness in life. According to Diogenes, anyone and everyone who did not realize the error of such thinking paid for it with their freedom. Desmond discusses one of the classic Cynic paradoxes, „poverty is wealth,“ as follows: for the Cynics, “What is truly important cannot be bought or sold like a commodity. Health, human friendship, self-regard, the various virtues that distinguish one as an excellent human being and that enable one to face life's contingencies—such goods depend more on individual disposition than on riches.”<sup>36</sup> Diogenes took it upon himself to illuminate this fact and to show people that they needed to look beyond not only material wealth but also the socially fabricated lies that dictated their conduct as well as their desires, effectively depriving them of the true virtues and values they *should* honor as natural beings.

Navia, who has written extensively on the ancient Cynics, argues that “modern cynicism is in reality, all appearances notwithstanding, the antithesis of classical cynicism,” and he places the modern variety of cynicism at the root of the present maladies afflicting American society and political culture.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it seems that for

---

<sup>35</sup> Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> Desmond, *Greek Praise of Poverty*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> Navia, *Classical Cynicism*, vii.

Navia there is a „good“ cynicism (ancient Cynicism) and a „bad“ cynicism (the modern variety), and on the topic of the latter he concludes:

The present crisis in human values, the emergence of irrationalism so evident in certain types of popular music and entertainment, the contemptuous attitude towards traditions and established norms, the brutality exhibited by the behavior of nations toward one another, the dehumanization of human relations brought about by a blind and unbridled reliance on technology—all these and other characteristics of our times reflect the advent of universal cynicism that, as an offspring of nihilism, threatens to plunge the human species into a long era of barbarism and primitivism.<sup>38</sup>

Navia’s strong condemnation of modern (indeed, „universal“) cynicism for its iconoclastic tendencies is curious, given the typical antics of the ancient Cynics. They too were often charged with posing a similar threat to society; they certainly showed great contempt for traditions and established norms, and associations were, and sometimes still are, made between their ways of life and both barbarism and primitivism (though these are misreadings). Navia himself seems to share the ancient philosophy’s fatalistic take on social and political reform, and the above rant could be construed as cynical in what he wants to portray as the classical (and hence „good“) sense. What is not clear is why a „universal,“ „bad“ cynicism is to blame for the concerns that he raises.

As it is functions today, cynicism is in some respects at odds with the spirit of the ancient philosophy from which it derived. Nevertheless, there are residual similarities between the ancient and modern conceptions that complicate attempts to divide them conclusively, and these similarities are often glossed over in studies seeking to assess the impact of cynicism as a modern phenomenon. One of the reasons for this, it seems to me, is that in both popular and scholarly discourse there is a tendency to assume that someone

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 3.

who believes that most human beings are self-serving and dishonest is him- or herself self-serving and dishonest. Louisa Shea claims that “cynicism has come to signify, in the words of the [OED], „a person who believes that people are motivated purely by self-interest rather than acting for honorable or unselfish reasons.“ But *cynic* did not always denote a self-seeking and ruthless individual.”<sup>39</sup> (She also cites the OED’s 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, though I have not been able to locate this particular definition.) While Shea, Chaloupka, Goldfarb, Navia, Sloterdijk and Mazella, are all attentive to the legacy of Diogenes’s cynicism, they all claim that the meaning of the concept has morphed into something destructive to the democratic process. On this point, I disagree. What I am arguing is that a cynic is not a ruthless, self-seeking individual (such as the „master-cynic“), but rather an outspoken critic of such individuals and of society’s tolerance for such behavior. Cynicism also remains a far cry from the weary and resigned awareness of corruption or the pessimistic renunciation of the possibilities of communal life invoked by Sloterdijk and seen in Keenan’s „outsider-cynic.“ A deeper investigation into ancient Cynicism, then, is in order.

## Troubling the ancient/modern dichotomy

Interestingly, the drive to distinguish between an ancient and modern, or a „good“ and a „bad“ cynicism is found not only in modern studies of cynicism, but has historical roots that can be traced back through the history of ancient philosophy. As Heinrich Niehues-Probsting emphasizes,

[to] anyone who knows the history of Cynicism’s effects and reception, the separation of cynicism and Cynicism seems like a continuation of the attempt to

---

<sup>39</sup> Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 2010), ix.

distinguish an authentic and original cynicism from a false and degenerate one, a Cynicism worthy of respect from one worthy of rejection, a good Cynicism from a bad one. This attempt is coextensive with the history of cynicism itself.<sup>40</sup>

The Cynics of ancient Greece were equally controversial among their proponents and detractors, and what, precisely, constituted authentic Cynicism was a matter of debate over the centuries. Indeed, the historical and literary sources chronicling Diogenes' life and philosophy were, rather ironically, protective of his image and his legacy to the extent that they sometimes outright avoided addressing certain elements. As Margarethe Billerbeck has argued, "in the history of ancient Cynicism the portrayal of Diogenes and his successors is far from being uniform," and she notes that among some of his more famous „successors“ there was a "tendency to idealize the founder of the movement and to purge his portrait of any features that might shock off potential followers."<sup>41</sup> Dio Chrysostom, Epictetus, Lucian and the Emperor Julian serve as examples of sources guilty of such idealization, and their accounts of Cynicism and of Diogenes are often challenged for presenting a „sanitized“ cynic type that does not fit Diogenes' life and practices. They all celebrated Diogenes' commitment to *autarkeia* and *parrhesia* but tended to downplay his shamelessness (*anaideia*) in their telling of his philosophy.

But as I aim to show, Diogenes' shamelessness—his outrageous, audacious and flagrantly rude behavior—was an integral part of his philosophical practice. He was brazen and contemptuous of others, and he was often treated with contempt himself, but his shamelessness and contempt were programmatic and critical to his capacity to „live according to nature.“ This also offers a clue as to why classical Cynicism has not always

---

<sup>40</sup> Heinrich Niehues-Probsting, "Picturing Diogenes," in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 365-6.

<sup>41</sup> Margarethe Billerbeck, "The Ideal Cynic from Epictetus to Julius," in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 205.

had a warm popular or scholarly reception. Hegel wrote the Cynics off as un-philosophical, simple, and ultimately uninteresting.<sup>42</sup> And Ferdinand Sayre, whose 1938 study on Diogenes was highly critical of the philosophy and its founder, describes it as follows:

The Cynics attacked and ridiculed religion, philosophy, science, art, literature, love, friendship, good manners, loyalty to parents and even athletics—everything which tended to embellish and enrich human life, to give it significance and to make it worth living. The callous amorality expressed by the word “cynicism” reflects the impression made by them upon their contemporaries.<sup>43</sup>

Diogenes did attack and ridicule all of these things, and he did make a callous impression on some his contemporaries for doing so. But his goal was to demonstrate that one must actively search, question and, ultimately, *figure out* what gives life significance and makes it worth living rather than falling back upon what, according to society, one is *supposed* to value. For Diogenes, as for the later Cynics and cynics today, this was and is always an ongoing process. Rather than looking to universals, the Cynics worshipped the everyday and were committed to action over abstract theory. They can still prompt us to ask ourselves *what* we value because they also demand that we explain or justify *why*. And such demands can prompt discussions or dialogue, and inspire individual citizens to push for change.

I should note that who deserves the title of the original Dog has been contested, just as it was in ancient Greece through the sixth century BC. As Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé argues, “Opinions are divided between Antisthenes—a follower of Socrates whose claim is based on a tradition of ancient sources, the only defect of which is that they are

---

<sup>42</sup> Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment*, ix-x.

<sup>43</sup> Ferdinand Sayre, cited in Robert Bracht Branham, “Defacing the Currency: Diogenes' Rhetoric and the Invention of Cynicism,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 81.

late (Epictetus, Dio Chrysostom, Aelian, Diogenes Laertius, Stobaeus, and the Suda)—and Diogenes of Sinope, whose claim is supported by modern scholarship.”<sup>44</sup> Antisthenes was indeed a follower of Socrates (he was present at his death), and he wrote extensively on such topics as rhetoric, logic, ethics and politics.<sup>45</sup> He was also known to have given lessons on asceticism at the Cynosarges gymnasium, and by some accounts Diogenes heard him there and became something of a disciple.<sup>46</sup> This explains why the heritage of Cynic philosophy is sometimes traced back to Antisthenes (and even to Socrates). But as Donald R. Dudley points out, “the validity of the tradition which makes Antisthenes the founder of Cynicism has been questioned in both ancient and modern times,” and he concludes that while Antisthenes may have had some influence on the development of classical Cynicism, Diogenes should be considered its founder.<sup>47</sup> Dudley makes a solid case for his argument: Antisthenes may have been an ascetic, but he was not a vagrant, and unlike Diogenes, who “poured scorn on all his contemporaries,” he was not disposed to rant and rail at those around him, and even attended philosophical lectures and was paid (albeit very modestly) for his teachings.<sup>48</sup> And regardless, Diogenes was, and remains, the literary hero of the philosophy of Cynicism and the figure most associated with its practices.

But before getting into the specifics of Diogenes’ life and philosophy, and thus of what it meant to be „cynical“ in ancient Greece, it is necessary to clarify what Cynicism was not. As Dudley contends, “it would be an exaggeration to speak of any Cynic

---

<sup>44</sup> Marie Odile Goulet-Cazé, “Appendix A: Who Was the First Dog?” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 414.

<sup>45</sup> Goulet-Cazé and Branham, “Introduction,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> Diogenes Laertius, cited in Luis E. Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope: The Man in the Tub* (Westport, CT: 1998), 153.

<sup>47</sup> Donald R. Dudley, *A History of Cynicism* (London: Methuen & Co, 1937), 1.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 2.

„school“ in the regular sense of organized teaching and a common body of doctrine.”<sup>49</sup>

While this study will focus on the life of Diogenes, the later cynics who carried on this philosophy through the sixth century AD were a motley crew of individualists whose preaching and teachings took various aims. Rather than a strict philosophical school, Dudley explains that “Cynicism was really a phenomenon which presented itself in three not inseparable aspects—a vagrant ascetic life, an assault on all established values, and a body of literary genres particularly well adapted to satire and popular philosophical propaganda.”<sup>50</sup> As will be shown, the improvisational character of Diogenes“ challenges to convention and power allowed him to turn his daily habits and practices into affirmations of the contingent nature of social and political interactions. It was also, I think, one of the qualities that gave his philosophy its staying power in the centuries that followed him, for the later cynics were able to „improvise“ their practice of Cynic philosophy to fit their own social and political circumstances without abandoning the spirit of Diogenes.

## Diogenes the Dog

Because he left few (if any) writings of his own, the story of Diogenes“ life and philosophy can only be pieced together from other sources, and the legitimacy of some of these accounts remains contested today. Diogenes Laertius“ biographical sketch of Diogenes in Lives of Eminent Philosophers is generally considered the most important ancient secondary source on him, and he claims that Diogenes wrote fourteen dialogues and seven tragedies. But the works themselves were not preserved and this claim may be

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 37.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. xvi.

unfounded, and what we know of Diogenes today comes largely from the *chreia* (anecdotes or „sayings“) that were said to be associated with him during his lifetime and from which the standard conceptions of his character and philosophy have been drawn. (Laertius“ biography is the richest source of these *chreia*, which explains its lasting significance.) Still, some details notwithstanding, there has been enough corroboration between sources on particular aspects of his life to establish the central tenets of the philosophical movement of ancient Cynicism for which he is the archetypal figure.

Diogenes was not born in Athens, but arrived there sometime during the course of the fourth century BC after having been exiled from his native Sinope for his purported involvement in defacing the city“s currency. The exact nature of his crime (or whether it *was* a crime) is unknown, as the historical accounts are varied and inconclusive. But his practice of „defacing the currency“ became an essential feature of the Cynic philosophy, and Diogenes arrived in Athens with a mission: to once again „deface the currency,“ though this time it was not the coinage that he planned to defile but the customs, norms and conventions that dictated Athenian social and political life. Taking up residence in a tub in the middle of the marketplace, Diogenes sought to show others that they were missing out on the happiness that would come from converting to his ascetic lifestyle and freeing themselves from the fetters of material desires and the pressures of attending to socially acceptable measures of status and value. Yet Diogenes“ asceticism was idiosyncratic, and while it required a strict commitment to disciplining the body and mind it was hardly restrictive of pleasure per se. Sexual desires, for example, he considered perfectly natural, and he saw no reason to be ashamed of satisfying them or to reserve

such pleasures for moments of privacy. Indeed, Diogenes often made a point of „enjoying himself“ in the middle of the square, a sight that frequently offended the Athenian public.

His trademark uniform was a ragged cloak, and the historical and literary records describe him carrying nothing but a leathern wallet (though by some accounts he is also said to have carried a staff, but only in his old age when he could not have walked without one). Diogenes“ near-naked appearance and minimal possessions are of significance because they represented his *chosen* way of life, a life dedicated to showing others that he could live happily among them while continuing to honor his own beliefs (in ancient Greek this translated to living well, so we can think of happiness, or *eudemonia*, as a state of well-being). A beggar by his own volition, he practiced his particular brand of asceticism publicly as an expression of his independence and, relatedly, as a reaction against the status quo. Diogenes“ conduct was not only rational according to his principles but also programmatic, and “every one of his gestures and statements, his mode of dressing, his diet, his living in a tub, his verbal and behavioral responses to what he heard and saw, his shocking antics—all these were parabolic expressions of his philosophical stance.”<sup>51</sup> What he aimed for was a life of freedom grounded in disciplined self-sufficiency, and he held that such a life was attainable if one had the courage to live it. And it was in this spirit that he embraced poverty, defied manners, and openly mocked all commonly accepted conceptions of virtue and decency, doing so in ways that his fellow Athenians considered rude, impertinent, and crazy but also quite often amusing.

The word „cynic“ literally meant „dog-like,“ and Diogenes and the later cynics “defiantly claimed [the canine epithet] as a metaphor for their novel philosophical

---

<sup>51</sup> Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope*, 64.

stance,” agreeing with those who called them dogs even as they disagreed with them on almost all other occasions.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, as far as Diogenes was concerned, he might as well be compared to a dog in the eyes of his contemporaries, for he renounced membership in any human community ordered by „unnatural“ laws. He contended that the rules dictating a dog’s way or mode of life, unlike the rules governing society, were natural and thus legitimate, and because of this he looked to their habits and behavior (as well as those of other animals) as sources of inspiration for his own mission to live naturally. And, like the stray dogs that roamed the city, begging for food and taking care of their needs as they pleased, Diogenes refused to leave the Athenians alone—he would bark (sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively) at those he didn’t like, or those who questioned or threatened his capacity to live his life on his own terms. Diogenes chose the status of a permanent outsider in Athens, and he took this status very seriously. While he lived „with“ the Athenians he was adamant that he was not „of“ them.

There is a distinctly anti-materialist or anti-luxury as well as libertarian and even anarchist quality to Diogenes’ cynicism, which may be one of the reasons for its failure to translate easily into politically reformist projects. Considering the social and political worlds to be necessarily corrupted by excess, he claimed strict indifference to the intricacies of Athenian political affairs and refused to recognize political or social rank.<sup>53</sup> Diogenes took it as his duty as well as his right to declare the superiority of his style of life over that of any and all of his contemporaries, and he not only braved the possibility of retaliation but also invited it. There are records, for example, of interactions between Diogenes and Alexander the Great, and we learn from Diogenes Laertius that when

---

<sup>52</sup> Branham and Goulet-Cazé, “Introduction,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 4-5.

<sup>53</sup> Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope*, 96.

Alexander once approached him and announced, “I am Alexander the great king,” Diogenes stood tall before him and responded “And I am Diogenes the Dog.”<sup>54</sup> This could be read a number of ways, but it seems that what he most likely meant was that it was as ridiculous for Alexander to call himself a king as it was for Diogenes to call himself a dog. They were simply men, not dogs or kings, and there was no more nobility to being a king than there was to being a dog—either as „kings“ or „dogs“ they were equals. Diogenes“ remark was not only insolent but also decidedly courageous, as there could have been serious consequences for his insolence should Alexander have taken the insult to heart. Yet interestingly, the king seems to have respected his courage. Diogenes Laertius also tells us that on another occasion, “Alexander is reported to have said, „had I not been Alexander, I should have liked to be Diogenes.“<sup>55</sup>

### ***Parrhesia, autarkeia* and ‘living according to nature’**

Diogenes“ cynicism was “a philosophy of revolt and a reaction against what he perceived to be the dismal spectacle of human existence,” but it was also a publicly performed personal response to particular conditions, circumstances, and concerns.<sup>56</sup> His attraction to concepts such as *parrhesia* and *autarkeia* make sense in this context: Diogenes was hell-bent on speaking out against authority, and he was determined to prove that he was capable of surviving on his own. But, paradoxically, he did *need* a public, because he needed an audience for his revelations. Michel Foucault, whose final lectures in 1984 were devoted to a study of both courage and truth, discussed at length the paradox of the cynics, who were at once private and public. He gives the following

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>55</sup> Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers II*, VI. 32-34.

<sup>56</sup> Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope*, 112.

definition of *parrhesia*: it is “the exercise of telling men the truth, announcing it without ever being overcome by fear.”<sup>57</sup> Diogenes remained in Athens because, while he did not accept the rationality or utility of its laws and customs, he had a need to tell the Athenians this and to show them why. These revelatory performances of his had an almost compulsive quality—he could not simply use his reason to determine the truth of his own needs, *he had to show others that he knew better*. Such demonstrations were required of the practicing cynic (and, I think, are still required of cynics today).

Because Diogenes’ debunking required revelation to others, speaking the truth was above all else the means by which he lived in accordance with human nature as he conceived it. It also positioned him uncomfortably on a line straddling the divide between private and public. Foucault highlights the critical importance that the concept of *parrhesia* holds for the Cynic mode of life: Cynicism is a “form of philosophy in which modes of life and truth-telling are directly and immediately linked together,”<sup>58</sup> where the capacity to speak freely is conditioned by the cynic’s capacity to live freely in a literal sense—without attachments, and without “all the pointless obligations which everyone usually acknowledges and which have no basis in nature or reason.”<sup>59</sup> Diogenes was not only the beggar wandering through the streets, covered in a tattered cloak, slinging insults at those around him and shocking them with his shameless insistence on satisfying his physical needs in public. He was also “the man who roams, who is not integrated into society, [who] has no household, family, hearth, or country,” and who can clearly discern the irrationality of the socially constructed laws and conventions that dictate the lives of

---

<sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2011), 167.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 166

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 171.

others because of the distance afforded by his independence from them.<sup>60</sup> His independence conditions the possibility of truth-telling, while the act of *parrhesia*, the act of exposing everything, is the ultimate exercise of his freedom and requires him to remain with society if not exactly in it. While the experience of freedom includes a necessarily private dimension it must also be witnessed, and Diogenes' life was thus an *exposure* of the truth of himself.

It is in this sense that Foucault argues that *parrhesia* constitutes an act "by which the subject *manifests* himself when speaking the truth, [and] thinks of himself and is recognized by others as speaking the truth."<sup>61</sup> Foucault underscores the performative dimension of cynicism and the importance of the presence of others in the becoming of the cynic self. Diogenes chastised his contemporaries for the hypocrisy of their morals, for their „slavish“ desires for wealth and status, and for living in contradiction with human nature as *he* conceived it. And he spoke with his body as much as with words, with his physical presence and his actions, to show that it was possible to live in honest and open resistance to the status quo, that a disciplined, ascetic life was perfectly sustainable, and that, therefore, the conventions of his time could not be „natural.“ So, by exposing the lies of the Greek conventional world, Diogenes revealed both the „natural“ world and himself. As Foucault explains, cynicism

brings to light, in their irreducible nakedness, those things which alone are indispensable to human life or which constitute its most elementary, rudimentary essence. In this sense, this mode of life simply reveals what life is in its independence, its fundamental freedom, and consequently it reveals what life ought to be.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 170.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 2-3.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 171.

Diogenes' exposure of his own living, breathing and very bare body was a direct challenge to the Athenians to defend the rationality of their needs, their wants, and their ways.

He was well aware that his saying *no* to the polis would meet with resistance and entail risks, but Diogenes Laertius notes that Diogenes maintained that "nothing in life...has any chance of succeeding without strenuous practice; and this is capable of overcoming anything."<sup>63</sup> I will now turn to the strenuous practice of self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) in Cynic philosophy. Becoming self-sufficient required testing the limits of one's capacities, and Diogenes was adamant that it required considerable self-discipline (*askesis*). Through disciplined asceticism, he sought to train his body to endure hardship with ease, and by strengthening his body he also believed he would strengthen his mind.

Diogenes Laertius offers the following evidence for this argument:

[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; and [he would say that] the one half of the training is incomplete without the other, good health and strength being just as much included among the essential things, whether for body or soul. And he would adduce indisputable evidence to show how easily from gymnastic training we arrive at virtue.<sup>64</sup>

The historical sources are in agreement that Diogenes was committed to physical fitness, and that he roamed through and around the city and embraced every opportunity to train and challenge his body. He also insisted on wearing his ragged cloak and nothing more regardless of inclement weather, and was known to roll in hot sand in the summer as a means of testing his threshold for pain and discomfort. By pushing his limits physically,

---

<sup>63</sup> Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers II*, VI. 71.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 71

Diogenes contended that he was able to demonstrate the irrationality of many of the needs and wants of the Athenians—the desires of his contemporaries were superfluous to their *real* necessities because he could prove that he did not *need* them to survive or live happily.

And like his body, Diogenes maintained that reason (*logos*) could be honed with practice, and that it also required regular exercise to perform at its best. He insisted that although *logos* was a natural human faculty, it was a faculty that only very few people actually made use of. Indeed, Diogenes argued that it was Athenians’ failure to train and utilize their *logoi* that deprived them (and anyone ruled by man-made laws and norms) of a life lived naturally. His insistence on this point is important because it reconciles his otherwise contradictory claim that as a „dog“ he was more human than anyone else in Athens. Although Diogenes sought to emulate some of the behaviors of animals such as dogs and mice, he never actually sought to *become* a dog or a mouse. His logic here is clear—animals lack the capacity to reason, and it would be perfectly *unnatural* for him, as a human being, to revoke his own.<sup>65</sup> He argued that when we, as human beings, put our reason to use, we see what we really need to survive, and we can therefore recognize the fact that so much of what is considered desirable according to society distracts us from nature’s true gifts. Diogenes Laertius tells us that Diogenes “would continually say that for the conduct of life we need right reason or a halter,” and the Greek word for „halter“ here also translates to „noose“ or „rope.”<sup>66</sup> The active use of one’s *logos*, then, was required for a true and naturally lived life, and for Diogenes, those who did not use their *logos* dangled from the hangman’s noose of convention. This noose might not strangle

---

<sup>65</sup> John L. Moles, “Cynic Cosmopolitanism,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 112.

<sup>66</sup> Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers II*, VI. 24.

them completely, but it would prevent them from living properly as free humans because they would be dependent on laws and conventions to tell them how to think and what to do. Like a pet dog's collar and leash, the noose dragged them through life rather than letting them lead themselves.

Diogenes' commitment to physical self-discipline extended to his diet, which was decidedly austere and consisted largely of bread, lentils, and lupines to ensure that he was capable of surviving on the simplest of means. Nevertheless, although his regular regimen consisted of simple foods, he was also reported to have enjoyed Athenian delicacies such as cakes, olives, and even wine from time to time. This may seem to contradict his commitment to asceticism (and, along with his habit of shameless sexual gratification, contributed to accusations that he was a hypocritical hedonist), but he charged that these infrequent indulgences demonstrated one of the more important aspects of his self-sufficient character—that he was resourceful and adaptable, able to secure the means for his material existence in an uncertain world. By this line of reasoning, there was nothing wrong with indulgence from time to time as long as he did not become *dependent* on them. In a similar vein, Diogenes justified his commitment to the principles of *parrhesia* and *autarkeia* despite his choice to live his life as a beggar. His critics have certainly asked how is it that a vagrant could claim to be not only free-spoken but also self-sufficient when he was surviving off the goodwill of his fellows. Plato confronted Diogenes on this issue, and Sayre's study of Diogenes highlights such supposed inconsistencies in Cynic philosophy. Sayre censured Diogenes' refusal to work and his prideful indolence, and he complained that "the Cynics denounced the pleasures

of others, while indulging themselves without stint in their own.”<sup>67</sup> Ultimately, he concluded, “the Cynic „life according to nature“ was a slump towards animalism and a retrogression from civilization.”<sup>68</sup> Yet Diogenes clearly did not abstain from work out of laziness (indeed, a person who was as fanatic as he was about discipline and exercise could hardly be considered lazy). Rather, he *chose* the life of a beggar as a means of consciously exercising and expressing his own freedom. As R. Bracht Branham argues, “begging—the rejection of work, of a life considered productive by society—is required by freedom to avoid becoming subject to society’s rules and authority.”<sup>69</sup> It was, then, yet another means by which he could actively say *no* to the status quo.

The animalistic or primitivist readings of the cynics offered by Sayre and others have been largely discounted by more recent scholarship, but the important cynic concept of cosmopolitanism (*kosmopolites*) is still sometimes mistaken as a declaration of Diogenes’ desire to return to a primitive lifestyle, or as his advocacy of a „return to nature.“ (This seems to stem from the work of scholars such as Sayre and the cultural anthropologist George Boaz, who also read a kind of primitivism into cynicism though his portrayal of the cynics is more flattering). But as Shea notes, today “most scholars agree that for Diogenes cosmopolitanism signifies a form of apoliticism, or more accurately, antipoliticism.”<sup>70</sup> The contemporary meaning of cosmopolitanism has changed significantly from the original, but Diogenes is generally credited with having coined the term (literally a combination of the Greek words for citizen and universe). His cosmopolitanism did not express an appreciation for the „worldliness“ of a man (or

---

<sup>67</sup> Ferdinand Sayre, *Diogenes of Sinope: A Study of Greek Cynicism* (Baltimore, MD: J.H. Furst, 1938), 2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 1

<sup>69</sup> Branham, “Defacing the Currency,” in Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, 97.

<sup>70</sup> Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment*, 17.

woman) who has traveled widely and witnessed many other ways of life, but it also did not represent his appreciation of the natural world as such. Rather, as Diogenes Laertius tells us, Diogenes declared his cosmopolitanism with the following announcement to the Athenian public: “I am a citizen of the world.”<sup>71</sup> What he meant by this was that he was *not* a citizen of any city or nation. His statement was a negation of the laws created by man rather than an acknowledgement of „belonging to the world,“ for he was saying to the people of Athens that no matter where he went he would always be a foreigner. As Dudley explains, “the cosmopolitanism of Diogenes was not the well-traveled man’s interest in alien cultures, like that of Herodotus, but rather a reaction against every kind of coercion imposed by the community on the individual.”<sup>72</sup> His cosmopolitanism highlights the individualistic character of his philosophical practice, for he was essentially saying to the people of Athens, „keep your laws off my body and out of my philosophy.“ So, despite Diogenes’ claims to political indifference, his cosmopolitanism was a celebration of his status of exile and permanent foreigner.

We must ask, then, why Diogenes insisted that living happily meant living according to „nature“ if he was not advocating a „return to nature.“ Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé has argued that in Cynic philosophy, human existence can only be rightly understood by observing and assessing the immediate physical world, and in this world only the laws of nature (*phusis*)—which behave unpredictably, requiring an attention to forces of contingency and uncertainty—could put constraints upon their freedom.<sup>73</sup> For Diogenes, nature’s laws were revealed in the ways they restricted his physical freedom

---

<sup>71</sup> Laertius, *Lives*, VI. 63.

<sup>72</sup> Dudley, *History of Cynicism*, 34.

<sup>73</sup> Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, “Religion and the Early Cynics,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé *The Cynics*, 79.

and fixed the boundaries of his capacity to control the world around him. While nature certainly provided him with gifts, such as sunshine for warmth and lupines and water to ease his hunger and quench his thirst, it also threatened him with weather, sickness, and other challenges to his material existence. According to Cynic philosophy, the laws of nature were something to be respected more than humbly honored. As Goulet-Cazé notes, Diogenes “wanted to be master of his own destiny...[and] in no way [did] he revere nature as one would a god. He simply [had] the wisdom not to struggle against it in vain.”<sup>74</sup> It is largely on this account that he was indifferent to questions or concerns about history, the after-life, or the existence of gods. Why worry about the past, the future, or other worlds when we can only know this one, Diogenes might ask, especially in light of the fact that we can never know what circumstances we will face over the course of a life (or how long we will live, for that matter)? Such thinking distracts each of us from the actual practice of living within the physical, material world, and for Diogenes, when we are not actively committed to experiencing the present we cannot aspire to self-mastery but instead become hollow and enfeebled versions of ourselves.

While Diogenes may have sworn upon „living according to nature,“ most of what is known about his appreciation for nature comes from his hostility to custom and his habit of emulating the behavior of animals. Still, it appears that he was a materialist of sorts, and his understanding of what the world is made of and how it came to be also served as justification for his beliefs and behaviors. Diogenes Laertius gives us a hint at the cynics’ ontology in the following often cited passage:

according to right reason, as [Diogenes] put it, all elements are contained in all things and pervade everything; since meat is not only a constituent of bread, but bread of vegetables; and all other bodies by means of certain invisible passages

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 79-80.

and particles, find their way in and unite with all substances in the form of vapour.”<sup>75</sup>

Dudley has argued that this passage clearly demonstrates “a bit of popularized Anaxagorean physics,” and he suggests that Diogenes might have employed it as a clever means of capitalizing on Anaxagoras’ philosophy to rationalize his habits of eating and relieving himself publicly.<sup>76</sup> Regardless, Diogenes was clearly endorsing the idea that all things contains elements of everything else, and that all elements in the world move through all of its different bodies.<sup>77</sup> It is on this ground that he is often thought to have based one of his more controversial claims, his endorsement of cannibalism as a perfectly „natural“ practice.<sup>78</sup> There is no record of Diogenes actually engaging in cannibalism, and it is most likely that he took up the subject for its shock value rather than as a genuine appeal to the Athenian community to take up the practice, but it does highlight his insistence that, on the most basic level, we are all composed of and share the same elemental particles. If we are all animals and we eat other animals, and if other animals sometimes eat us, then what’s wrong with eating one another? What, he might ask, makes cannibalism necessarily unnatural?

Suggestions such as these challenged not only the laws and conventions of Athens but also the theoretical systems of its other resident philosophers. As Bracht Branham argues, “unlike the metaphysicians of his day, Plato being the prime example, Diogenes was content to derive his thinking directly from his social—or in his case anti-social—

---

<sup>75</sup> Laertius, *Lives*, VI. 72-3.

<sup>76</sup> Dudley, *History of Cynicism*, 30

<sup>77</sup> Moles, “Cynic Cosmopolitanism,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 112.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 112.

practice without grounding it in a metaphysical domain remote from experience.”<sup>79</sup> If, for Diogenes, the only things that can be *known* are learned through actual, practical experience, then what is real cannot be logically deduced, and he had no patience for Plato’s theoretical constructs and universals. Indeed, their approaches to philosophy could hardly have been more different, and, unsurprisingly, there are records of decidedly unfriendly exchanges between the two of them. Plato was reported to have called Diogenes not only a dog but also a “Socrates gone mad,” and we hear from Diogenes Laertius that Diogenes, true to form, called “Plato’s lectures a waste of time.”<sup>80</sup> Diogenes certainly did not give lectures in the sense that Plato did. Rather, he *lived* his philosophy and taught through the example of his own actions, and the only ideals he could get behind were those that could be *actualized*. If Plato could not *produce* his Forms he could not live by them, and it is in this sense that Diogenes’ hostility to „high theory“ and abstract argument can be tied to “his belief that the test of truth is less a matter of logical finesse than of the philosopher’s ability to practice persuasively what he teaches. Plato stands condemned on both counts.”<sup>81</sup>

## Rascal with a cause

Diogenes Laertius recounts a famous exchange between Plato and Diogenes, where Diogenes is said to have stormed into a lecture that Plato was giving. When the latter “defined Man as an animal, biped and featherless,” to much applause, Diogenes “plucked a fowl and brought it into the lecture room with the words, „Here is Plato’s

---

<sup>79</sup> Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope*, 89.

<sup>80</sup> Laertius, *Lives*, VI. 24.

<sup>81</sup> Goulet-Cazé “Religion and the Early Cynics,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 88.

man.”<sup>82</sup> Diogenes’ sarcasm here is poignant, and his statement is a clear (and humorous) challenge to Plato’s teachings and his authoritative position as a philosopher. It also exemplifies a critical aspect of cynic philosophy and of Diogenes’ approach to *parrhesia*. Speaking freely was not just a right. It was a responsibility, and it required hounding the Athenians and capitalizing on any and all opportunities that they offered him to mock their ideals and their practices. Diogenes went looking for trouble, and the exchange described above demonstrates this. He himself considered Plato’s lectures a waste of time, but he paid enough attention to the „reigning philosopher“ of Athens to know when, where, and how to charge into those lectures and seriously insult him. Diogenes may have claimed independence from the Athenians, yet he nevertheless remained keenly aware of what was going on around him and found clever and creative ways to criticize them on the basis of what he heard them saying and saw them doing. Cynicism was (and, I argue, still is) a necessarily interactive philosophical practice; Diogenes found specific targets for his attacks on convention and the mode of attack (verbal assault, shocking behavior, sarcastic statement, etc.) was tailored to fit the particular situation and audience. Rather than staying put in his tub in the square and simply preaching about the evils of convention and the blessings of a cynic way of life, he moved around, and his hostility was aimed at the various individuals he witnessed going about their days.

There was, then, a decidedly innovative and unpredictable quality to his activities. Bracht Branham notes that Diogenes’ „method“ consisted “of a continual process of „adaptation“ or „improvisation“ as circumstances [confronted] him with a series of differing problems. As the question, the interlocutor, and the specific context [varied], so

---

<sup>82</sup> Laertius, *Lives*, VI. 40.

[did] Diogenes“ responses.”<sup>83</sup> He was quite skilled at „thinking on his feet,“ and his adaptability widened the scope of his philosophical reach because it allowed him to turn any and all of his encounters into *parrhesiatic* opportunities. If living happily was primarily a matter of renouncing society’s excesses and adopting a disciplined and ascetic way of life, Diogenes could easily have left the community and roamed the countryside, eating frugally, exercising regularly, and satisfying himself away from the prying eyes of a disapproving society. But, to revisit the paradoxically private and public nature of the philosophy, this was not an option. It was *parrhesia* that Diogenes considered „the most beautiful thing in the world,“ and his commitment to freedom of speech demanded that he have a public that actually listened to him. This required *getting the attention* of those around him, and this, I believe, is what made sneers and sarcasm essential to the practice of cynic philosophy. Insults and shocking or offensive behavior are hard to ignore, and Diogenes knew this and used it to his advantage. His insolence was programmatic: he taunted and teased his contemporaries because it was an effective means of gaining their full attention even if at times it also gained him their ire. Diogenes was obnoxious and opinionated, but there was also a playfulness to his rhetorical puns, and in addition to anger his pranks provoked laughter and amusement. Anthony A. Long has noted that most of the aphorisms attributed to Diogenes by Diogenes Laertius “have at least three things in common: black humor, paradox or surprise, and ethical seriousness.”<sup>84</sup> In creating his Cynic „self,“ Diogenes embodied a particular style of life characterized by a paradoxical combination of silliness and seriousness—he used humor to show the

---

<sup>83</sup> Branham, “Defacing the Currency,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 91-2.

<sup>84</sup> A.A. Long, “The Socratic Tradition: Diogenes, Crates and Hellenistic Ethics,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 33.

Athenians how foolish their conventions and customs were, and in doing so he demonstrated the depth his commitment to his own beliefs.

Bracht Branham claims that “the humor of the traditions about Diogenes reflect the polish of a self-consciously rhetorical practice that made optimal use of the argumentative resources of the pointed anecdote or *chreia*,” and he highlights “the fit between ideology and rhetorical practice, between *parrhesia* and Cynic traditions of philosophical jesting.”<sup>85</sup> Diogenes was able to toe the line between frivolity and seriousness in a way that effectively engaged his audience, and his use of humor allowed him to push his points to the edge of tolerability without crossing over it. He was a philosophic jester, but his disruptive behavior had serious dimensions that were not lost on his contemporaries; his outrageous conduct sometimes elicited angry responses from those he insulted or offended, but it also generated a fair amount of curiosity, and his antics were a subject of public fascination as well as ridicule and scorn. Indeed, it seems Diogenes’ rhetorical skills were remarkable and garnered him some admiration even if the content of his assertions was not always appreciated. We are told by Diogenes Laertius that Diogenes “had in fact a wonderful gift of persuasion, so that he could easily vanquish anyone he liked in argument,” and “so magical was the spell which the discourses of Diogenes exerted” that he had devoted followers who were converted to his way of life by the power of his words and deeds.<sup>86</sup> Whether or not he had disciples during his own lifetime is contestable (and if he had any they were few), but this does suggest that his antics were, at least at times, difficult to dismiss. Indeed, Long argues that “Diogenes appears to have been a well-educated man who enjoyed argument with

---

<sup>85</sup> Branham, “Defacing the Currency,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 99.

<sup>86</sup> Laertius, *Lives*, VI. 74-6.

other philosophers...and [who] earned the respect of many citizens,”<sup>87</sup> and many of the sayings and anecdotes ascribed to him reveal a clever wit and a keen sense of comedic timing. Although he was generally considered something of a madman, even at his most scandalous his behavior was tolerated and the Athenians did not cast Diogenes out. In fact, they seem to have taken care to protect him, and Diogenes Laertius also tells us that when a boy once threw stones at his tub and broke it, the youth was flogged and he was promptly provided with a new one.<sup>88</sup>

Diogenes himself had a complicated relationship with the Athenians, for despite all of his sneering and his sarcastic denunciations of their ways of life he *needed* them—not only for material support but also for the very practice of his philosophy. His conception of living naturally was hostile to convention but not to the idea of communal life itself, and rather than leave the city, Diogenes considered it his duty to reveal to the people of Athens the irrationality of their ways. In addition to considering himself the „teacher of not wanting,“ he also compared himself to a doctor who must inflict pain in order to heal his patients, and Dio Chrysostom wrote of Diogenes that, “just as the good physician should go and offer his services where the sick are most numerous, so, said he, the man of wisdom should take up his abode where fools are thickest in order to convict them of their folly and reprove them.”<sup>89</sup> He was deeply committed to demonstrating that *anyone* with the courage to commit him or herself to his way of life could live happily according to nature, and Diogenes Laertius suggests that he intentionally set the bar above reach with the hope that the Athenians might amend *some* of their ways. He reports

---

<sup>87</sup> Long, “The Socratic Tradition,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 40

<sup>88</sup> Laertius, *Lives*, VI. 43.

<sup>89</sup> Dio Chrysostom, *Dio Chrysostom*, ed. Henry Lamar Crosby, trans. J.W. Cohoon (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 1949), 379.

that Diogenes “used to say that he followed the example of the trainers of choruses; for they set the note a little too high, to ensure that the rest should hit the right note.”<sup>90</sup> He did not hate his fellow Athenians—instead, he hated their ways of life, and on this point he was clear. His shamelessness and his indifference to conventions were meant to unsettle, upset and even hurt those who witnessed his actions or were the recipients of his verbal attacks. But it was his compassion for his contemporaries that was the impetus for his criticism of them: he saw himself as a „philanthropist.“ Diogenes was living his life in the presence of others in order to shock them into recognizing the evils of their ways, and even if his cares went unappreciated and his work was slow going (for the record, he did not expect *much* change), he still felt like he was giving back to humanity. Thus, his insolence and non-conformity were a sign of both his independence from and his devotion to the people of Athens.

Why did „living according to nature“ demand the use of sneers, sarcasm and unpleasant behavior? Because this practice of living entailed having the courage to take charge of one’s life and submit only to nature’s often unpredictable rules, which required exercising and utilizing one’s faculties of body and mind to the fullest. As humanity possesses the capacity to speak, living according to nature also entails speaking freely, and, for Diogenes, loudly asserting one’s freedom was not only his natural right but also his responsibility. He and the cynics who would later take inspiration from him were dedicated to exposing their truths even if (and perhaps because) these truths were unwanted, and this practice above all else exemplified their capacity to live naturally.

Sneers and sarcasm were *necessary* because truth-telling required the public’s attention—the courageous Cynic did not beg or plead his fellows to see and live as he

---

<sup>90</sup> Laertius, *Lives*, VI. 34-6.

did, he poked and prodded them to insure that his messages would not be ignored.

Laughter, at the very least, constituted a *response* to Diogenes' sneers, sarcasm and otherwise outlandish behavior. And as Niehues-Probsting notes:

The Cynic... was *not* a man of pain. This addition is important. The Cynic was laughed at because of his contemptibility; but he was, as Diogenes said about himself, not beaten down by laughter. Cynicism became the exercise and eventually the art of swallowing contempt and being unperturbed by it. To pretend consciously to be contemptible could—from a psychological point of view—be a defense against unwanted contempt and an act of self-determination.<sup>91</sup>

So, Diogenes not only refused to let laughter „get him down“ but he also encouraged it. It was a sign of recognition and a reassurance that he was succeeding in his mission to make a mockery of convention. He was, Niehues-Probsting argues, both an expert at expressing contempt and a living, breathing example of everything his society found contemptible.<sup>92</sup> Diogenes „defaced the currency“ of Athens in order to show its people what he took to be a shortcut to happiness, and what he wanted was for those around him to actually acknowledge the true or natural limits to their freedom and to realize that their own self-respect depended upon resisting all others.

Foucault claimed that “*parrhesia* was first of all and fundamentally a political notion,” and although Diogenes claimed indifference to the world of politics, his commitment to showing the Athenians that they bent their knees to the wrong masters has obvious political implications.<sup>93</sup> Still, we must remember that he was not rallying them to *join* him. Desmond argues the following:

---

<sup>91</sup> Niehues-Probsting, “The Modern Reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 351.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>93</sup> Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 8.

the Cynic sage renounces the things of external Fortune to gain an absolute internal freedom. Here the Cynics are at their most negative and most idealistic at once. Their wisdom is a total skepticism with regard to externality: nothing can be known or possessed except the inner self, and so one should renounce all externals in order to gain an absolute “wealth” in one’s own self-certainty.<sup>94</sup>

Though the cynics are sometimes referred to as the „Army of the Dog,“ theirs was an army of independent warriors, modeling themselves on Heracles and working alone in their philosophical practices to do battle with all visions of the world that conflicted with their own. Diogenes was the original rebel (or rascal) with a cause—he was the champion of truth and the foe of falsehood and hypocrisy, and he committed his life to proving that there *was* room for honesty in society even if it was often unwelcome.

## Learning from Diogenes

Diogenes and his legacy challenge us, as individuals, to seek the truth, to share it with one another, and to do so in the face of political and social forces that are resistant to change and have the power to retaliate against us. His cynicism was a personal reaction against the world created by men that attacked not only the futility of its customs and beliefs but also the fact that these were so frequently contradictory and hypocritical. He chastised his contemporaries not only for what they believed but just as importantly for the lack of commitment and sincerity with which they followed the moral and ethical codes that they claimed to hold so dear. This brings me back to the question of the role of cynicism in American political culture today. Diogenes was adamant that he knew how to live *better than anyone else*, and the cynics have often been criticized for the hubristic tendencies in their philosophy. There are arguments to be made for such criticism,

---

<sup>94</sup> Desmond, *Greek Praise of Poverty*, 23.

perhaps the most obvious being that Diogenes took it upon himself to insult others simply for not living *their* lives as *he* lived his. His insistence on knowing better, and his noisy disparagement of others for their „slavish“ habits, in many ways flies in the face of democracy“s pluralist virtues and demonstrates its own kind of dogmatic rigidity. Still, he was far from selfish in his insistence on knowing the truth; his incivility was the means by which he demonstrated his commitment to unsettling the social and political structures of those he lived with, and he was convinced that this unsettling was done for their benefit. Diogenes was no ordinary prankster, and despite his airs of superiority he submitted himself to a „greater purpose“—to living according to nature, which *required* him to mock his fellows.

There are lessons to be learned from Diogenes“ ardent commitment to living his life as an assertion of the truth. It is my contention that the most valuable and lasting of these lessons is that although telling the „truth of oneself,“ and telling the truth of society by exposing or debunking its lies, is a frightening and unwieldy process, it can nonetheless be done. This is a simple lesson in theory, but hardly an easy one to follow in practice. It requires the courage to confront not only the unknown but also that which we purport already to know or to be certain of, and it thus requires a respect for the limits of what we can know as well as a willingness to challenge them. We learn from Diogenes that one *can* live in open and honest resistance to the status quo, and that a disciplined ascetic life *is* sustainable. We also learn that such a lifestyle will compel us to defy laws and norms and in doing so to confront one another, and that this process is dangerous and will likely entail ridicule, scorn, alienation, or worse. For Diogenes, the principled pursuit of truth trumps comfort and safety, and his earnest commitment to expressing his

independence and defining himself on his own is admirable. He respected the fact that he could not know everything and that people, nature, and fortune were unpredictable. But just as importantly, Diogenes respected himself, and he worked diligently to test his knowledge and capabilities as a means of continually adapting to the uncertainties of the world around him. He was brave enough to *live* the „truth“ through the process of seeking it out, and he cared deeply about his responsibility to reveal his truths to his fellows. Diogenes, then, teaches us that there is much to be gained from „not-wanting“—namely, our own freedom and the capacity to reveal ourselves confidently as who we are rather than who we should be in the eyes of others. He may have been proud, but he was intent on showing others that anyone could be as proud and as happy as he was if they were brave enough to live as he did.

Yet there are also limitations to looking to Diogenes (and to cynicism) as a model for inspiring political and social change. Though ancient cynicism was necessarily practiced publicly, it consistently eschewed the kind of collective action often considered the defining mark of the political. Diogenes both started and ended with the project of transforming the individual, and while he believed that any individual had the capacity to undergo such a transformation, human society was viewed as fundamentally corrupted and beyond salvation. Is social and governmental (and not just personal) sincerity possible? Diogenes argued that it is not. His conception of human nature acknowledges a capacity for sincerity and virtue, but he did not believe that we could live happily according to nature without renouncing social practices and politics altogether. Diogenes told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but, but there were few Athenians who were willing to really *respond* to what he said. He did not actively inhibit reform, but he

certainly did not advocate for it despite his habit of constantly provoking his fellows to question their actions and beliefs. This political pessimism Diogenes shares with cynical realists. While he said „everything,“ his expectations for wider political change were meager because he was convinced that politics are corruptive.

I will take up the difficulty of determining what actually constitutes the „truth“ in democratic politics shortly, but first it is worth briefly discussing Diogenes“ legacy as a philosophical and literary hero. His reputation throughout the course of ancient cynicism was quite varied, and it veered between depictions of him as a semi-saint and as a social villain. In regards to Diogenes“ legacy, Shea says the following:

His activities as defacer of public norms give us, at best, an ambiguous portrait of the Cynic as rascal as well as moralist... This is what makes him such an interesting figure upon which to base a discussion of the modern intellectual: he responds to the aspiration to courageously confront the injustices that plague society even as he forces a direct confrontation with the darker aspects of the will to change the world.<sup>95</sup>

And although I think we can agree that few would want to adopt his style of life *in toto*, that does not mean that others have not continued to emulate his spirit of speaking truth to power. The later cynics had a tendency to „interpret“ Diogenes“ way of life, adopting aspects of his philosophy and molding them to fit with their own takes on Cynicism, which over the course of its history was often blended with other philosophies such as Stoicism and Epicureanism. The fact that Diogenes became an idealized figure has contributed to the confusion and debates over the „true“ story of his life and the contents of his philosophy. Regardless, he remained a well-known and memorable character in the literary works of and on the cynics through the sixth century AD (when ancient cynicism as a movement is considered to have ended). I would argue that the individualistic,

---

<sup>95</sup> Shea, *Cynic Enlightenment*, xii.

improvisational and adaptable character of Diogenes' cynical practice made the philosophy itself „adaptable“ after his death. Not all of the later cynics can be said to have challenged power directly, but in different ways they improvised their images of Diogenes to fit their own particular circumstances while still committing themselves to *parrhesia* and *autarkeia*.

We can also identify a number of individuals in more recent history who can be said to have carried on Diogenes' courageous practices of dissent and who were committed to exposing the un-reasonable nature of so many cultural norms and political conventions. For example, Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Nietzsche have all been compared, in different ways, to Diogenes, and all were well aware of his position in the annals of philosophy. Indeed, cynicism and the figure of Diogenes were controversial subjects discussed by the Enlightenment *philosophes*, and Voltaire famously accused Rousseau of being a “foolish and false Diogenes,” neither worthy of nor possessing the merits of the original.<sup>96</sup> None of these thinkers adopted the disciplined asceticism of Diogenes in the sense of embracing poverty and rejecting culture through and through, but they certainly adopted his spirit of rebelling against „un-natural“ and „un-reasonable“ laws and conventions. While they did so in different ways and to different ends they all knew how to use sarcastic humor and shocking literary antics to relay their challenges to the status quo, and they braved the possibility of social alienation and political persecution along the way. I would also add H.L. Mencken to this list of neo-cynics. Mencken, who has at times been referred to as „the American Voltaire,“ was inarguably dedicated to challenging what he considered to be the irrational and hypocritical morality

---

<sup>96</sup> Niehues-Probsting, “The Modern Reception of Cynicism,” in Branham and Goulet-Cazé, *The Cynics*, 351.

of early twentieth-century America. I will turn to Mencken in detail in the next chapter, but for now I would like to point out that although he is often thought to epitomize the caustic „modern“ cynicism that is lamented as a symptom and source of today’s bitter public disillusionment, this is an unfair and unfounded characterization of his life and his work. Rather, Mencken’s caustic social and political criticism was in line with that of Diogenes in critical ways: he made people angry, he made them laugh, and he most certainly captured their attention. And he did this in pursuit of the truth, and in defense of the principles of freedom and equality.

So how, then, do we recognize, or experience, cynicism today? Cynicism is a multi-faceted term, but the alleged dichotomy between an ancient and modern cynicism works to obscure the calls of the potential cynics in our midst. Diogenes’ cynicism was an ethos, a practical and *personal* way of life, but it also cultivated a particular character type—a „self“ that was defined through the process of continually claiming its independence through resistance to conformity. Cynicism cannot be a social ethos or even a collective mood. For the ancients, it was individualistic to the core, and its resistance to law and order was libertarian (or even anarchist) in that the only leader the cynic recognizes is the self. It is on these grounds in particular that I am contesting the claims that we live in a cynical culture today, or that it constitutes a modern ideology. Cynicism is not generalizable, and contra Sloterdijk, it cannot constitute a collective weariness with the hypocrisy and lies that are present in our political and social worlds. Rather, it is enacted only through the particular actions of practicing cynics, those daring individuals who are wont to dedicate their lives to speaking truth to power. If we say, as did Hellmann, that cynicism is „an unpleasant way of telling the truth,“ we might also say

that any „genuine“ cynic today has not abandoned the spirit of Diogenes, for he or she assumes the role of the „truth-teller,“ or *parrhesiast*, a dangerous position to shoulder in a democracy but also an important one.

Cynicism is not (and indeed cannot become) the dominant or exclusive mood of American political culture—we are not a society made up of principled truth-tellers, and Diogenes’ cynicism was grounded upon a profound respect for and commitment to the truth. But we can still learn from (or at least learn to listen for and listen to) potential cynics in our midst even if we cannot (and would not want to) aspire to become part of a cynical public. The fact that we cannot all become cynics collectively, that we cannot come together in a wider cynical culture, does not foreclose the possibility that cynicism can motivate us individually to search for the truth and to then do something political with it. Democracy needs citizens who will regularly speak truth to power, and it needs all citizens to be ready to do this on occasion. Today, cynicism does not need to be practiced as a way of life as it was for Diogenes. Instead, we, as individuals, can adopt a cynical mood from time to time, and assume the character type in order to challenge power in particular instances by facing our fears and the potential repercussions that speaking freely for the sake of the truth can entail.

## Truth and democratic pluralism

Foucault has argued that “democracy is not the privileged site of *parrhesia*, but the place in which *parrhesia* is most difficult to practice.”<sup>97</sup> This, he claims, is “[b]ecause in democracy one cannot distinguish between good and bad speakers, between discourse

---

<sup>97</sup> Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 57.

which speaks the truth and is useful to the city, and discourse which utters lies, flatters, and is harmful.”<sup>98</sup> There is a subtlety to Foucault’s argument here that can be missed at first glance. *Parrhesia* might indeed be not only difficult but impossible to practice in other systems of government, and individuals attempting to engage in it under a totalitarian regime, for example, would most likely be forcibly (and perhaps ultimately) silenced. But it is particularly difficult to practice in a democracy because it is difficult to make oneself *heard* and *recognized* above the noise of opposing truth-claims, and doing so requires positioning oneself *against* the majority. A system that permits myriad competing voices thus highlights the risk of engaging in *parrhesia*: to freely speak „truth“ is to enter into a conflict between different sets of entrenched feelings and opinions, a war that can lead to violence when it is a matter of confronting the beliefs of others and to disorientation when it is a matter of confronting one’s own. Making oneself heard is a frightening prospect. But, in light of the fact that we, as a public, are aware of the possibility of political mendacity and operate in a culture obsessed with the exposure of political as well as personal scandals, the risks of *parrhesia* are outweighed by the need for it. As Linda M.G. Zerilli has argued, “[a]lthough holding political leaders accountable for the veracity of their statements is surely important and indeed essential to our belief in representative government, the question arises as to whether democratic citizens are in a position to do something with the truths that come to light as a result of such investigations.”<sup>99</sup> To engage in *parrhesia* is to *care* about the truth, and to engage in the cynics’ practices of truth-telling is not only to refuse to live in contradiction with the truth but also to commit to seeking it out.

---

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 40

<sup>99</sup> Linda M.G. Zerilli, “Truth and Politics,” in Elkins and Norris, *Truth and Democracy*, 55.

But does such a commitment to truth require a renunciation of politics? In her discussion of what it means to „speak truth to power,“ Wendy Brown wonders

whether obsessing about lying politicians suppress the larger challenge they pose to the fiction that democratic politics is or can be a field of truth. Might even the cynical declaration „All politicians lie“ function to restrict the reach of the problem? That is, might a preoccupation with lying facilitate a disavowal of the unique, and perhaps uniquely distressing, character of the field [of politics] with regard to truth?<sup>100</sup>

Brown argues that even though politics and truth are incompatible, the field of truth remains relevant to the realm of politics. Following Foucault, she asserts that power cannot function without a mask or a veil, and that it essentially dissolves or unravels once its „truth“ is revealed. Power, then, must remain hidden, and Brown asserts that “if the lifeblood of politics is power, and if power cannot speak its own truth without undoing itself, then politics is not and cannot be a field of truth. Even speaking truth to power is, in a certain sense, a parapolitical act, one that aims to expose an object in the political field from outside that field.”<sup>101</sup> Exposing power’s truth is „gadfly work“ for Brown, but it still serves a critical function in a democracy.

And such acts of exposure are precisely what Diogenes and the cynics aimed for (as did Mencken, as I will show in the pages to come), and their parapolitical acts did make some political difference. Cynics *did* (and *do*) speak truths about power, a fact that our focus on the mendacity of politicians distracts us from. If cynicism cannot be a collective or public mood, it can nevertheless have an impact on the American citizenry by sparking debates over public complicity in government action and inaction. Diogenes was something of a thorn in the side of his fellows, but I am venturing that his most

---

<sup>100</sup> Wendy Brown, “Speaking Power to Truth,” in Elkins and Norris, *Truth and Democracy*, 89.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

redeeming quality was the sincerity of his mission to nurse them back to health. His eccentricities were a demonstration of his sense of self-respect as well as his respect for humanity as he conceived it, and he did believe that there was a healthy state that his contemporaries could aspire to. Diogenes committed himself to speaking the truth as he saw it, but he also made no effort to quiet those who did not like hearing what he had to say. As hostile as he was to other philosophies and systems of understanding the world, his ultimate goal was to put the question of truth on the table and to force his fellows to acknowledge not only the limits of their knowledge but also the fact that there were things that they knew but chose to ignore.

In his 2005 Nobel Lecture, Harold Pinter declared the following: “I believe that despite the odds which exist [against us], unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens, to define the *real* truth of our lives and our societies is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all.”<sup>102</sup> The concerns Pinter presents in this lecture, which is focused on the American political system and targets both politicians and the public, are echoed in part by Friedman when he decries the American public’s complacency with political dishonesty and suggests that we desire to be told not the truth but „what we want to hear.“ Pinter is outraged, in particular, by the injustice and illegitimacy of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, and he suggests that the very dignity of humankind is at stake if we fail to define the *real* truths of our lives, which means that we must strive to define *who* we are as Americans and to consider the obligations this places upon us as citizens. For Pinter, it seems, truth and power are generally incompatible, and in politics preserving power requires restricting truth, so the

---

<sup>102</sup> Harold Pinter, “From Nobel Lecture: Art, Truth, and Politics,” in Elkins and Norris, *Truth and Democracy*, 15.

only antidote to the spread of abusive political power is the public's commitment to search for and expose the truth. This would suggest, then, that as American citizens we must be actively engaged in the search for truth, in the process of debunking or unmasking lies and misinformation. Pinter does not propose that „the truth will set us free“ but rather that without it we are damned, and in underscoring the importance of searching for the truth he expresses the hope that to *care* about what is done in our names is the first step toward political change.

Yet the idea of searching for the truth in politics immediately raises the question of how certain we can ever be about what constitutes the truth, or how we can divide fact from fiction. What does it mean to attend to truth in democratic politics, a sphere of multiple, competing truth-claims? As Jeremy Elkins has noted, “truth matters to politics, but what kinds of truth matter and how they matter are themselves political questions.”<sup>103</sup> This seems a basic point, but it is one that is disregarded by the charge that American cynicism perpetuates the spread of disillusionment, and that as a society our orientation towards politics has become, as Chaloupka claims, one of „lost belief.“ Disbelief in the sincerity of particular (or even most) political leaders does not necessarily entail that the larger American public is of the opinion that politicians cannot be right or wrong, or good or bad, or that their statements cannot be true or false. Americans, as individuals and as a public, may sometimes fixate on political mendacity, but I do not think that we have given up on the concept of the truth, or on the difference between right and wrong, and that these are concepts that we can and should openly discuss. The fact that we may have difficulty coming to an agreement on what is true or false or right or wrong does not mean we should dismiss the significance of these concepts. Indeed, one of the many

---

<sup>103</sup> Jeremy Elkins, “Concerning Practices of Truth,” in Elkins and Norris, *Truth and Democracy*, 52.

hurdles we must face when considering the contentious nature of what constitutes „the truth“ in democratic politics is that, for many people, what constitutes the truth is not contentious at all.

We are often all too confident about what we do or do not know, or what is or is not politically pertinent information; hence Robert Post’s claim that “the rub of politics is that what reeks to us of deception and dishonesty to others epitomizes political truth.”<sup>104</sup> Relevant here is the question of whether truths, to qualify as such, require a rational or natural basis. William A. Galston argues that because “the demand for certainty is incompatible with politics,” the question of how to demarcate what can be considered true is impossible to answer conclusively.<sup>105</sup> Yet he notes that

in practical life there is no escaping the need to assess truth-claims on the basis of information and arguments that will leave us well short of certainty. In every situation there is a point between the extremes of randomness and certainty at which further inquiry won’t make us less uncertain, a point at which „look before you leap“ shades over into the „paralysis of analysis.“ Unfortunately there is no algorithm that locates that point—one of many reasons why politics is an art rather than a science.<sup>106</sup>

Galston thus distinguishes truth from legitimacy. He also notes that when it comes to what the public does or does not believe, truth is not always the guiding force, but that this is not necessarily the fault of the government or a result of the dishonesty of political leaders. Regardless of the specifics of what they believe and why, Galston insists that in a democracy people “have a right to be wrong, a right they often exercise.”<sup>107</sup> And it is this right to be wrong that protects our capacity to speak freely in a democracy even as it

---

<sup>104</sup> Robert Post, “Truth and Disagreement,” in Elkins and Norris, *Truth and Democracy*, 76.

<sup>105</sup> William A. Galston, “Truth and Democracy: Theme and Variations,” in Elkins and Norris, *Truth and Democracy*, 134.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 134.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 142.

complicates our relationship with the truth; it is a right that must be secured if we are also to secure the capacity to speak at all.

Pinter asked us, as individuals who are part of a wider American public, to consider whether there is or could be a point at which we will actually speak out against the actions of our leaders and government and say, „not in my name.“ Diogenes did and said this daily, in honor of the truth. While few of us may have the inclination to declare our commitment to truth in politics (as well as life) on a regular basis, I am arguing that it is our responsibility as citizens to be willing and able to do so at times. This is a lesson that I think we can learn from the father of ancient cynicism, and that we can and must put to use today. And following in this vein, I think that when it comes to understanding the role of truth in American politics, we must consider Galston’s take on the situation: “[t]he bad news is that so many Americans are ready to believe the worst[, but t]he good news is that they continue to believe in the distinction between truth and falsehood, and in the possibility that truth can guide political action.”<sup>108</sup> The cynical realist would scoff at this statement, but has the American public given up on how the system *should* work, or on the right to speak up and demand that it does in particular instances? Like Galston, I do not think that we, as individuals and as a society, have lost faith in the concept of the truth (though we may have a tendency to equate „the truth“ with our beliefs, an issue I will elaborate on in the chapters to come). And sometimes we should listen to what our political leaders are saying to us, not just because we like what they say or we hate it, or because we believe that what they say is true or false, but because we need to *hear* them if we are to have any hope of weighing in on the discussion of political and social issues.

---

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.142.

What Diogenes and his legacy can inspire us to do is to listen to and question our leaders, and to question one another and ourselves. This is not because he had a „true“ or „correct“ vision of the world, but because his criticism can remind us that we should question and test the validity of our own visions. Mencken does just that, though in his own way, and it is to his cynicism I will now turn. Like Diogenes, he had his own prejudices and his own conceits as to how one *should* live one’s life, and charges of hubris that have been leveled at both of them are fair in some respects. But also like Diogenes, Mencken exhibited not only a deep sense of and appreciation for the virtue of self-respect but also an appreciation for the principle that every human individual has the right to respect him- or herself and that this right should be protected. Their love of liberty is tied to this principle, and while it may be idealistic I do not think this means that we should discount the value of their criticism.

## Chapter 2: The Diogenes of his day—H.L. Mencken’s American cynicism

*“[H]ere is nothing sinister that smells of decay, but on the contrary this Holy Terror from Baltimore is splendidly and exultantly and contagiously alive. He calls you a swine, and an imbecile, and he increases your will to live.”—Walter Lippmann, 1926*

H.L. Mencken, the outspoken cynic who began a four-decade assault on the political and social scenery of the United States just over a hundred years ago, spent most of his life ridiculing America and her people, and the relationship (or lack thereof) between truth and democratic politics was one of his favorite subjects. The chief reason that politicians lied, he argued, was not that they were crooks (though according to him they were), nor was it that the American public was stupid (though according to him it

was). Rather, politicians lied because the American people were *willfully* ignorant—they did not want to hear the truth, and indeed, they feared it. For Mencken, the American stance towards truth could be best described as anxious rather than ambivalent. In *Notes on Democracy*, he offers the following observation: “the truth, indeed, is something that mankind, for some mysterious reason, instinctively dislikes. Every man who tries to tell it is unpopular, and even when, by the sheer strength of his case, he prevails, he is put down as a scoundrel.”<sup>109</sup>

A prominent journalist and a prolific writer, Mencken was himself regularly put down as a scoundrel, though it may have been the rudeness of his delivery as much as the „truths“ he told that riled his vast readership. Considered by his detractors to have been something of a „national menace,“ he is still remembered today for the caustic wit that characterized his unique style, but the lasting significance of his cynicism remains controversial. David Mazella has painted Mencken as a founder of the “disillusioned and disillusioning voice” of „modern“ cynicism, wherein the *parrhesiatic*, or truth-telling, practices of Diogenes and the ancient cynics have been replaced by the work of media experts who exploit and exacerbate public frustration with politics for their own professional and personal benefit.<sup>110</sup> In a similar vein, William Chaloupka claims that “there is no better place to mark the beginning of contemporary journalism”’s cynical slide than with Mencken, the high-school graduate turned Nietzsche interpreter turned colorful and angry critic” who delighted in exposing political shams and hypocrisy, and whose relentless insistence on denigrating American life made him both famous and

---

<sup>109</sup> H.L. Mencken, “Melancholy Reflections,” *The Chicago Tribune*, May 23, 1926.

<sup>110</sup> Mazella, *Making of Modern Cynicism*, 22.

infamous.<sup>111</sup> For Mazella and Chaloupka, the ancient cynics' commitment to pursuing truth and courageously denouncing falsehood has morphed into a new form of cynicism, a mass phenomena characterized by widespread disbelief in the honesty of democratic politics. Both thinkers credit Mencken with providing the groundwork for institutionalizing „modern“ cynicism via the mass media. But although they do not discount his influence they do, I think, underestimate its ultimate value for democracy.

A closer look at Mencken's life and work reveals that he embodied much more of the Cynical spirit of Diogenes than is generally acknowledged. As a cynic, he neither inspired extensive public disbelief nor created the building blocks for a media industry built upon generating and profiting from such sentiments. What Mencken did do was whip up a heady mix of anger and amusement from a national audience that found him very difficult to ignore. His aim, he claimed, was “to combat, chiefly by ridicule, American piety, stupidity, tin-pot morality, [and] cheap chauvinism,”<sup>112</sup> and this he did with remarkable flair. Mencken's writing was *affective*—his idiosyncratic style was humorous but also biting, as he turned his words into „weapons“ trained at poking and prodding the American public into both recognizing and *responding* to contemporary political and social issues. He was not disillusioning; rather, Mencken was often extremely aggravating. He exposed „truths“ in such a way that his readers, as witnesses of sorts, could not help but affirm or deny them, and many felt compelled to enter the public sphere to challenge what he said and did. A self-professed “libertarian of the most extreme variety,” Mencken insisted that he could “imagine no human right that is half as

---

<sup>111</sup> Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows*, 101-2.

<sup>112</sup> H.L. Mencken, *Notes on Democracy* (New York: Dissident Books, 2009), 206.

valuable as the simple right to pursue the truth at discretion and utter it when found.”<sup>113</sup>

This was a right that he made a career out of exercising, but, more importantly, it was one that he worked diligently to defend for everyone.

There are certainly aspects of Mencken’s „philosophy“ that do not map conveniently onto that of Diogenes, and this has led to, or at least contributed to, the tendency to read his cynicism as an unfaithful outgrowth of the ancient philosophy. He did not embrace the ancients’ vagrant and ascetic lifestyles, and in fact he „professionalized“ his cynicism and made a decent living for himself through his practices of ranting and railing against the American people. His work was also much more overtly political. Whereas Diogenes claimed complete indifference to politics and renounced his ties to the Athenian political community, Mencken took his responsibilities as a citizen of the United States very seriously (among other things, he was proud of the fact that he always voted and paid his taxes). Nevertheless, the tendency to sharply distinguish Mencken’s cynicism from that of the ancient Cynics, and even to posit his criticism as withering while affirming the latter’s as admirable, is misguided. For Mencken, journalism was not just a job that he did to pay the rent and feed his family, nor did he pursue it in order to achieve fame and fortune. It was a way of life and a medium for speaking the truth that demanded courage, discipline and self-reliance, and he was as hell-bent on defending liberty, championing freedom of speech and challenging hypocrisy as was the original Dog. What Mencken’s criticism cynical is above all makes the performative dimension of his truth seeking and revealing. Cynicism requires an audience. Like Diogenes, Mencken refused to simply seek the truth on his own and live his life accordingly—he had to *show* others that he knew better than they did, that he had

---

<sup>113</sup> H.L. Mencken, cited in W.H.A. Williams, *H.L. Mencken* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 123.

caught them in their lies. He used offensive rhetoric to expose the prejudices of his culture in an attempt to force the American people to acknowledge the ways in which their actions and beliefs contradicted their own democratic ideals. By provoking them into responding to his accusations that they were stupid, weak, fearful, self-righteous, moralistic, racist, misogynistic, and the like, Mencken drew them into conversation on these topics and dared them to prove him wrong.

## Flash, flair and fun

In 1927, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant remarked that just “as Diogenes searched for an honest man, so does [Mencken] search for a free American.”<sup>114</sup> This, I argue, is true, but the concepts of honesty and freedom were intertwined for Mencken as well as for Diogenes, and for both cynics a free man *was* an honest man. Indeed, one of the more compelling things about Mencken’s writing is not the flash and flair of his wit but his commitment to honesty—his humor stems more from his capacity to pinpoint truths about his culture rather than from a talent for stretching the truth to fit comedic purposes. This is a point often lost on his critics, who highlight his hyperbolic tone and his liberal use of stereotypes as evidence of a mere stylist with a shallow mind and a hunger for recognition. Mencken did employ such techniques, but those who have consequently written him off as an ambitious careerist, or as a genuine racist, misogynist, or anti-Semite, have missed the mark. What he aimed to do was to shame his fellow citizens into recognizing the extent to which racist, misogynist, and anti-Semitic sentiments, among others, influenced politics and held material weight in a society that hypocritically

---

<sup>114</sup> Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, “H.L. Mencken,” in *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, ed. Douglas C. Stenerson (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987), 30.

claimed allegiance to the principles of liberty and equality. Reflecting back on his writing towards the end of his career, Mencken offered the following assessment of his work: “[t]he imbeciles who have printed acres of comments on my books have seldom noticed the chief character of my style. It is that I write with almost scientific precision—my meaning is never obscure.”<sup>115</sup> He laid bare the contradictions between what Americans preached and what they practiced, not as an expert analyst of his society but as an outspoken member of it.

Mencken’s treatment of the subject of race offers an almost counter-intuitive case in point here. As Edward A. Martin has argued, he

was “un-euphemistic” in that he frequently used the most blatantly racist and offensive terminology [to discuss] racial attitudes and problems. [But he] used such language because it came from the ordinary speech patterns of southern racists, and was inappropriate to the liberal views he was expressing: the effect was to ridicule racists among his readers.<sup>116</sup>

In a pre-politically correct culture where such sentiments were frequently expressed openly and without apology, Mencken mocked prejudice in its own terms. He criticized the „southern yokels“ and the „Ku Kluxers“ by employing the same slurs that peppered their discourse, and since his writings were so far-reaching, this ridicule rarely went unnoticed by those he was aiming at. As I.J. Semper remarked in 1929, what often makes Mencken’s language harsh and shocking also increased the accessibility of his criticism: he wrote “as other men talk—in the racy, fluent, tuneful idiom of the everyday.”<sup>117</sup>

Yet Semper also called Mencken the “veritable *Doctor Rhetoricus*” of his age, and the bluntness and forcefulness of his writing was coupled, somewhat paradoxically,

---

<sup>115</sup> Mencken, *Minority Report*, 293.

<sup>116</sup> Edward A. Martin, *H.L. Mencken and the Debunkers* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1984), 41.

<sup>117</sup> I. J. Semper, “H.L. Mencken: Doctor Rhetoricus,” in Stenerson, *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, 85

with linguistic playfulness.<sup>118</sup> Charles Scruggs, who has written extensively on Mencken's influence on and involvement with the intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, cites his honesty and courage as reasons that he was read and respected by the likes of James Wheldon Johnson, George Schulyer, and others, but he adds that the chief reason they read Mencken was that he was *fun*.<sup>119</sup> Fascinated by the American language, Mencken put his immense vocabulary to use to report upon major issues and events, prominent public figures, and the quotidian practices of people across the country, and he did so with an air that oscillated between seriousness and silliness. He was, as Alistair Cooke has argued, "a humorist by instinct and a superb craftsman by temperament,"<sup>120</sup> and he put his linguistic skills to the task of challenging the political and cultural status quo while poking fun at his society from a variety of angles. The results, it seems, were not only infuriating or amusing depending upon who you asked, but also unique in their combination of subject matter and style. As Wheldon Johnson stated in 1918, "nobody in the country writes quite like him. Sometimes we know that he is laughing at his readers, and sometimes we suspect that he is laughing at himself. We might call him a humorous cynic, and when he is most cynical, he is most enjoyable."<sup>121</sup>

## The makings of a 'national menace'

Henry Louis Mencken was born into a close-knit, middle-class family on September 12, 1880 in Baltimore, Maryland. His parents, August and Anna, were first-

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>119</sup> Charles Scruggs, "H.L. Mencken and James Weldon Johnson: two men who helped shape a Renaissance," in Stenerson, *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, 187.

<sup>120</sup> Alistaire Cooke, "Mencken and the English Language," in *On Mencken: Essays*, ed. John Dorsey (New York: Knopf, 1980), 101.

<sup>121</sup> James Wheldon Johnson, "American Genius and its Locale," in Stenerson, *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, 51.

generation German-Americans, and August was the proprietor of the local tobacco business and cigar factory that his own father had started upon immigrating to the United States. The oldest of four children, Henry was just three years old when the family moved to a row house at 1524 Hollins Street in West Baltimore. With the exception of the five years that he was married to Sara Powell Haardt (who sadly succumbed to tubercular meningitis in 1935), Mencken lived in this Hollins Street home until his death in 1956. Over the course of his career his work required him to regularly commute to New York City and to travel extensively throughout the United States. Nevertheless, he refused to relocate from Baltimore even when he was offered lucrative newspaper positions and editorships in other cities.

It is significant that Mencken remained a Baltimore resident throughout his life. As his local nickname „Horrible Harry“ indicates, his presence there was not always appreciated. Nevertheless, despite the censure that he hurled at all of the „Baltimoralists“ in his midst, Mencken felt that the city was where he *belonged*. Indeed, his cynicism was grounded in the stability of his attachments to his family, his friends, and perhaps more than anything, the house on Hollins Street. Mencken eventually wrote the following tribute to his familial abode:

I have lived in the same house in Baltimore for nearly forty-five years. It has changed somewhat, as I have—but somehow it still remains the same...It is as much a part of me as my two hands. If I had to leave it I'd be as certainly crippled as if I lost a leg.<sup>122</sup>

Mencken's identification with the home he grew up in was not just sentimental. Though critical of many aspects of middle-class American culture, he took with him into his career not only a respect for discipline, ambition and thrift, but also a profound respect

---

<sup>122</sup> Mencken, *Prejudices: Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Series*, 321.

for the ways in which communal life can build individual character and foster the confidence and self-assuredness necessary to speak one's mind. In this sense the impact of his upbringing on his iconoclasm was paradoxical: as W.H.A Williams argues, "no rebel was ever more conventionally and securely rooted."<sup>123</sup>

For Mencken, Baltimore's charm sprang directly from the fact that its residents stuck to their own traditions and stubbornly resisted adopting the ever-changing fashions and tastes of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Baltimoreans, he argued, understood the benefits of settling into enduring local communities where families and friendships could grow over time and where they could feel a sense of identification and connection with their surroundings as well as with each other. A Baltimorean was, Mencken claimed, *of* Baltimore and not just from it, and this was a distinction that he took quite seriously. It is also a distinction that is overlooked by critics who have accused him of being „un-American“ on account of his German ancestry. It is significant, given his respect for family, that he was not raised in an environment that displayed or encouraged any particularly overt German patriotism; the Menckens did not speak the German language at home and they only rarely engaged with Baltimore's German community.<sup>124</sup> Mencken was proud of his ancestral heritage, but he was also adamant that his roots lay in Baltimore, and he identified as a Baltimorean even more so than a German-American. It is true that Mencken's musical tastes leaned toward German composers such as Bach, Beethoven and Wagner, and he was a devoted reader of German writers and thinkers such as Nietzsche. But Mencken hardly believed that Germany was a historical land of „superior“ people or even that Germany was a superior nation in

---

<sup>123</sup> Williams, *H.L. Mencken*, 17.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

comparison to the United States or the rest of the world (indeed, he argued that the majority of people in any nation were „inferior,“ and the Germans were no exception to this rule). It is my contention that the influence of his German heritage on his opinions and beliefs has been greatly exaggerated.

Mencken graduated from the Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, a public high school, when he was 15 years old, holding the highest GPA on record by the school at the time and serving as valedictorian of his class. Yet although his academic performance was excellent and he claimed to have respected a few select instructors at the BPI, he was already priding himself on being a largely self-educated man. A voracious reader from an early age, Mencken had begun taking advantage of Baltimore’s public libraries when he was eight, and throughout his life he would continue to not only patronize the Enoch Pratt Free Library but also to refer to it as „his school.“ Indeed, he credited his personal reading habits with developing his own „superior“ intellect, and at the peak of his career Mencken went so far as to make the following claim: “altogether, I doubt that any human being in this world has ever read more than I did between my twelfth and eighteenth years.”<sup>125</sup> All boasting aside, it was certainly true that he read just about anything that he could get his hands on, exploring a wide range of subjects and genres in his commitment to continuously expanding the horizons of his own knowledge. Foreshadowing the acrimonious exchanges he would have with numerous academics throughout his career, upon graduation from high school Mencken cited his distaste for „schoolrooms and pedagogues“ as the primary reason that he refused to pursue a higher degree of any sort. What he wanted was to learn from life outside of the classroom, not only by reading about the world on his own but, just as importantly, by *observing* it, by watching it unfold

---

<sup>125</sup> H.L. Mencken, cited in Carl Bode, *Mencken* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 23.

before his own eyes. Mencken set his heart on becoming a newsman, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that at the time this was not considered a „respectable“ career choice.

Unfortunately, August Mencken was not at all supportive of this plan, and he made it very clear that if Henry did not intend to pursue further formal education then he would be joining the family business. Mencken could not bring himself to defy his father’s orders, and he soon began to learn the rudiments of making and selling cigars. Still, although he worked diligently for his father, the vast majority of his free time was dedicated to reading and experimenting with writing. It was during this period in his life that he began to seriously explore the works of some of the writers who would come to profoundly shape his thinking: Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner. Along with Darwin (and those biologists and social philosophers who drew from him), Mencken’s discovery of Nietzsche had a particularly profound influence on his budding „philosophy.“ From these thinkers he culled a belief in individualism and self-reliance that would undergird much of his work, and as Williams has argued, “Mencken’s Darwinized Nietzsche gave him the closest thing he would ever have to an ideology.”<sup>126</sup>

Mencken read Nietzsche through the lens of the philosophy of „survival of the fittest,” and calling Nietzsche “a thorough-going and uncompromising biological monist,”<sup>127</sup> he argued that in order to properly understand Nietzsche’s thought one had to go back to Darwin. Mencken was a materialist, and he took from Darwin the belief that competition is valuable for the survival and development of the individual and species.

---

<sup>126</sup> Williams, *H.L. Mencken*, 34.

<sup>127</sup> H.L. Mencken, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Tucson, AZ: See Sharp Press, 2003), 81.

Darwin, he claimed, “proved, in *The Origin of the Species*, that a great many more individuals of any given species of living being are born into the world each year than can possibly survive. Those that are best fitted to meet the condition of existence live on; those that are worst fitted die.”<sup>128</sup> I want to emphasize that although Mencken flirted with aspects of social Darwinist thought, he hardly ascribed to the tenets of the ideology *in toto*. Like Nietzsche, he remained largely skeptical of human progress throughout his life, and he argued that the vast majority of his fellow countrymen were stupid and craven and that the prevalence of such weaknesses was hardly confined to particular strata of society (or to his own era). This is significant because although Mencken was sometimes guilty of underestimating the material and psychic impacts of political, economic, and social disadvantage, he did not distinguish between superior and inferior beings on the basis of such social constructs as race, gender or class.

Much like his father before him, Mencken valued courage, honesty, intelligence and competence in one’s endeavors as marks of the superior individual, and during his tenure as a cigar maker and salesman he became increasingly desperate to prove that his potential was being wasted and that his skills as a reader, writer, and observer of American life had be put to use. Nevertheless, knowing that he would be permitted to follow his passion only, so to speak, „over his father’s dead body,“ by late 1898 Mencken was slipping into a state of despair and even considering suicide.<sup>129</sup> Henry Mencken felt himself at an impasse. Had it not been for August Mencken’s unexpected death on January 13, 1899, H.L. Mencken’s future as an editor, journalist and writer might never have materialized. He mourned the loss of his father, but it did not take him long to take

---

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. 81.

<sup>129</sup> Bode, *Mencken*, 24.

advantage of his newfound freedom. Shortly after August's burial, he found his way to the offices of the *Baltimore Herald*, and at the age of 19 became the youngest paid reporter on staff.

## The cynic in his own times

By 1905, Mencken was the paper's managing editor and had had his first book, on the plays of George Bernard Shaw, published. When the *Herald* closed in 1906, he changed employers and began his nearly forty-year relationship with the *Baltimore Sun*. Mencken's book on the life and works of Nietzsche (the first of its kind to be written in English) was published in 1908, and that year he also began to review literature for *The Smart Set*, a publication he would later co-edit with George Jean Nathan. He went on to have his own regular column in the *Evening Sun*, contribute articles and editorials to countless other publications, assume editorship of *The American Mercury*, publish 25 additional major works of his own, and (reportedly) answer every letter that he received. Mencken's productivity as a writer and editor remains dizzying.

And the intensity of the reactions that Mencken's editorials, columns, books, and activism stirred up across the United States is indicative of the shock-value of his work and the success he had in capturing the public's interest on a wide range of subjects pertaining to American politics, society and culture. Still, although he was a smashing success in the sense of achieving notoriety on the national scene, by many accounts he was also considered the most hated man in America during his heyday in the 1920s. In 1926 alone, there were over 500 different editorials printed about him in newspapers and

journals across the country, and at least four-fifths of these were hostile.<sup>130</sup> Never one to shy away from criticism or controversy, Mencken compiled an assortment of particularly impassioned excerpts from these testimonials and published *Menckiana: A Schimpflexikon* in 1928. The following small selection from that volume offers a glimpse of what some of his fellow Americans thought of him: “the verbose Diogenes from Baltimore”; “a mangy mongrel”; “the dog that bites the hands that feed it”; “one of those little skunks who spread their poison wherever they go”; a man inflicted with “dysentery of the mouth.”<sup>131</sup> At times his detractors even threatened him physically. Mencken was repeatedly warned not to travel in the South if he cared for his life (though these warnings never stopped him), and at the height of his fame (or infamy) it was not unusual to find his likeness burning in effigy on the courthouse lawns of small towns across the Bible Belt (a term that he himself coined).<sup>132</sup>

That being said, there were many who welcomed and found inspiration in Mencken’s railings against American „piety, stupidity, morality, and chauvinism.“ Throughout his career (and particularly in the 1920s) he was revered as well as reviled, and in many circles was granted such nicknames as „the American Voltaire“ and „the Sage of Baltimore.“ Though Mencken had few friends and many foes in the academic world, his magazine *The American Mercury* became a Bible of sorts across college campuses nationwide, and in 1926 Walter Lippmann called him “the most powerful personal influence on this whole generation of educated people.”<sup>133</sup> Mencken’s outspoken rebellion against the „tyranny of the majority“ resonated with the concerns and

---

<sup>130</sup> H.L. Mencken, “Author’s Note,” in Mencken, *Menckiana: A Schimpflexikon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928).

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, Selections.

<sup>132</sup> Louis Hatchett, *Mencken’s Americana* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press: 2002), 9.

<sup>133</sup> Walter Lippmann, *Men of Destiny* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), 61.

frustrations of many individuals and groups who wanted to challenge inequalities, generate social and political change, and fight for the right to dissent in a culture working hard to bolster traditional political, social and cultural „values.“ As Huntington Cairns notes, “[for] a dozen years following the establishment of the *Mercury*, [Mencken] was on the public stage as a commentator on American life, and for two thirds of that time he had the largest following ever had by a publicist in that position. At the peak of this phase of his career, *The New York Times* editorialized that Mencken was the most powerful private citizen in the United States.”<sup>134</sup> Love him or hate him, there is no denying the fact that he was a force to be reckoned with.

In 1928, Irving Babbitt (a literary critic, academic, and one of Mencken’s nemeses) lamented the deleterious effects of the rise of „Menckenism“ among the American youth.

The symptoms of Menckenism are familiar: a certain hardness and smartness and disposition to rail at everything that, rightly or wrongly, is established and respected; [and] a tendency to identify the real with what Mr. Mencken terms „the cold and clammy facts“ and to assume that the only alternative is to fade away into sheer romantic unreality.<sup>135</sup>

This description of „Menckenism“ is not wholly inaccurate. There *was* a hardness and a smartness to his work, and he did rail at many things that, rightly or wrongly, were considered established and respectable (indeed his hardness, smartness and humor sprang from the ways in which he juxtaposed „cold, clammy facts“ with the rhetorical claims of American nationalism and moralism). Just as importantly, Mencken *did* condemn those who ignored or glossed over „the facts“ of life to a realm of „unreality,“ though it was not always a „romantic“ one. The romantic, he argued, “is a variety of man whose eye

---

<sup>134</sup> Huntington Cairns, ed., *The American Scene* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), xxi.

<sup>135</sup> Irving Babbitt, “The Critic and American Life,” in Stenerson, *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, 81.

inevitably exaggerates, whose ear inevitably hears more than the band plays, [and] whose imagination inevitably doubles and triples the news brought in by his five senses.”<sup>136</sup>

Whether discussing literature or political and social issues, Mencken criticized romanticism on the grounds that it painted a distorted and misleading picture of human life. But he also leveled similar charges against utopianism and idealism, and most of all upon „Puritanism.“ All were trained on imagining and pursuing a vision of what ought to be rather than actively addressing what *was*, and this, as he saw it, rendered them toxic influences on both the individual and society.

Still, Babbitt’s definition of „Menckenism“ ignores (or mistakes) the motivations for his cynicism. Mencken wrote because he *cared* about the (dire) state of American democracy, and Henry May claims that “[t]his is [what differentiated] him and his merely bourgeois-baiting, alienated contemporaries.”<sup>137</sup> Mencken tapped into the air of disillusionment that permeated the social and political atmosphere of the United States after the First World War, but he was not disheartened by his lack of illusions and he carried on demanding acknowledgement of American hypocrisy. He was, above all, a staunch individualist whose most definitive characteristic was the courage that drove him to speak and to write his mind. When asked what inspired him, Mencken offered the following response: “[t]he two main ideas that run through all my writing, whether it be literary criticism or political polemic, are these: I am strongly in favor of liberty and I hate fraud.”<sup>138</sup> Mencken aired his grievances about his culture not only as a journalist and critic but also, I venture, as a concerned citizen who refused to sit back and witness his

---

<sup>136</sup> H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: First, Second and Third Series* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2010), 454.

<sup>137</sup> Henry May, *The End of American Innocence*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 214.

<sup>138</sup> H.L. Mencken, in *The Impossible H.L. Mencken*, ed. Marion Elizabeth Rodgers (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell, 1991), xlvii

society violate its own value system. He did not expect the „tyrannical majority“ to change much on behalf of his „generous“ efforts to defend civil liberties, but he did consider it his duty as a member of the „superior“ intellectual minority to do all that he could to protect them. The distinction between these two categories—the inferior but tyrannical majority and the elite minority—figures prominently in Mencken’s work. Yet it is worth noting here he was uninhibited by fears of disapproval, and in fact he encouraged *anyone* to exercise the right to speak freely and to rail right back at him.

Mencken went to great lengths to disrupt the illusion that the American people exercised—much less enjoyed—their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, claiming that, instead, they allowed not only the government but also their friends and neighbors to police their conduct and to tell them how they *should* live their lives. Nevertheless, he never fully abandoned the middle-class values with which he was raised and, paradoxically, his attacks on the moralism of the American „booboisie“ were not rooted in a rejection of bourgeois principles per se. Throughout his life he continued to espouse such traditional American ideals as individualism, self-reliance, limited government and free enterprise. In committing himself to defending these ideals in honor of the right to liberty shared by all Americans, his activism bolstered progressive causes more often than not. Attempts to classify Mencken exclusively as a conservative or a liberal thinker, or to label him as a realist or an idealist, inevitably fail because his cynicism defies such dichotomies and he simply does not fit comfortably into any one of these categories. As Douglas C. Stenerson contends, “critics who have damned H.L. Mencken as an arch-reactionary or hailed him as a libertarian have not seen the whole man. The truth is that he was both. His social and political thought is particularly

fascinating because it embodies so many conflicting elements in the American heritage.”<sup>139</sup>

## On words, weapons and wars

Mencken’s professional dexterity was impressive; at various moments throughout his career he assumed, with gusto, the roles of “journalist, literary critic, popular philosopher, social critic, philologist, editor, autobiographer, [and] satirist.”<sup>140</sup> Still, we must remember that he was largely self-taught when it came to his knowledge of the genres and subjects that he worked with, and the range that he tackled was extensive. Mencken’s critics (particularly those in the academic world) have accused him of spreading himself too thin, and although he was exceptionally well read, such arguments are not invalid. He was, as Williams has noted, an “anti-specialist whose work tends to displease most specialists in the various fields in which he sported,” and he was often guilty of disregarding the complexity of causal forces behind political and social phenomena.<sup>141</sup> Mencken does not (and could not) offer expert analyses of particular political and social issues, nor did he claim to. What he does offer is a shockingly honest assessment of *what* was going on in American politics and society even when he fails to adequately explain how or why. In fact, I would argue that this „failure“ contributed to the potency of his effect, for Mencken thrust upon his readers the burden of explanation and response. Unfettered by the constraints of academic specialization, he cried foul

---

<sup>139</sup> Douglas Stenerson, “„The "Forgotten Man“ of H.L. Mencken,” in Stenerson, *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, 134.

<sup>140</sup> Williams, *H.L. Mencken*, preface 1

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.* 1

whenever he found the mores, not to mention the laws, of his contemporary America to contradict the principles upon which the United States had been founded.

Throughout the course of his career, Mencken maintained that he was enormously amused by the knavery and foolishness of his fellow citizens. Nevertheless, he took his (self-appointed) position as an acute observer and critic of American life very seriously. As George H. Douglas has argued, “Mencken was a writer who sought to understand American society thoroughly and rigorously, but he did this not by the [customary] means open to scholarship, not by cool detachment, but by engagement—by wrestling with his subject, punching it, knocking it down.”<sup>142</sup> Indeed, there is a decidedly aggressive and even militaristic tone to much of Mencken’s work, and he named his inaugural newspaper column „The Free Lance“ for good reason. In it, he set about satirically skewering his fellow Baltimoreans on any subject he saw fit, and although Mencken knocked his targets around figuratively rather than physically, his attacks certainly hit home. „The Free Lance“ (first published in 1911) frequently caused outrage, and the *Sun* received and regularly printed impassioned responses to the column at its author’s behest. It was with pride that Mencken would later venture the following statement: “In my gladiator days on the *Baltimore Sun* I never attacked a single man without means of hitting back. Often I insisted upon the paper giving him the means— [and] I controlled space that was dedicated to anyone wanting to attack me.”<sup>143</sup> Mencken lashed out at his fellows, but he invited the American people to treat him as he treated them, and he took care to facilitate anyone who felt the urge to strike him back.

---

<sup>142</sup> George H. Douglas, *H.L. Mencken: Critic of American Life* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978), 50.

<sup>143</sup> H.L. Mencken, in *The American Scene: A Reader*, ed. Huntington Cairns, 475.

His column was read widely and caused amusement as well as anger, but despite its success, „The Free Lance“ was abruptly shuttered in 1915. Although an official explanation was never provided, Mencken“s stance against U.S. involvement in the First World War, his brash criticism of propaganda and media censorship in the years leading up to it, and his alleged German sympathies have all since been cited as reasons for the column“s demise. At the time, Mencken had come under increasingly heavy fire from the public as well as the authorities for his „un-American“ opinions and statements, and he was subjected to governmental surveillance and censorship throughout the duration of the Great War. The experience of being watched and silenced was one that Mencken never forgave much less forgot. He would later offer the following assessment of democracy in the United States: “Democracy, like virtue, seems to be something that everybody whoops up but nobody follows as a career. Very few Americans actually believe in it, [and whenever] the test comes they are willing to deprive other people of their rights...[and] to exchange their own for some form of security.”<sup>144</sup> Mencken“s reproach was not unfounded given its historical context and the very real effects that movements such as the first Red Scare had on anyone (citizen or non-citizen) accused of espousing beliefs or opinions that deviated from the American norm. Citing equality before the law, limited government and freedom of speech as the only elements in a democracy that are genuinely valuable, Mencken claimed that all three of these principles had been abandoned by a public all too willing to trade in its values (and its ethics) for the safety promised by conformity.<sup>145</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> Mencken, *Minority Report*, 207.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* 119.

Still, his own faith in the values of liberty and equality was shaken but not broken, and he remained committed to the task of exposing American hypocrisy in terms both harsh and humorous. According to Mencken, the War had confirmed that “hypocrisy is actually a kind of ideal in America. When the American cannot be really virtuous he becomes a hypocrite, and soon or late he convinces both himself and his neighbors that his hypocrisy is a sufficient surrogate for the virtue he lacks.”<sup>146</sup> Soon after the war was over Mencken returned to admonishing the government’s abuse of power and the public’s complacency toward it with increased fervor. Declaring that he was “unalterably opposed to all efforts to put down free speech, whatever the excuse,”<sup>147</sup> Mencken consistently advocated for some of the country’s most notorious radicals, at times adding not only his name and time but also his money to their defense. It should be emphasized that in doing so he lent his support to the causes of individuals and groups espousing beliefs that were antithetical to his own. Mencken’s political leanings could most accurately be described as liberal in the classical sense (he stood for civil liberties, limited government, respect for the rule of law, and a free market economy). Yet he publicly defended, among others, the Italian immigrants and accused anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti and the activist and labor leader Thomas Mooney, and he not only published the work of Emma Goldman in *The Mercury* but also formally lobbied the Bureau of Immigration on her behalf and donated funds to the „Emma Goldman Recovery Committee.”<sup>148</sup> Though his requests that she be allowed to return to the United States were never granted, Goldman appreciated his efforts. She and Mencken had developed a correspondence, and in 1930 she wrote to him with the following message: “Bless your heart...How naïve of you to think that you

---

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. 246.

<sup>147</sup> H.L. Mencken, in Williams, H.L. Mencken, 123

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. 124-5.

could change the law in my direction. It is splendid of you to want to attempt it...[and] the fact that you have tried has done me a world of good.”<sup>149</sup>

Mencken was, paradoxically, an idealist in his own right, and his mission was to show everyone—experts and laymen alike—that they sacrificed their own dignity when they handed over their rights and liberties. He tailored his criticisms as well as his activism to achieve the biggest impact for each particular individual or case that he took on; “My weapon,” Mencken argued, “is [always] adapted to the enemy and to the fight,”<sup>150</sup> and his cynicism, like that of Diogenes, was often improvisational. Yet there is an irony to the aggressive tone and militaristic tropes that crop up in his writing given the intensity of his opposition to the United States’ involvement in both World Wars. A strict isolationist, Mencken saw no reason to justify military engagement in any conflict short of a foreign invasion of American soil. He has been criticized roundly on this issue. In the case of World War II, it is certainly true that he refused to acknowledge or take seriously the very real threat that Nazism posed to human life and dignity as Hitler rose to power in the 1930s. Mencken grossly underestimated Hitler’s power and influence as a demagogue (as well as his ultimate intentions). But this does not automatically make him a fascist or an anti-Semite—though he has long suffered such accusations—nor does it make him a German loyalist (and, for what it’s worth, he later admitted he had been wrong). The attachments that Mencken felt to Germany were cultural and not political. “The fact is,” he wrote,

my „loyalty“ to Germany, as a state or nation, is absolutely nil. It would do me no good whatsoever if the Germans conquered all of Europe; it would do me a lot of damage if they beat the United States. But I do believe I was right when I argued

---

<sup>149</sup> Emma Goldman, cited in Williams, *H.L. Mencken*, 125.

<sup>150</sup> Mencken, in Cairns, *The American Scene*, 475.

that unfairness to them was discreditable and dangerous to this country, and I am glad that I did.<sup>151</sup>

Mencken's concerns lay primarily with the effects that both wars had at home, and while his opinions on the U.S.'s military involvement overseas may have been off the mark, his condemnation of the government's suppression of free speech and the right to dissent, and of its persecution of anyone suspected of being „un-American,“ is hard to fault. Challenging the motives of both the Wilson and Roosevelt administrations for going to war, Mencken argued that “to wage a war for a purely moral reason is as absurd as to ravish a woman for a purely moral reason. Such notions do not make for innocence, and hence for self-respect; they make for hypocrisy. The more war has to be explained and justified, the less good will issue from it.”<sup>152</sup> Mencken called the press as well as politicians to task for fanning the flames of wartime chauvinism, and he chastised the public for buying into it—their enthusiasm did not make for bravery, he argued, but for hypocrisy. “The kinds of courage I really admire,” Mencken stated, “are not whooped up in war, but cried down, and indeed become infamous. No one, in such times of irrational and animal-like emotion, ever praises the man who stands out against the official balderdash, and seeks to restore the national thinking, so called, to a reasonable sanity.”<sup>153</sup> This was the man that Mencken had taken it upon himself to try to be.

## Making sense of Menckenism

Neither a political nor a philosophical movement, „Menckenism“ was, at heart, an improvisational critical practice characterized by the particular ways that Mencken

---

<sup>151</sup> Mencken, cited in Williams, *H.L. Mencken*, 65-6.

<sup>152</sup> Mencken, *Minority Report*, 201.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* 187.

himself went about „telling it like it is.“ He summed up his personal creed as follows: “I believe that it is better to tell the truth than to lie. I believe that it is better to be free than to be a slave. And I believe that it is better to know than be ignorant.”<sup>154</sup> For Mencken, both freedom and knowledge depend upon a practical search for truth, while the practice of publicly revealing this truth is in turn both an expression of one’s freedom and a demonstration of what one knows. Yet although the concepts of truth, freedom and knowledge are intimately connected in his cynical „philosophy,“ he never formally defines any of them philosophically. This is not due to intellectual oversight. It is, rather, due to Mencken’s belief that formal conceptual definitions belong to the realm of metaphysics, and that the retreat to such a realm constitutes a death knell for thinking. Indeed, all absolutes were anathema to Mencken, regardless of whether they took philosophical, religious or scientific forms, and he was hostile to any system of thought that claimed authority on the bases of theoretical proofs. In this he was like Diogenes. “Philosophy,” Mencken stated, “consists largely of one philosopher arguing that all others are jackasses. He usually proves it, and I should add that he also usually proves that he is one himself.”<sup>155</sup> What Mencken sought were truths rather than the Truth, and as far as he was concerned, anyone doing otherwise was a fraud.

Nietzsche, however, was one of the few exceptions to that rule, and it is clear that Mencken felt he had discovered something of a kindred spirit in this German philosopher waging a lonely war against convention. His book on Nietzsche offers some of the clearest insight into the bases of his own iconoclasm because it is, in many ways, less an examination of Nietzsche than an account of the cynical „philosophy“ of H.L. Mencken.

---

<sup>154</sup> H.L. Mencken, “What I Believe,” *The Forum* 84 (September 1930): 139.

<sup>155</sup> Mencken, *Minority Report*, 48.

“All life upon earth,” Mencken asserts, “is nothing more than a battle with the enemies of life. A germ is such an enemy, cold is such an enemy, lack of food is such an enemy, and others that may be mentioned are lack of water, ignorance of natural laws, armed foes and deficient physical strength.”<sup>156</sup> Drawing upon his reading of Darwin, he claims that all natural beings are shaped by the various ways that they respond to challenges and adapt to their environments; although human animals cannot always know what dangers they will face, their chances of survival increase when they actively examine the world around them and take measure of threats that arise. For Mencken, to exist is to struggle, but although living is a risky business, humans are far from helpless beings cast into a hostile world. As we struggle with competitive energetic and material forces, he asserts that “[our] perceptions, corrected by our experience and our common sense, must serve as guides for us, and we must seize every opportunity to widen their range and increase their accuracy.”<sup>157</sup> Whether or not the majority of human beings make practical use of their perceptions, experience and common sense is, of course, another issue entirely for Mencken. Still, he argues that although man must respect the laws of nature, humans can use their instincts and their knowledge of these laws to respond to adversity in ways that afford the individual as well as the species the chance to not only survive but thrive.

Like his take on Nietzsche’s materialism, Mencken’s assessment of the distinction between superior and inferior individuals (and, relatedly, his assessment of the pernicious effects of Christian morality on humanity) reflects an intuitive if not always subtle understanding of Nietzsche’s thought. He describes Nietzsche’s superior man as follows: “[he] is a being capable of facing the horrors of life unafraid, of meeting great enemies

---

<sup>156</sup> Mencken, *Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 79.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

and slaying them, of gazing down upon the earth in pride and scorn, [and] of making his own way and bearing his own burdens.”<sup>158</sup> For Mencken, a superior individual is a free spirit—a courageous, independent and self-sufficient being who honestly measures the pains as well as the pleasures of living on this earth and resolves to make the best of both. Such individuals, he asserts, are rare, and by contrast the vast majority of human beings are so afraid of losing their battles with the enemies of life that they sacrifice their independence for the perceived safety of the herd. “Liberty,” Mencken argues, “means self-reliance, it means resolution, it means enterprise, [and] it means the capacity for doing without.”<sup>159</sup> These are precisely the qualities that separate strong individuals from the weak and the few from the many. Clinging together, the fearful and weak devise moral systems that seek to teach the brave and powerful individual to sacrifice his or her strength for the good of the group, and this has the effect of weakening the species as a whole. Mencken asserts that it is not the „good“ that the weak (and tyrannical) majority are after so much as the suppression of any threats presented by the strong, and they cleverly endeavor to convince the strong to relinquish their independence and superior prowess by shaming them for the qualities and characteristics that distinguish them from the rest of the group.

But Mencken also admits that there are material advantages to conforming to the morals of the majority—even if he has no respect for those who do so. Indeed, despite morality’s pretensions to self-sacrifice, Mencken claims that “all morality, in fact, is colored and modified by opportunism,”<sup>160</sup> and his biggest complaint against Christianity (which, following Nietzsche, he considers the most insidious of all slave-moralities) was

---

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>159</sup> Mencken, *Notes on Democracy*, 54.

<sup>160</sup> Mencken, *Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 52.

not that its mission to make lambs out of lions was at odds with the laws of natural selection (though he believed that it was). Rather, it was that Christian morality was a sham concocted by clever but weak members of the species to constrain the instincts of the strong for their own benefit. Man, Mencken asserts, is naturally self-serving, and “a code of morals [is] nothing more than a system of customs, laws and ideas which [has] its origin in the instinctive desire of some definite race to live under conditions which best [serve] its welfare.”<sup>161</sup> Morality, then, does not destroy the natural forces that drive human beings into conflict, nor does it aim to shape all human beings into passive bodies capable of peaceful coexistence—it simply changes the weapons they have at their disposal to protect themselves and their interests, and this, ironically, is Christian morality’s silver lining. Mencken argues via Nietzsche that “humanity [has] escaped utter degeneration and destruction because, despite its dominance as a theory of action, few men actually [practice] Christianity.”<sup>162</sup> His hatred of hypocrisy notwithstanding, he concedes that the very fact that Christians so rarely practice what they preach has been a saving grace for the species: its laws and customs may harness individual strength and thus weaken humanity, but the laws of nature have not permitted it to kill the human race off completely.

The name that Mencken gave to the particular variety of Christian moralism that, he charged, had taken root in the United States since its founding was „Puritanism.“ In doing so, he took a bit of creative license. Fred Hobson has noted that it was not technically Puritanism and its legacy that Mencken decried but essentially an American equivalent of Victorianism. Throughout his career he railed, among other things, against

---

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. 44.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid. 84.

the “enforcement of genteel standards in literature, American reticence about discussing sex, [the] movement toward prohibition, [the] distrust of hedonism, [and] the American passion for „decency“ and „respectability,“<sup>163</sup> and these issues were more closely linked to Methodist revivals in American culture than to the nation’s punitanical past.

Nevertheless, Mencken effectively used the term „Puritan“ pejoratively as a moniker for all things oppressively and aggressively „moral“ in American society. Defining Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy,”<sup>164</sup> he maintained that anyone attempting to police the private lives of his or her neighbors in the name of „decency“ and „respectability“ was essentially sadistic. As far as he was concerned, the Puritans strove not to make people „better“ but to make them suffer, and one of Mencken’s chief complaints against Puritanism was that it claimed to mitigate the human proclivity to dominate others but actually exploited it. Despite its pretensions to acting in the name of the Lord, he asserts that “there is only one honest impulse at the bottom of Puritanism, and that is to punish the man with the superior capacity for happiness—to bring him down to the miserable level of „good“ men, i.e., of stupid, cowardly and chronically unhappy men.”<sup>165</sup>

Yet Mencken claimed that its success in proscribing happiness and spoiling the fun in life, though loathsome, was not surprising. Puritanism (like any form of moralism) capitalized on not only the weakness and fearfulness of the American people but also, and relatedly, on their irrationality and stupidity. Mencken argues that the common American is deeply afraid of the unknown, and that in order to avoid facing it he or she

---

<sup>163</sup> Fred Hobson, “„This Hellawful South“: Mencken and the Late Confederacy,” in Stenerson, *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, 179.

<sup>164</sup> Mencken, in Dorsey, *On Mencken*, 123.

<sup>165</sup> H.L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 163.

turns against rationality and eagerly embraces the fantasy of Truth. Absolute truths in any form provide respite from the insecurity of uncertainty, not because they are „true“ but because believing in them spares one the energy of thinking. Such a person, according to Mencken, never doubts, refuses to use reason and the evidence of his or her senses, and rejects common sense in favor of the doctrines of a fictional higher power that promises certainty in an uncertain world. On the subject of what, specifically, constitutes stupidity he says the following:

Any kind of handicap save one may be overcome by a resolute spirit—blindness, crippling, poverty. The history of humanity is a history of just such overcomings. But no spirit can ever overcome the handicap of stupidity. The person who believes what is palpably not true is hopeless.<sup>166</sup>

For Mencken, stupidity and certitude are synonymous. Of that, paradoxically, he was most definitely sure. Instead of accepting the „cold, clammy“ facts of life—that human beings are material bodies struggling with one another and with the forces of nature—the stupid individual cowers before the Truth and dismisses the truths of life all together. Mencken claimed that a superior man, by contrast, is not tempted by the comfort of certainty. Rather, “he sees daily evidence that many things held to be true by nine-tenths of all men are, in reality, false, and he is thereby apt to acquire a doubt of everything, including his own beliefs.”<sup>167</sup> The key to not only surviving but appreciating life on Earth for as long as possible was to develop the courage to constantly test one’s knowledge.

For Mencken, there was no undertaking more worthy than that of pursuing the truths of a world constantly upset and shaken by material forces that naturally frustrated human attempts to control them. He argued that because “all human progress, even in

---

<sup>166</sup> Mencken, *Minority Report*, 183.

<sup>167</sup> Mencken, *Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 87.

morals, has been the work of men who have doubted the current moral values,” the motto of the superior individual must always be “I am not too sure.”<sup>168</sup> Yet although Mencken claimed that hypocrisy, irrationality, and stupidity were the marks of the inferior majority, it is significant that he did not in fact essentialize or naturalize these characteristics. As Marion Elizabeth Rogers argues

for Mencken the superior man, regardless of race or social background, is simply the man of honor. By that he means an independent, enlightened citizen, predisposed towards liberty, [and] on guard to keep his freedom from eroding under the pressure of self-styled patriots or unscrupulous politicians who play upon the fears of people in troubled times.<sup>169</sup>

The man or woman of honor is, in a word, a person of great integrity—he or she is not only unafraid to challenge the majority in defense of the democratic principles of liberty and equality under the law, but is also strong enough to resist the temptation to pander to its fears or its (foolish) idealism for the sake of personal gain. This strength is critical, because the superior individual is as much a human animal as the inferior and is not invulnerable to these temptations. Indeed, he or she may even engage in unscrupulous behavior from time to time. Yet Mencken asserts that one of the things that marks the superior individual from the inferior and the honorable person from the moral lies in their responses to such moments of weakness: “the difference between a moral man and a man of honor,” he claims, “is that the latter regrets a discreditable act, even when it has worked and he has not been caught.”<sup>170</sup> Mencken contends that the instant the moral individual’s hypocrisy is revealed, he or she immediately starts denying wrongdoing and

---

<sup>168</sup> Mencken, *Minority Report*, 282.

<sup>169</sup> Rogers, *Notes on Democracy*, 15.

<sup>170</sup> Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, 617.

pointing fingers at others. The honorable individual, by contrast, takes the high road by acknowledging the slip and accounting for the dishonorable act.

Mencken called Nietzsche's thought a „counterblast to sentimentality,“ and asserted that “[i]f Nietzsche left no other vital message to his time, he would have at least forced and deserved a hearing for his warning that Christianity is a theory for those who distrust and despair of strength, and not for those who hope to fight on.”<sup>171</sup> Fighting on against sentimentality is precisely what Mencken did in his own time, and he certainly managed to force a hearing on the dangers that morality posed to liberty and the pursuit of happiness in American life. Following Nietzsche's lead, Mencken asserted that American moralism is both spawned by and feeds off of fear, and he insisted that, contrary to popular belief, the United States is hardly the land of the free or the home of the brave. “The American people,” he claimed,

taking one with another, constitute the most timorous, sniveling, poltroonish, ignominious mob of serfs and goose-steppers ever gathered under one flag in Christendom since the end of the Middle Ages, and they grow more timorous, more sniveling, more poltroonish, more ignominious every day.<sup>172</sup>

For Mencken, American exhortations to freedom and bravery amounted to egregious examples of hypocrisy in a decidedly two-faced society. “Ask the average American,” Mencken wrote, “what is the most salient passion in his emotional armamentarium—what is the idea that lies at the bottom of all his other ideas—and it is very probable that, nine times out of ten, he will nominate his hot and unquenchable rage for liberty.”<sup>173</sup> Yet the majority of his fellow citizens, as he saw it, willingly traded their

---

<sup>171</sup> Mencken, *Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, xvi-xvii

<sup>172</sup> Mencken, *Prejudices: First, Second and Third Series*, 301-2.

<sup>173</sup> H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, *The American Credo: Toward an interpretation of the National Mind* (New York: Knopf, 1921), 14.

liberty and dignity for the security promised by moral conformity. Clearly, Mencken himself was not afraid to condemn them for their cowardice or their lies.

## Paging 'Dr. Rhetoricus'?

There is no denying that, taken at face value, Mencken's „philosophy“ was harsh and unforgiving, and it has certainly been received as such both during his own time and today. As Charles A. Fecher argues, “in a nation dedicated to the principle that no man is better than any other, [Mencken's philosophy did not] and does not make for popularity.”<sup>174</sup> But popularity, at the end of the day, was not Mencken's goal. His primary goal, rather, was to force hearings on the extent to which Americans were, in fact, actually dedicated to the principle of equality, and the extent to which they truly valued liberty. It was in defense of these principles that he wrote, and his criticism was earnest and honest. Mencken may have been distrustful of the inherent „goodness“ of human beings and of the motivations behind most human behavior, but he was no misanthrope. Though he ranted and railed against his society, he did not hate life, or for that matter his fellow Americans. Rather, he hated what he considered to be their hypocrisy.

Mencken had the audacity—some would say the nerve—to criticize American culture from within and in honor of the very ideals that it promised but failed to uphold. His cynicism toed the line between revolt and reform in a way that raised questions about the state of American democracy and that many people found uncomfortable but could not ignore. And in this his criticism resembles that of Diogenes. At the core, both were

---

<sup>174</sup> Charles A. Fecher, “The Comfortable Bourgeois: The Thought of H.L. Mencken,” in Dorsey, *On Mencken*, 125.

cultural rebels devoted to living a life of freedom even if their visions of what it meant to be free were not symmetrical. Despite his insistence that “no normal being wants to hear the truth,”<sup>175</sup> Mencken considered it his duty to ensure that everyone would hear him tell it as he saw it. And like Diogenes, he showed that there was room for honesty in society even if his observations were unwelcome. On the subject of cynicism, Mencken said the following:

One of the most curious of human delusions lies in the theory that cynics are unhappy men—that cynicism makes for a general biliousness and malaise. It is a false deduction, I believe, from the obvious fact that cynics make other men unhappy... For what a cynic believes, though it may be too dreadful to put into formal words, at least usually has the merit of being true—and truth is ever a rock, hard and harsh, but solid under the feet.<sup>176</sup>

If the goal of the cynic is to force people to face uncomfortable truths, Mencken and Diogenes showed that a little comedic relief goes a long way. Both cynics recognized that humor has the ability to lighten moods and to help their unwanted or undesirable messages go down more easily. It draws attention to their unsolicited and unwanted truth-claims but can also soften the blow a bit—a joke, like an insult, is difficult to ignore, and the combination of the two can be twice as affective.

Indeed, it is because the truth can be such a bitter pill to swallow that dark humor plays such an indispensable role in cynical practices. Mencken’s assessment of human nature and the politics that are motivated by it was that although man may be capable of virtue and of actions unmotivated by drives to further self-interest, the mere fact of having such a capacity hardly translates to the inclination or desire to act upon it.

Nevertheless, Mencken was not a political realist in the classic sense; his recognition of

---

<sup>175</sup> Mencken, *Prejudices: Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Series*, 480.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

„the human drive to dominate“ was muddled with a kind of idealism that prevented him from fitting comfortably into any theoretical camp. He *believed* in freedom of speech and the right to dissent. I would argue that for Mencken, the ends never justified the means in political contestations, even if he was never surprised by the extent to which corruption infiltrated the political process, or if he charged the public with inviting political mendacity as much as he charged politicians for indulging in it. “The capacity of human beings,” he argued, “to believe the obviously not true is apparently almost unlimited. Politicians fall into trouble, not by overestimating it, but by underestimating it.”<sup>177</sup> Still, I would argue that Mencken could most accurately be considered a political meliorist rather than a pessimist: his view was that things could never be the best or the worst, but that they *could* improve (and that they did, albeit very slowly). He might have compared his contemporary America to the Dark Ages, but he was well aware that the times were quite different, despite his frequent use of medieval metaphors to describe his countrymen.

Mencken made fun of his fellows and of himself, and he had fun doing so. This lightheartedness helped him to expand his readership, and as such to expand the reach of his messages; as William H. Nolte has argued, “Mencken’s most appealing quality... was his enthusiasm and exuberance. He delighted in the world about him, and he conveyed that delight to his readers.”<sup>178</sup> Mencken did not, so to speak, let his frustrations get him down. “We live,” he argued, “in a land of abounding quackeries, and if we do not learn to laugh we succumb to the melancholy disease which afflicts the race of viewers-with-

---

<sup>177</sup> Mencken, *Minority Report*, 276.

<sup>178</sup> William H. Nolte, “The Literary Critic,” in Dorsey, *On Mencken*, 204.

alarm. I have had too good a time of it in this world to go down that chute.”<sup>179</sup> I think that there is something valuable to be learned from the fact that he also did not give up on his society, even if he did not expect much change to come from his efforts.

## Liberty, equality and hypocrisy in America

In 1947, Mencken gave an interview on public affairs in which he was asked whether he preferred to be called „The Sage of Baltimore“ or „The Man Who Hates Everything.“ He responded with the following statement: “I don’t give a damn what you or anyone else calls me...[but] in the present case it is a little inaccurate to say that I hate everything. I am strongly in favor of common sense, common honesty, and common decency.”<sup>180</sup> Given his criticism of the common man, it may be surprising at first glance that Mencken endorses „common“ sense, „common“ honesty and „common“ decency here. In fact, these are concepts he consistently praises in his work. Although Mencken is often charged with harboring aristocratic sensibilities on account of the dichotomy he presents between superior/elite individuals and inferior/common ones, he argues that one of the marks of the superior individual is his or her capacity to cast off Truth while making use of the common sense, honesty and decency that are available to all. Mencken does not, of course, define these concepts, nor does he feel the need to. Yet I suspect that he had an additional motivation for employing such terminology in his discussions of the American public. Though he argues that most Americans would identify liberty as their most cherished principle, Mencken claimed that what they were really obsessed with was status, or what he terms „social aspiration.“ “[The American’s] dominant passion,” he

---

<sup>179</sup> Mencken, *Mencken Chrestomathy*, vii.

<sup>180</sup> Mencken in Cairns, *American Scene*, 3.

asserts, “is a passion to lift himself by at least a step or two in the society that he is a part of—a passion to improve his position, to break down some shadowy barrier of caste, to achieve the countenance of what, for all his talk of equality, he recognizes and accepts as his betters.”<sup>181</sup> Mencken was yet again making fun. And the jury is out as to whether or not he was correct in his assessment. But I, for one, would agree with him at least on some levels, and if he was right it is hardly surprising that his audience often did not take kindly to being called common, average, or inferior.

That being said, one might ask what use is Mencken, a critic who for the most part fell out of popular favor in the 1930s, for us today? There are certainly limitations to looking to Mencken as a model for inspiring political and social engagement, much less change, for he consistently eschewed the kind of collective action often named as the defining mark of the political. Yet that did not keep him from getting involved in the public sphere and speaking out on political issues and causes. One of the remarkable things about Mencken is that not only was he not „disillusioning“ (he did not „generate“ disillusionment, even if he was read and embraced by disillusioned members of society), he also was not, on the whole, disillusioned in the common sense of the term. Mencken did not succumb to disappointment and frustration; he acted upon his observations and his frustrations with hypocrisy in American life, and in doing so he often cut directly across the kinds of ideological lines that are prevalent in politics today. Mencken sought to break down (what he took to be) the illusions that the American people had about themselves, e.g. that they were committed to upholding such basic democratic principles as equality before the law, political tolerance, government accountability and transparency, and civil liberties. What I think is most compelling about his cynicism (and

---

<sup>181</sup> Mencken and Nathan, *American Credo*, 28-9.

that of Diogenes) is that they both manage to maintain a measure of ideological aloofness that is nevertheless combined with a commitment to engaging their respective societies in a discussion (or argument) about its current state of affairs. This is not because they did not have their own prejudices, which they did. But in committing to fight hypocrisy, and to doing so with a laugh and a wink as well as with a (metaphorical) club, Mencken was able to rail against his society in a way that was heard all across the political spectrum.

Mencken's cynicism started very public arguments about what it means to be an American and what national values the American people honor. It also inspired individuals and groups who were dissatisfied with their culture to start conversations about how to change it. Though Mencken was hardly a Progressive (indeed, he did not identify specifically with any political or social movement and was not a member of any political organization, liberal or conservative), he lent his support to particular causes on both the liberal and the conservative sides of the political spectrum throughout his career.<sup>182</sup> And although he has sometimes been branded a foe of democracy, his criticism of democracy, like his discussions of superior and inferior people, has been taken out of context. Mencken chastised the spectacle of democratic politics (while also claiming to delight in this same spectacle) but he by no means sought to replace the system with another form of government. Rather, his attacks on government were aimed at the people who run for office, those who vote for them, and the corrupt and inefficient manner in which elected officials manage the tasks that are placed before them. Mencken did not so much denounce the system itself as the ways in which it operated in practice. In fact, although Mencken argued that government is by nature evil because it restricts individual liberty, he saw it as a *necessary* evil, and never advocated getting rid of government

---

<sup>182</sup> Williams, *H.L. Mencken*, 53.

altogether (and in this his cynicism does differ from that of Diogenes, who refused to accept any of the laws of his society). There *were* times when Mencken felt that a person's liberty could legitimately be curtailed by the government, but this was only when it presented a direct and immediate threat to the physical or material well-being of another person.

David Greenberg argues that Mencken's world-view, though generally characterized as libertarian, "might better be described as a kind of slapstick nihilism, equal parts Nietzsche...and Groucho Marx (who sang in *Horse-feathers*, „Whatever it is, I'm against it“).”<sup>183</sup> This seems to me an apt description, and one that is closely attuned to the remarkable combination of seriousness and silliness so typical of Mencken's work. He shared with Nietzsche a number of core beliefs: that „conclusions are consolations,” that conventions constrain creativity, and that the ultimate mission of the moral man or woman is to enslave and thus destroy the strength and vitality of the free spirit. He also appreciated Nietzsche's courageous honesty and his unique style, which he called the kind of writing “that one cannot read aloud without roaring and waving one's arms.”<sup>184</sup> But to a much greater degree than Nietzsche, Mencken was humorist, and his comedic tendencies amplified the effect of his of criticism. His style, unique in its own right, was at once frank and funny, earnest and capricious, and also, somehow, ridiculously relevant to his time. I think that Nietzsche, Mencken, and Groucho Marx all shared an irreverent, liberating and life-affirming spirit. Consider, for example, Mencken's assessment of the role of the iconoclast in any age: “The liberation of the human mind has best been furthered by gay fellows who heaved dead cats into sanctuaries and then went roistering

---

<sup>183</sup> David Greenberg, “Lippmann vs. Mencken: Debating Democracy,” *Raritan* 32, no. 2 (2012). 1

<sup>184</sup> Mencken, *Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 78.

down the highways of the world, proving to all men that doubt, after all, was safe—that the god in the sanctuary was a fraud. One horse-laugh is worth ten thousand syllogisms.”<sup>185</sup> It’s difficult to imagine that, given their respective oeuvres, either Nietzsche or Groucho Marx would have disagreed with him.

## Chapter 4: Provoking Perfectionism—Stanley Cavell on Doubt and Democracy

*“Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist...[and] go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways.” —Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1841*

What is the role of the cynic in any given age? And to what extent might this role, and its attendant goals, be related to those of the non-conformist that Ralph Waldo Emerson celebrates in *Self-Reliance*? I will address both questions in the pages to come, but for the moment I would like to focus on the significance of Emerson’s ties to the philosophy of cynicism. I chose this epigraph because it reveals a cynical side to Emerson’s thinking largely elided by the American philosopher Stanley Cavell, to whose reflections on skepticism and Emersonian Perfectionism I turn in this chapter. Cavell has written extensively on Emerson’s work, and indeed, he credits „The Sage of Concord“ with provoking many of his own meditations on the relationship between self and society, between philosophy and politics, in American culture. Yet although Cavell has commented at length on *Self-Reliance*, he does not address the narrator’s affirmation of “the rude truth.”<sup>186</sup> This omission is noteworthy because it seems to me that the theme of

---

<sup>185</sup> Mencken, *Mencken Chrestomathy*, 17.

<sup>186</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 135.

„speaking the rude truth“ permeates the text of this essay, and as this is a theme that lies at the heart of cynic philosophy, it is worth probing the parallels between Emerson’s proverbial non-conformist and the non-conformism of the cynics. Doing so ultimately reveals, I argue, a new perspective from which to consider not only *Self-Reliance* but also Cavell’s endorsement of Emersonian Perfectionism as a necessary response to the difficulties of democratic life.

I should note from the outset, however, that Cavell never affiliates his thinking and writing with cynicism or its critical practices. In fact, he does the opposite, and proposes that his work on Emerson Perfectionism offers an antidote to the hopelessness of a cynical response to the predicaments and perplexities of the human experience of living with others in an uncertain world. And Cavell is, to a certain degree, on the mark here: cynicism does, by and large, present human quarrels and concerns with others as unseizable or unresolvable, and this is its chief weakness as a critical attitude. Rather than affirming a shared world, the cynic takes a stand of near-permanent protest against his or her society with the goal of staying true to the self (or, in Foucault’s words, “caring” for the self). So, although cynicism is not selfish it *is* self-centered; the cynic advocates for the transformative potential that comes with questioning society and freeing the self from the fetters of conformism, but the locus of change is always the individual rather than the community and this, I think, is the philosophy’s Achilles heel. By focusing on the personal benefits of breaking away from conformism and conventionality, cynicism does not adequately appreciate the interdependencies between the self and society, and instead posits a world in which the two are, by their very nature, diametrically opposed. They are not, and this is a point that Cavell is attentive to. Despite

his reputation as an individualist, Cavell examines the reciprocity between the self and society quite closely, and his work on skepticism and Emersonian Perfectionism shows that caring for the self in fact depends upon also caring for, and having commitments to, a community of others. Human beings, Cavell argues, need others and a measure of conventionalism if they are even to begin making sense of, and finding meaning in, their lives. And while the cynics do not deny this human need to convene (remember, they do require an audience), the meaning-making capacities of conventionality are something they take for granted in their commitment to self-reliance.

Nevertheless, this is not reason enough to discount the affirmative aspects of cynic philosophy, or to deny its relation to Cavell's work. Indeed, there are striking similarities between the cynics' concerns for the state and the fate of the human self in society and those advanced by Cavell, and his reading of Emerson's *Self-Reliance* helps bring this to light. Focusing intensely on the significance of Emerson's statements that "the virtue most requested in society is conformity" and that "self-reliance is its aversion," Cavell contends that Emerson

is pretty explicitly naming his own writing as saying of itself that it is written in aversion, aversion to conformity. And since the work of the word „conformity“ in its sentence is to name a virtue, a contribution to a way of life, the implication is that his writing in self-reliance exhibits or enacts a contribution to a counter way of life.<sup>187</sup>

This smacks of Diogenes and his cynicism. According to Cavell, Emerson identifies himself as the non-conformist narrator, and his aversive writing signifies an act of disobedience; it demonstrates Emerson's determination to adopt a self-reliant style of life

---

<sup>187</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 22.

by defying his society's most requested virtue.<sup>188</sup> And following in this vein, Cavell also notes that Emerson's use of the concept „aversion“ should not be construed simply as a „dislike“ or an „avoidance“ of conformity. Instead, he suggests that Emerson's aversion can be seen as an act of turning *toward* his society as much as (and, I think, more than) a turning away from it. This implies that Emerson's writing is more than an act of disobedience—it is also an act of “rude” confrontation, one in which he provokes his readers into (potentially heated) conversation by telling them truths about themselves and, just as importantly, about himself. Indeed, for Emerson it is the very process of telling such truths that allows him to *become* himself, and hence to be true to himself. Emerson's „aversion,“ Cavell argues, signals a *conversion*; it signals a transformation of the self via an enduring aspiration towards an “unattained but attainable” self (and it is precisely this kind of transformation that Cavell likens to Foucault's conception of caring for the self).<sup>189</sup>

And, it is this possibility of transformation, of cultivating the self by embracing the possibility of perpetually liberating oneself “from a present state to a further or next state,” that grounds Cavell's interest in moral perfectionism.<sup>190</sup> He is adamant that the search for the truth of oneself is not aimed at the attainment of a „perfect“ self, and through his reading of Emerson he maintains that the goal of perfectionism is not to achieve a „final destination“ but rather to learn to embrace processes of *change* in an uncertain world. It entails a process of discovery, and what Cavell ultimately draws from Emerson's writing is a vision of moral perfectionism that “proposes confrontation and

---

<sup>188</sup> Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, 69.

<sup>189</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 120.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.* 121.

conversation as the means of determining whether we can live together, [and] accept one another into the aspirations of our lives.”<sup>191</sup> This requires actively questioning the self’s „place“ in the world, as well as testing the strengths and boundaries of one’s relationships with others to see what they are in fact comprised of. For both the cynics and for Cavell, doubt functions as the catalyst for a process of self-transformation, but more than the cynics Cavell stresses that this process can, and in fact should, push us to value and respect our relations with others and with the world for what they are: often unpredictable and uncertain, but also brimming with the potential to help us make sense of and find meaning in our lives. Still, it is my contention that recognizing rather than rejecting the similarities between the cynics’ concerns for the care of the self and those of Cavell actually strengthens his argument that Emersonian Perfectionism offers us tools with which to address the dilemmas of democratic life. As Piergiorgio Donatelli notes, the search for truth epitomized in Emersonian Perfectionism “is a search for direction [wherein] we need a guide, which Cavell epitomizes in the figure of the friend” who can help us find our way when our understanding of ourselves, others or the world has been shaken and we feel lost, or confused, or dissatisfied with our experiences and frustrated by our expectations.<sup>192</sup> Cavell argues that such a guide, be it another person, a text, a film or anything else that strikes us and provokes us to question what we know, can inspire us to embrace change instead of avoiding it. Emerson’s non-conformist serves as one such guide for Cavell. But the cynics can also be friends who guide us to question ourselves and to change our ways (even if they are reluctant to admit doing so) and their provocative potential should not be discounted.

---

<sup>191</sup> Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 24.

<sup>192</sup> Piergiorgio Donatelli, “Bringing the Truth Home: Mill, Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Moral Perfectionism,” in *The Claim to Community*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 40.

As Richard Flathman has argued, to engage in the kind of confrontation-conversation that Cavell's vision of Emersonian Perfectionism suggests "is to put oneself at risk, to make a wager at high stakes and with uncertain odds," because our arguments (and hence our very selves) might not be understood, or accepted, by those with whom we endeavor to communicate.<sup>193</sup> And this speaks to the message of Emerson's non-conformist on „speaking the rude truth,“ and to what I am proposing are important connections between Cavell's thinking and writing on Emerson's act of „rude“ disobedience and the philosophy of cynicism. Calling “truth handsomer than the affection of love,” Emerson indicates in *Self-Reliance* that in order to be (and to continue to become) himself he must commit to the practice of questioning that searching for the truth requires, even if this earns him the ire of his fellows, for —only then can he be true to himself.<sup>194</sup> What Emerson shares with the cynics, then, and what we can learn from them as well as from him, is the lesson that despite (or even because of) the risks involved there are rewards for speaking the rude truth should if we muster the courage to do so. Hence, my aim next will be to parse out the similarities and the differences between the cynics' practices of speaking the truth and those of the non-conformist of in *Self-Reliance* in order to answer the questions with which I began.

## On speaking the rude truth

What is the role, and what are the goals, of the cynic in any age? A highly idiosyncratic critical stance toward the public world, cynicism has been practiced in a variety of ways (and its practices have been embodied by a variety of different figures)

---

<sup>193</sup> Richard Flathman, “Perfectionism without Perfection: Cavell, Montaigne, and the Conditions of Morals and Politics,” in Norris, *Claim to Community*, 104.

<sup>194</sup> Emerson, *Essential Writings*, 135.

since Diogenes of Sinope first pledged to „deface the currency“ of ancient Athens in the fourth century BC. Still, those individuals who have embraced the philosophy of cynicism throughout the ages and across various places and spaces have shared the commitment to courageous free-spokenness, the hostility to conformity, and the fondness for black humor that characterized the original Dog. H.L. Mencken possessed these qualities in abundance. A self-described extreme libertarian, Mencken insisted that the most valuable human right was the right to seek and to speak the truth, and he chastised early twentieth-century American society for suffocating this right (and the truth) beneath the weight of puritanical values, parochial beliefs and unexamined opinions. As a journalist and writer, Mencken made it his mission to challenge the American status quo, and he taunted his readers into responding to his harsh criticism of the state of the nation“s social and political culture, asking:

What is the spirit of Americanism? I precipitate it conveniently into the doctrine that the way to ascertain the truth about anything, whether in the realms of exact knowledge, in the purple zone of the fine arts or in the empyrean reaches of metaphysics, is to take a vote upon it, and [to insist] that the way to propagate that truth, once it has been ascertained and proclaimed by lawful authority, is with a club.<sup>195</sup>

A fierce critic though hardly an opponent of democracy, Mencken used his acerbic wit to try to force his fellow citizens to question the legitimacy of the customs, conventions and convictions that governed their lives. He did not expect to inspire much change, and he knew that his antics were seldom appreciated. But that did not diminish his zeal for hammering against the establishment.

Mencken was a provocateur, and such is the role of the cynic in any era: he or she uses sneers, sarcasm, and shocking language and behavior to jolt others into reacting to

---

<sup>195</sup> Mencken, *Prejudices: Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Series*, 3.

critical claims about their societies and about themselves. This role is an admirable one, and in a democracy it serves the valuable purpose of confronting citizens with important, if often unwanted, truths about their social and political culture. Yet it is also, I have argued, a role that has limits when it comes to prompting substantial social and political change. This is, to some extent, due to the rudeness of the cynics' rhetorical practices. Mencken's truths were frequently rude in the common sense of the word, as he used insulting and offensive language to catch the attention of his audience knowing full well that his methods would meet with at least as much disapproval as the truths that he told. And, unsurprisingly, his readers often responded with anger not only to what he said but also to how he said it; in fact, they were particularly prone to responding to *him* as a polemical public figure, and in this sense his offensiveness sometimes eclipsed the significance of his truth-claims by distracting his audience from the import of the issues themselves. But this was what Mencken expected, and understanding why is essential to understanding cynic philosophy and its aims. It is through the process of seeking and then speaking the truth that the cynical self is manifested, and this process requires an audience. Mencken provoked controversy and picked fights with the American public in order to prove that *he* could live a meaningful life in honest pursuit of the truth, and his goal was not to motivate others to take up his practices, nor was it to push them to act collectively in answer to the lies and the hypocrisy that he exposed. Rather, Mencken proudly paraded his heterodoxy in the face of his peers in order to showcase his self-reliance and his capacity to live well without their approval. His thinking here was heavily influenced by his reading of Nietzsche, whom he said "preaches a mighty crusade against all those ethical ideas which teach a man to sacrifice himself for the theoretical

good of his inferiors.”<sup>196</sup> Ultimately, Mencken provoked controversy not to try to change his society but to be true to himself by reorienting his relation to it.

Foucault has argued that cynicism, in essence, amounts to a practice “of truth-telling, of truth-telling without shame or fear, of unrestricted and courageous truth-telling, of truth-telling which pushes its courage and boldness to the point that it becomes intolerable insolence.”<sup>197</sup> This is an apt description of the philosophy, but it is important to remember that the cynic always works to toe the line of intolerability such that he or she provokes reactions (and sometimes anger) from others but is never cast out of society altogether because the practice of truth-telling requires an audience. And, although Mencken sought to reorient his relation to his society by confronting it he did so not only out of respect for his own truths but also out of respect for truth itself; he did not expect to generate widespread change, but his provocative non-conformism did have a purpose that reached beyond caring for his own person. For the practicing cynic, caring for the self and caring for the truth and the freedom to speak it go hand in hand, and although the philosophy is self-centered it is this aspect that gives cynicism a wider socio-political significance. Mencken maintained that his practice of truth-telling would meet with resistance not only because of his choice of language (though he acknowledged that the overt rudeness of his rhetoric could, and would, upset his audience) but also because he was convinced that the “truth, to the overwhelming majority of mankind, is indistinguishable from a headache.”<sup>198</sup> Most people, Mencken argued, fear the truth and consequently tend to avoid it—this is why he was determined to make it very hard for them to avoid *him*.

---

<sup>196</sup> Mencken, *Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 62.

<sup>197</sup> Foucault, *Courage of the Truth*, 165.

<sup>198</sup> Mencken, *Mencken Chrestomathy*, 149.

How does this compare to the outspoken non-conformist of *Self-Reliance*?

Emerson (whose work Nietzsche admired) also takes on the role of a provocateur in this essay, and he does so for reasons similar to those of the cynics. “For non-conformity,” Emerson writes, “the world whips you with its displeasure,” but he goes on to conclude that “to be great is to be misunderstood” and that to brave the costs of the world’s displeasure by adopting a life lived in aversion to conformity is to adopt a *better* way of life.<sup>199</sup> Like Mencken, Emerson’s aim in speaking the rude truth was not to incite widespread social or political reform but rather to affirm his own independence and individuality by asking us, as members of his audience, to consider the state of our own. His motto, like Mencken’s, might have gone something like this: to be all that you can be you can’t be like everybody else, and you have to make sure everybody knows it. “Henceforward I am the truth’s,” Emerson announces, followed by the assertion that “I must be myself [and] I cannot break myself any longer for you.”<sup>200</sup> This is a provocative statement, and one that is closely aligned with cynic philosophy. Emerson breaks with his society’s expectations in honor of the truth because those expectations would otherwise break *him*—they would prevent him from becoming his true self by telling him what that self should be like. And the fact that he does not expect his society to appreciate his non-conformity has as much to do with the nature of the truths that he seeks and tells as it does with his act of defiance.

For Emerson, becoming self-reliant also entails learning to see, act and live against the grain, and like Mencken he takes it upon himself as a writer to tell us this even though he does not expect us to want to hear it. Indeed, he also expects us to be

---

<sup>199</sup> Emerson, *Essential Writings*, 137-8.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.* 145.

afraid of what he has to say. “We [have] become timorous, desponding whimperers,” Emerson writes of his society, “[and we] are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other.”<sup>201</sup> On what grounds does he make this claim? Invoking the injunction to „Trust Thyself,“ Emerson outlines the risks that we, as individuals living within communities of others, may face when seeking out truths about our societies and ourselves. Firstly, we might be subjected to „the rage of the multitude“ and face scorn, contempt or worse from our peers who do not want to hear the truths that we have to tell. Emerson acknowledges that this possibility understandably generates anxiety and the tendency to avoid the truth altogether.<sup>202</sup> But he argues that the other “terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency, a reverence for our past act or word,” and he is adamant that “with consistence a great soul simply has nothing to do.”<sup>203</sup> Those individuals who crave consistency do so not out of fear of social reprisal but because they fear losing hold of their capacity to understand and to make sense of themselves and to be known and understood by others. What Emerson is getting at here is that we, his audience, are afraid of finding out the truths of ourselves because we are afraid that in leaving our „old“ selves behind we might realize that we no longer „know“ ourselves, and that we have also become unknown to others in our communities. At root, the craving for consistency derives from a fear of change. And this is a fear that Emerson takes most seriously and which informs Cavell’s reading of *Self-Reliance*.

This is important because it speaks to Emerson’s understanding of his task as a writer, and to Cavell’s interest in Emerson as a provocative writer. Emerson, as Cavell

---

<sup>201</sup> Ibid. 146.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid. 137-8.

reads him, wanted to be *heard*, not only for his own sake but also for ours. As Emerson writes of his contemporaries:

Well, most men have bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief, and attached themselves to [some] community of opinion. This conformity makes them not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to set them right.<sup>204</sup>

This is a profoundly cynical statement, and one that Cavell has claimed to find „chilling.“ But it is also a statement that has fueled Cavell’s thinking on Emerson and on skepticism and moral perfectionism. For Cavell, Emerson’s statement „that every word they say chagrins us“ challenges the bases of human intelligibility and belief, and evidences the threat of skepticism, because it prompts us to doubt anything and possibly everything that we have claimed to „know“ about ourselves, or our friends, or our enemies, or our society. And, in doing so it prompts us to wonder whether we can ever really „know“ anything about any of these things (or anything at all). But Cavell also reminds us that this doubt need not empty our world of meaning. By pushing us to question what we know, Emerson’s provocation in *Self-Reliance* can—and in Cavell’s case does—generate a response to this doubt, and may encourage us to cultivate a richer understanding of ourselves, others and the world. Emerson embraced a self-reliant style of life because he wanted to *be* himself, to discover who that self was and who it might become, and this is something that his society’s desire for conformity stood in the way of. Yet following Cavell, I think Emerson also wanted to ask us, as his readers, to listen carefully to his rude truths because he was sure he was saying something not only about himself but also about *us*, about the nature of living in common with others.

---

<sup>204</sup> Ibid. 137.

Cavell argues “that it is a principal object of Emerson’s thinking to urge a reconsideration of the relation (,the“ relation?) of soul and society, especially as regards the sense of priority of one over the other.”<sup>205</sup> What Cavell means to call attention to here is the importance of *re*-considering this relation, of keeping this process of questioning open rather than closed. This is something that furthers his claim that Emerson’s writing is philosophical because his prose simultaneously questions his audience and itself (and himself), not as a means of resolving differences between them but as a means of seeking to better understand what makes them different, and what can bring them together and drive them apart. Emerson, Cavell argues, suggests “the idea of philosophy as a way of life...[and reminds] us that the power of questioning our lives, in, say, our judgments of what we call their necessities, and their rights and goods, is in the scope of every human being (of those, at any rate, free to talk about their lives and modify them).”<sup>206</sup> And Emerson’s *Self-Reliance*, Cavell proposes, is a work of philosophy. Indeed, he claims that Emerson, along with Henry David Thoreau, should be credited with laying the building blocks of American philosophy in and of itself.<sup>207</sup> This is a claim that has met with some resistance, for although Emerson is widely recognized as one of the early leaders of American letters, the lasting effects of his writing upon the nation’s social and political culture remain matters of controversy today.<sup>208</sup> The writer John Updike, for example, has likened Emerson’s „philosophy“ to one of „righteous selfishness,“ and numerous critics have accused him of propagating, among other things, the „sin of pride.“<sup>209</sup> My aim in

---

<sup>205</sup> Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 3.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid. 13.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid. 20.

<sup>208</sup> See, for example, Alan Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk, *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press), 21.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid. 21

mentioning this is not to debate the details of Emerson or Thoreau's respective philosophic legacies, nor is it to enter into a wider discussion of what constitutes a distinctly American philosophy. Rather, I would simply like to emphasize that, like Diogenes and Mencken, Emerson was a provocateur whose staunch individualism and iconoclasm have contributed substantially to his mixed critical reception over the years.

Of course, Emerson does not fit the model of the cynic in full. He was not prone to using off-color humor and other outrageous or sensationalist tactics to capture the attention of his readers, nor was he as quick to dismiss the possibility that his criticism might inspire others to change their ways. Society, according to the cynics, is always a lost cause, since by nature it subverts the independence of the individual, and in doing so constrains the creativity, the capacity for expression, and the health and happiness of the human self. Like Diogenes, Mencken remained doubtful about his (or anyone's) capacity to orchestrate a significant shift in his social and political culture, and he saw no reason why he should be held responsible for proposing concrete solutions to the concerns that he raised: "My business is not prognosis, but diagnosis. I am not engaged in therapeutics, but in pathology."<sup>210</sup> Although Mencken did not deny that human societies can and do undergo change, he was adamant that a basic dichotomy pitting society against the individual, and the majority against the minority, would always remain. And to some extent, he blamed very the nature of the human species for this. "As animals go," Mencken maintained, "man is botched and ridiculous. Few other brutes are so stupid or so cowardly. The commonest yellow dog has far sharper senses and is infinitely more courageous, not to say more honest and dependable."<sup>211</sup> Even taking into account

---

<sup>210</sup> Mencken, *Notes on Democracy*, 147.

<sup>211</sup> Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, 4.

Mencken's penchant for hyperbole, such a vision is, to say the least, predicated upon a conception of human nature that overstates the fixity of its structures and understates its capacity for creativity and for surprising actions and reactions. In this sense, what his cynicism fails to properly consider are the myriad ways in which human beings *can* and *do* relate to, and care for, one another and for the world, and the role that conventions play in orchestrating these relations.

For Cavell, Emerson's self-reliance entails turning towards one's society in conversation-confrontation, and he does not foreclose the possibility that his society might turn towards him to acknowledge what he has to say. Indeed, as Cavell notes, "if (Emerson) believed that his audience *could not* turn to him, it would be folly for him to write as he does. As it would be folly if he believed that he was not subject to the same failings as they."<sup>212</sup> But Emerson did declare his intent to „go upright and vital, and to speak the rude truth“ in the face of his society's displeasure, and he did so in order to prove his commitment to the truth and to being true to himself, commitments that necessarily set him apart from his community and that he shared with Diogenes and Mencken. And I would like to highlight the value that Cavell places on Emerson as a thinker and writer who not only shares his thoughts and experiences with his society but who also dares to humble, chasten and shame his readers into reacting and responding to what he has to say.<sup>213</sup> (Again, something that Emerson shares with the cynics.) Cavell proposes that we, as his audience, might *learn* from the experience of being humbled, chastened or shamed to question our society and ourselves and to respond to one another and affirm our relations rather than reject them. Cynics like Mencken embrace practices

---

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. 26.

<sup>213</sup> Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 19.

of truth-telling as a means of asserting their individuality, but Cavell suggests that such practices can also be inclusive rather than purely exclusive: once provoked, we, as individual beings, can question ourselves but also each other, and Cavell commends the conversational aspect of turning towards one's society that cynicism ignores.

While cynic philosophy harbors some elements of skepticism (understood in the most general sense as a stance of questioning that denies the human capacity to know anything with certainty about ourselves or others or the world), Cavellian skepticism aims to show us what our practice of questioning *can* teach us. "At the bottom of all philosophy," Mencken asserts, "of all science and of all thinking, you will find the one all-inclusive question: How is man to tell truth from error? The ignorant man solves this problem in a very simple manner: he holds that whatever he believes, he knows; and that whatever he knows is true."<sup>214</sup> Human beings, Mencken claimed, have a strong tendency to equate what they *believe* with what they *know*, and what they know with the truth, and he argued that it is not the truth that they want but the illusion of certainty. "The public," Mencken contended, "with its mob yearning to be instructed, edified and pulled by the nose, demands certainties; it must be told definitely and a bit raucously that this is true and that this is false. But there *are* no certainties."<sup>215</sup> For Mencken doubt was sacrosanct, but he claimed that ignorance had and always and will always make a mockery of the American public because the vast majority of human beings do not want to question the beliefs that they already hold. Mencken insisted that to live in accordance with the truth, and hence to live freely and honestly, was the only way to live with the dignity that the human self deserves. And it is this aspect of cynic philosophy that Cavell's work on

---

<sup>214</sup> Mencken, *Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, 87.

<sup>215</sup> Mencken, *Prejudices: First, Second and Third Series*, 25.

skepticism builds upon by further exploring, in the absence of certainty, *what* possible grounds are available to us, as individual beings and as a society, to make sense of and find meaning in our lives by acknowledging what we share in common with others.

## From cynicism to Cavellian skepticism

Cavell shares with the cynics the basic skeptical assumption that human beings cannot know anything with certainty. Yet unlike the cynics, he takes as keen an interest in the human drive to deny certainty (that is, to challenge the bases of all human knowledge and belief) as he does in the quest to affirm it. Investigating the realms of human knowledge and belief that lie between these two poles, Cavell gives a more nuanced assessment of the role that doubt plays in human understanding and intelligibility than Diogenes and Mencken do, and he argues that the „true“ or extreme skeptic’s position is as dogmatic as that of the „true believer.“ (Mencken hailed skepticism as the hallmark of the higher mind, a position that Cavell would, I think, take issue with.) For Cavell, both positions avoid the „messy“ aspects of knowledge and of the concept of the truth—the fact that we do not always have the evidence to „prove“ things, or that we do not agree with others on the evidence that is presented and do not want to believe it. But Cavell does not discount the power of these positions to influence human thought and understanding and action (or lack thereof). Indeed, he takes them quite seriously, particularly the position of the skeptic, to which I will now turn.

According to Cavell, skepticism can be seen as more than a challenge to the quest for certainty; it is symptomatic of a greater drive to reject what we share with others as sufficient evidence of the reality of who we are and what we are responsible for. The

skeptic's questioning at once produces and is a product of disappointment with, and distrust of, the world and others and the self that human beings may experience—it is a response to the fact that our relationships with others and the world may be vulnerable, and that by extension we ourselves are vulnerable. This realization, Cavell notes, can be frightening, and it is “why the skeptic's knowledge, should we feel its power, is devastating: he is not challenging a particular belief or set of beliefs about, say, other minds; he is challenging the ground of our beliefs altogether, our powers to believe at all.”<sup>216</sup> The skeptic's position, then, is truly isolating in its extreme form, as it denies our ability to understand anything and, by extension, to account for or be accountable for anything we say or do. This need not, however, be cause for despair, and the aim of Cavell's work on skepticism is to demonstrate what its practice of questioning can actually *tell* us about our world, and about others and ourselves. When we choose to put aside isolation by engaging the skeptic's questions, Cavell argues that we are able to realize that “[i]n questioning our knowledge, doubting it, we see what our everyday relationship with the world consists in.”<sup>217</sup> In fact, doubting and affirming our knowledge, ourselves and the world go hand in hand in Cavell's his definition of „living our skepticism,” which entails questioning our selves and our relationships to see what they provide us with rather than to emphasize everything that they lack.

The skeptic's concerns can thus be addressed in another light: we can see that the practice of questioning how much we can „know” is related to the question of how much we *want* to know and what we are willing to allow ourselves to find out. Cavell turns the skeptic's position back upon itself to probe further into the human desire to deny the

---

<sup>216</sup> Ibid. 240.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid. 448.

commitments and cares we *do* have. What we may call Cavellian skepticism, or „living“ skepticism, constitutes a mode of living that is built upon a practice of challenging the limits of what we, as individual beings, can know about our selves, about others, and about the world that we share. Its objective, however, is not to dwell on these limits. Rather, Cavell invites us to consider what such a process of questioning can show us about what we do know and understand and care for in the world around us. On this subject, Cavell states the following: “My interest, it could be said, lies in finding out what my beliefs mean, and learning the particular ground they occupy. This is not the same as providing evidence for them. One could say that it is a matter of making them evident.”<sup>218</sup> What insight about our lives, Cavell asks, can be gained through the process of engaging the skeptic in his or her practice of questioning? In the absence of certainty about the presence of other minds or the existence of the world, what is it that we nevertheless *do* know about ourselves and our lives? In his endorsement of „living skepticism,” Cavell argues that although skeptical doubt unsettles our understanding of, among other things, the existence of the world, it need not divest our understanding of the world or our lives of meaning. While the „true“ or extreme skeptic would argue that nothing can be certain, Cavell claims that the act or process of questioning our knowledge does not have to empty the world of meaning because meaning and caring are not based on certainty but rather on the actual experience of having and recognizing commitments and cares.

Thus, Cavell does not aim to refute skepticism. Instead, he acknowledges that human beings can never be completely free from the doubt that drives it (or that derives from it). Instead, what he does aim to do is highlight the extent to which this doubt can

---

<sup>218</sup> Ibid. 241.

push us, as separate beings, to test the strengths of our relationships with others and the world in order to find out what they are, in fact, comprised of. “My object,” Cavell argues, “is not to answer the questions, „What, or who, is the skeptic?“ What is the power of his position?“; it is an attempt to show why those questions are worth asking.”<sup>219</sup> To live one’s skepticism requires accepting the fact that self-knowledge is not grounded in certainty, and what its practices of questioning reveal is the extent to which we can (and already do) make sense of and find meaning in our lives. Cavell argues that individual fears and anxieties over what we can and cannot know about our relations with others and with the world ultimately derive from fears and anxieties over what we do and do not know about ourselves. “Knowing oneself,” Cavell attests, “is the capacity...for placing-oneself-in-the-world,” but embracing this capacity, he admits, requires courage, and he insists that it is something each of us must work at.<sup>220</sup> To „place-oneself-in-the-world,“ Cavell argues, is to take stock of one’s existence by accounting for one’s life experiences; it entails troubling the boundaries of one’s knowledge through a practice of questioning that leads to a clearer understanding of the ways in which our attunements with others and the world shed light on the depths of our own selves. And, to „place-oneself-in-the-world“ demands that we accept the fact that our understanding of our lives, and of ourselves, will always lack totality. Put another way, Cavell suggests that „knowing oneself“ requires, somewhat paradoxically, that we admit that self-knowledge is not built upon certainty, and that our understanding of ourselves is never complete. Still, he maintains that although we may not be able to prove with certainty whether (or how or why) we or others or the world exists, the sense of confusion that such a realization can

---

<sup>219</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 242.

<sup>220</sup> Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 108.

produce is something that we *can* understand—it is something intelligible, and it is something that is (potentially) communicable to others. For Cavell, “what skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged.”<sup>221</sup>

According to Cavell, then, the human being’s essential relation to the world is one of acknowledgment rather than knowledge, which he describes as an acceptance (or an admission, or a confession) of what we do understand, or of what is intelligible, about ourselves and about others and the world. Cavell’s work in and on ordinary language philosophy undergirds his arguments here, and I will elaborate on the connections between skepticism and this subject shortly. But for the moment, suffice it to say that Cavell insists that an absence of proof for what we claim to know does not leave us without the means to make sense of, or to care about, our lives. As Hilary Putnam has noted, Cavell is “concerned to make us see something that troubles the skeptic, something that can and should give us a sense of „vertigo“ at certain times, without causing us either to become skeptics or to find illusory comfort in [an] over-intellectualized response.”<sup>222</sup> What ultimately interests Cavell is *how* we each, as individual beings, respond to such moments of „vertigo“ or confusion, moments when the grounds of our understanding and beliefs have been seriously shaken. Avoidance constitutes one mode of response, and Cavell is sensitive to the temptation, and even the allure, of turning away from that which agitates our understanding, and, hence, our sense of „self.“ But as he reminds us, there is another possible response, one that can potentially

---

<sup>221</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 324.

<sup>222</sup> Hilary Putnam, “The Recovery of Greece and the Discovery of America,” in Cray and Shieh, *Reading Cavell*, 119.

reap more satisfying rewards than avoidance. We might also, when faced with „vertigo,“ take the chance of acknowledging and even confronting that which is unsettling, a move that could lead to personal transformation. It is in the province of his work on this second mode of response that Cavell’s thought is most closely aligned with the philosophy of cynicism. And it is also, I argue, where he reaches beyond cynicism to provide a more hopeful vision for the future prospects of American democracy.

## The importance of the ordinary

Cavell’s reflections on skepticism are tied to his thinking about ordinary language philosophy and, more specifically, to his readings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. So, although a detailed discussion of his treatment of this branch of philosophy is beyond the scope of this chapter, an introduction to his writing on the subject is in order. What ordinary language philosophy teaches us, Cavell argues, is that although human understanding starts with the individual self, this is not because the self is more important than the community, but rather because accepting one’s individuality is essential to understanding our connections and commitments to any community whatsoever. For Cavell, human understanding proceeds from the private to the public, but he is adamant that what we think or say or do demands acknowledgment from an audience of others if it is to register as *meaning* anything at all. Thus, his concern for the state of the self is inextricably intertwined with his concerns for community, and for the possibilities and responsibilities that our connections with others bestow upon us. Cavell lays out the critical task of the ordinary language philosopher as follows: “his problem is to discover the specific plight of mind and circumstance within which a human being gives voice to

his conditions.”<sup>223</sup> Yet the meaning of this proposition is not immediately obvious—we must still ask *what* it is that the ordinary language philosopher is trying to discover, and *why* he or she endeavors to discover it. The key elements of the statement that need to be parsed out are the philosopher’s focus on the specificity of the mind, the fact that this mind is in a „plight“ due to (and thus is troubled by) a particular circumstance, and the importance of the mind’s (and the self’s) efforts to „give voice“ to its concerns. Before working through these elements, however, we must first establish the bases for Cavell’s interest in ordinary language more generally so as to establish his reasons for privileging its philosophical function.

Cavell argues that it is through the *use* of ordinary (or common) language, “words free of philosophical occupation,” that human beings come to understand not only the world and other beings but also, and more importantly, their own selves.<sup>224</sup> Questions of self-knowledge, he claims, lie at the heart of all philosophical problems, and he runs through various discussions on ordinary language to consider the ways in which the human self comes into being, or gets its bearings, in the world, by putting commonly shared words to use in making sense of thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions.<sup>225</sup> Our ordinary words and concepts (or criteria) are those that do not require special information or identifications to make sense of—we learn what they mean by learning them alongside our experiences with others in the world. (To offer a basic example, we learn what pain and hope and sadness mean as we experience them and as we work to relate to others and share this experience through our shared use of language. Without the experience of the sensations that they produce we could not learn the concepts because we could never

---

<sup>223</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 240.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.* 238.

<sup>225</sup> Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 240.

understand them. Thus, what it is like to actually experience pain or hope or sadness could never be explained to us by supplying a missing piece of information). For Cavell, we learn ordinary language and our worlds side by side, and we are each responsible for making connections between the two, or for thinking through the ways that our understanding of our language illuminates our understanding of our relations with other beings and our place (or places) in the world. Sometimes we fail to make these connections accurately or intelligibly, and sometimes the realization of such a failure causes us to cast doubt upon the bases of our knowledge and our capacity to know about anything at all. Yet Cavell maintains that the sense of disconnect (and discomfort and fear) that the experience of this failure can produce is a natural one, and that it reminds us that our knowledge of ourselves, like our knowledge of others and of the world, is always partial and incomplete. Human understanding, he contends, depends upon shared agreements, or attunements, in language and culture, and these agreements can—and sometimes *should*—break down.

Cavell argues via ordinary language philosophy that human beings, as separate and individual creatures, are initiated into an inherited and shared system of language and they depend on this system in order to learn anything at all. This is why the learning of ordinary language and the learning of the world go hand in hand. As Espen Hammer explains, for Cavell, to come to know what a thought, a feeling, a belief, or an action actually is, we must learn to master each of their respective concepts in our native tongue; when we master the concepts, we understand the phenomena they represent.<sup>226</sup> It is, then, through our mastery of ordinary language that we can come to recognize what our

---

<sup>226</sup> Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2002), 11.

thoughts and feelings and beliefs tell us about what we do (and do not) know about our selves and our world. And it is also through our use of ordinary language and concepts that we can assert or give voice to our thoughts, feelings and beliefs, and thus make them evident to others. But Cavell contends that, despite the fact that ordinary language is systematic and that its systems permit human beings to make sense of the world and to express themselves through shared or common words and concepts, its mechanisms harbor an undeniable element of freedom. Our selection of words and concepts in a given situation or circumstance involves a measure of independent choice, and the ways in which we use them grammatically can play a critical role in the intelligibility of our assertions. “Knowing something,” Cavell proposes, “is ineluctably a matter of aligning concepts with the world; and it must be a problem whether any given instance of the failure of knowledge is a failure to have got the concept right or the world right.”<sup>227</sup> Language, Cavell argues, is flexible and can change and adapt, but only to a point. One of the difficulties in using language is that we don’t always know in advance where that point will land; when testing the boundaries of our grammar we sometimes find that we have pushed them too far and have crossed beyond the realms of intelligibility. Such moments cause confusion (for ourselves and for others), because we do not always know whether it is our words or our knowledge of the world that has failed us—neither does our audience. Still, Cavell contends that such moments, though unsettling, can present us with further opportunities for thinking about the connections between our language, our worlds and our selves, and for learning more about them. They can push us to question *why* our understanding of the ordinary has failed us, and how we might respond to such failures.

---

<sup>227</sup> Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 157.

Thus, as Sandra Laugier has argued, for the ordinary language philosopher, “the adequacy of language to reality—the truth of language—is not to be constructed or proven: it is to be shown in language and its uses.”<sup>228</sup> Cavell works to demonstrate the ways in which the self comes into being through expressions that are conditioned by ordinary language and culture and hence are dependent upon participation in a life lived with (and understood and recognized by) other beings. Yet to say that one’s expressions are conditioned does not indicate that the human self or its thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions are determined. Despite Cavell’s emphasis on the fact that human beings are born into language and culture, he sees neither language nor culture as rigid entities; they are no more fixed, „whole“ or „complete“ than we are as individual selves, and like us they are open to transformation. Language and culture are also, he argues, reliant upon our preservation, and, like living beings, they can evolve and die out. As Richard Eldridge notes:

Nothing within ordinary thinking or linguistic practice *guarantees* its continuation; how it goes on is up to us, we who are initiated into it and go on within and from it, and this can seem terrifying. Yet ordinary thinking and linguistic practice are necessary media for the presence of things to discursively thinking, judgmental subjects, and we do not have the power to alter prior patterns of language and thought *tout court*... These patterns have a certain sway over us, and this too seems terrifying.<sup>229</sup>

What Eldridge highlights here is the tension that exists between our abilities to alter or adjust the foundations of our systems of language and culture (and, hence, our own understanding), and our reliance upon the continuing existence and reliability of these very systems if we do not want to altogether uproot our senses of both self and

---

<sup>228</sup> Sandra Laugier, “Wittgenstein and Cavell: Anthropology, Skepticism, and Politics,” in Norris, *Claim to Community*, 22.

<sup>229</sup> Richard Eldridge, “Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance,” in Richard Eldridge, ed. *Stanley Cavell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4-5.

community. Though we can shift the limits of intelligibility, we are responsible for establishing and maintaining a ground upon which our intelligibility and our understanding can rest. And this is quite a responsibility, for the vitality of our shared language and culture, like our shared relationships, requires active participation and maintenance if they are to continue to provide us with any means to know or to *care* about whether we, or a world, exist.

Though Cavell maintains that we inherit ordinary (or native) languages from those who come before us, he does not mean to suggest that language or culture ensure that we will take an interest in, or care for, the state of our relations with one another, or with the world or our selves. Taking an interest or caring is, rather, something that each of us must *decide* to do. It is also, Cavell argues, something that we can, though will at times fail, to do. Our attunements in language and culture, like our relationships with others, are dependent upon the extent to which we work to maintain them in the face of circumstances that are at times beyond our control. Our language, culture and relations are all vulnerable to disintegration or destruction, for their existence depends upon our capacity to take an interest in them and to care for the continued existence of our selves and others as members of communities in a shared world. Stephen Mulhall summarizes Cavell's thoughts on the precariousness of human relations neatly:

if the ground of the inheritability of language, the basis of the continued existence of the speech community and its members, is the capacity of human beings to see and hear themselves in the words and deeds of other human beings, then the continuance of that community cannot be guaranteed either by nature or grammar; it rests solely upon our capacity to take and maintain an interest in one another and in ourselves.<sup>230</sup>

---

<sup>230</sup> Stephen Mulhall, cited in *ibid.*, 4.

For Cavell, human beings are initiated into the world through our attunements with others and our innate capacities to form connections and to communicate and otherwise express our thoughts and feelings and beliefs; indeed, these attunements produce the histories that give shape to our actions and experiences. But he holds that our attunements are dependent upon the extent to which we are able to sustain our relationships, and they are always threatened by the possibility that our connections may disintegrate and our abilities to understand one another may fail us. This, for Cavell, is a threat that we must not attempt to eradicate but rather learn to *manage* as best we can.

To return, then, to the ordinary language philosopher's essential task (which sets up Cavell's thinking as a philosopher), we can now begin to analyze the various elements of the problem he identifies. What does the practice of ordinary language philosophy really entail for Cavell? What can we learn from it? It entails discovering and bringing to light the potential points or moments at which one's sense of self is disrupted or disturbed by a moment of „vertigo,“ when we reach for our ordinary concepts to make sense of this experience and to voice our concerns to others. It is worth quoting Hammer at length on this subject:

We can now see more clearly what Cavell wants to achieve by the proposition that ordinary language philosophy is about whatever ordinary language is about. As opposed to science, its aim is not to gather relevant but hitherto unknown facts for explanatory purposes. Nor is it to understand how language functions, though this may of itself, of course, be of great significance. Rather, the situation in which humans find themselves urged to engage in the kind of reflection that Cavell recommends is one in which, despite the presence of all relevant facts, they feel puzzled by what they confront.<sup>231</sup>

---

<sup>231</sup> Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, 11.

We, as separate and individual beings, realize the significance of ordinary language and of our attunements and the relations that they facilitate in those moments of vertigo when, despite our knowledge of all the relevant facts, our understanding of the world, and of ourselves, is shaken. It is in such moments, Cavell argues, that “we begin to feel, or ought to, terrified that maybe language (and understanding and knowledge) rests upon very shaky ground—a thin net over an abyss.”<sup>232</sup> But it is also in these moments that we can appeal to our ordinary language and concepts for help. They cannot prove our position but they can help us to make sense of the particular experience (and the experience of particularity) that such feelings of vertigo elicit, and as such they can give us the words to „give voice“ to our experiences and concerns. For Cavell, our shared linguistic and cultural expressions are the tools with which we each „give voice“ to ourselves as individual creatures living within communities. But in order for each or any of us to effectively voice our particular concerns, it is also imperative that the other members of our communities understand or can make sense of our expressions. As Eldridge has explained, for Cavell “*giving voice* implies not just brute discharge alone, but further a making intelligible of how the human condition is present in one who has been moved to speak. Nor will just any speech do; *giving voice* implies an achievement of expressiveness that is beyond the communication of bits of information about the material world.”<sup>233</sup> What it implies is an achievement of expressiveness about *us*, as individual beings *and* as members of groups or communities.

Cavell insists that it is vital to the ordinary language philosopher’s problem that the mind in question has been moved, or provoked, to „give voice“ to itself by the

---

<sup>232</sup> Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 178.

<sup>233</sup> Eldridge, “Between Acknowledgement and Avoidance,” in Eldridge, *Stanley Cavell*, 1.

experience of a troubling moment, one in which the sense of having a „place“ in the world, a place that is with others but is also one’s own, has been threatened or disrupted. We must be moved, or troubled or shaken, in order to really *need* to speak and to assert ourselves, and to try to differentiate as well as to see the connections between the „I“ and the „we.“ Indeed, it is “this aspect,” Cavell proposes, “of the moment of morality—in which a crisis forces an examination of one’s life that calls for a transformation or reorienting of it—[that] is the province of what I emphasize as moral perfectionism...[It emphasizes] that aspect of moral choice having to do, as it is sometimes put, with being true to oneself, or as Michel Foucault has put the view, caring for the self.”<sup>234</sup> Each of us, as individual beings, can choose to avoid or to turn away from the questions that such crises provoke or, alternately, we can choose to acknowledge them by actively examining what our lack of certainty about ourselves, and about others and the world, can teach us. There is a tension, Cavell argues, between the human creature’s capacities to at times accept and at times question (and possibly reject) the systems of language through which we are able to make sense of and discover meaning in our worlds. And there is also, Cavell insists, a tension between our abilities to make sense of ourselves and of others as separate members of the human communities we are nevertheless a part of, and which we must maintain if we are to maintain our sense of independence and of „self.“

My aim next will be to highlight the significance of what Cavell indicates is the necessity (or the irrefutability) of these tensions which sustain and enable and constrain human life—tensions between the known and the unknown, between intelligibility and unintelligibility, between what is separate and what is common, and between acknowledgement and avoidance. Cavell suggests that an appreciation of the necessity,

---

<sup>234</sup> Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 11.

but also the elusiveness, of the ordinary (of the words and concepts and grammar that we cannot help but understand, but that cannot *always* supply us with meaning in moments of confusion) is key to understanding and appreciating these tensions. What he is ultimately concerned to show us is that the choices we each, as individuals, make in dealing with these tensions, and in particular the tension between acknowledgement and avoidance, have substantial ethical, social and political implications.

## **Understanding acknowledgment and avoidance**

Cavell uses ordinary language philosophy to argue that there are words and concepts and attunements, and hence aspects of our lives, that we cannot help but share with others and understand. But he also argues that there are situations in which we can choose to acknowledge or to avoid what we share in common, and what we do and do not know about ourselves and our world, and that the consequences of our choices can impact our lives as well as the lives of others and the world that we share. I must emphasize, however, that in focusing on individual choices Cavell is by no means insinuating that our choices are not shaped or impacted (and sometimes compromised) by external social, political or even environmental forces. His point is that even though they often are this does not divest us of our responsibility, as individuals, for taking an interest in, and caring for, the choices that we do make and the actions that we do take. Indeed, recognizing the role that external forces play in shaping our understanding of ourselves and of our communities and the world is critical to appreciating the significance of what Cavell proposes is the tension between acknowledgement and avoidance in human life. As Timothy Gould has noted, “Cavell’s investigations are twined around his interest in

our capacity for being the origin of our actions and for bearing up under our vulnerability to accidents and inadvertencies and, indeed in our ability to make something out of these very inadvertencies and happenstances.”<sup>235</sup> To put it bluntly, Cavell maintains that although we are never entirely free agents we need not give in to the temptation to give up on our agency itself.

Yet before expanding upon what it would mean to give in to such a temptation, I would like to return briefly to what Cavell means by the concept of acknowledgment and to the way he juxtaposes it with the concept of knowledge. His use of the example of „being late“ summarizes his thoughts here nicely:

It isn’t as if being in a position to acknowledge something is weaker than being in a position to know it. On the contrary: from my acknowledging that I am late it follows that I know I am late (which is what my words say); but from my knowing I am late it does not follow that I acknowledge I’m late... [It is in this sense that one] could say acknowledgement goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in the requirement that I do something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge).<sup>236</sup>

As I have argued, for Cavell acknowledgment can constitute an admission, or a confession, of what one knows, but it can also constitute other modes of response (such as a declaration, or even a celebration). He insists that our responses to what we know will not always be uniform (we will respond in different ways to different circumstances, and not always as others think we should, or even as we feel that we should or, afterwards, feel that we should have). And Cavell maintains that there are times when we will not respond at all, but will instead avoid (either intentionally or unintentionally) what we know about ourselves or others or the world. This does not, however, rob his

---

<sup>235</sup> Timothy Gould, “The Names of Action,” in Eldridge, *Stanley Cavell*, 48.

<sup>236</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 257.

understanding of acknowledgment of its significance, and to provide one more example of what he means here, Cavell proposes that we consider the hypothetical circumstance of witnessing another person (or another living being) in pain. Upon seeing someone tearfully limping away from the scene of an accident, we may avoid responding (for many reasons) to his or her situation, but that does not mean that we do not see or understand that the person is experiencing pain, or is in need of help, upset or confused. As Cavell notes, “[if] one says that this is a failure to acknowledge another’s suffering, surely this would not mean that we fail, in such cases to know that he is suffering? It may or may not. The point, however, is that the concept of acknowledgment is evidenced equally by its failure as by its success.”<sup>237</sup>

Of central importance to understanding the tension between acknowledgment and avoidance is the issue of self-knowledge and the role that each of us, as separate, individual beings, must play in actively probing our experiences through the use of language as we have learned it in and by living within and amongst groups of others. Cavell works to emphasize the extent to which we, as human beings, find ourselves capable of forming connections and communicating and expressing our thoughts and feelings to produce the histories that give shape to our experiences. What he suggests, then, is that we each, as individual beings, have the capacity to assume a stance of questioning, of both our selves and of others and the world, that allows us to make sense of and find meaning in our lives. This is not to say that we will necessarily like or enjoy or find satisfaction or comfort in what we make sense of, or in the meaning that we find, at least not always, and for some of us perhaps rarely. And it is also not to say that we will not at times be fooled or misled by one another, or that communication cannot break

---

<sup>237</sup> Ibid. 263.

down. But Cavell does argue that we will not become impossibly unintelligible to one another if the conventions that we share and that provide us with a basis for grounding our concepts in an intelligible history are recognized for the important role they play in communication and understanding. While a particular word or convention can cease to be relevant or intelligible (e.g. can cease to provide us with meaning), the fact that conventions exist, and the fact of the natural human tendency to convene, cannot be ignored. If conventions necessitate and demonstrate the necessary presence and existence of community and connections between people, then the awareness of them and the sense that they may fail us, or have been failing us, can be disconcerting to say the least. Despite the essential interdependence they suggest we cannot escape, the fact that they are not fixed or firm but rather dependent upon these shared relations illustrates the chance that if these relations were to disintegrate, so might our means of understanding what we take to be our existences. Where would this leave us? This can work in more than one way, of course, but it can have the effect of highlighting our separation from one another while at the same time pointing to a measure of dependence on others that can equally stoke feelings of vulnerability or fears of betrayal. Still, in such situations there is room for this questioning to be productive in the sense of generating further questions without necessarily drowning us in despair.

It is important for Cavell that we, as individual beings, realize that we can and do make *choices* between acknowledgment and avoidance in the various circumstances we find ourselves faced with over the course of our lives. To say that we can and do make such choices is not to say that we always can or do. Such an argument would tailspin into its own kind of dogmatism, akin to the kind experienced by the „true“ skeptic and the

believer in Truth. But for Cavell, the skeptic and the „true believer“ both avoid responsibility for what they say and do in the world, the first by eschewing certainty and the second by clinging to it. The skeptic argues that because we cannot know anything with certainty, whether it pertains to knowledge about ourselves, or about others and the world, we can never know what we are or not responsible for. And the „true believer“ argues that because everything is certain in the world, we cannot control or be held responsible for anything that happens, since everything that happens is preordained. The skeptic’s concerns can then be addressed or challenged in another light: it is not a matter of questioning how much we can know about the existence of the world, or others, or ourselves, but a matter of questioning how much we want to know and what we are willing to allow ourselves to find out. We doubt our capacity to know whether the other is suffering to avoid accepting the possibility that this pain could in fact be real, that our own suffering can also be real, and that we may be responsible for it or at least unable to ease the burdens that it imposes. Indeed, as Cavell states, “[s]kepticism about our knowledge of others is typically accompanied by complacency about our knowledge of ourselves,”<sup>238</sup> for we choose not to believe what we already know in both instances. There does exist a limit to what or how much one may know at a given time, but Cavell implores us to make an effort to push the boundaries of this limit, to test its strength, if we are each to maintain a sense of what a present existence feels like, of what the having of cares and commitments entails.

This process, Cavell argues, forces us to accept our finitude and our separateness (though not necessarily our separation) from others and from the world, and to acknowledge the fact that our understanding of our lives, and of ourselves, will always

---

<sup>238</sup> Ibid. 109.

lack totality. Cavell is concerned with illuminating not only the possibilities for but also the necessity of change in human life. It is through our attunements in language that we make sense not only of others and of the world, but also ourselves. Our ordinary words *can* make sense even if they do not always do so, and even if the connections that we form through the use of ordinary language are no more grounded in certainty than the systems of language and communication that we acquire to make ourselves intelligible to one another. So, what we can learn from skepticism is that there are things that we do know in the absence of certainty, and that we need to question our selves, and others and the world, to find what out what these things are. “A „failure to know,“” Cavell asserts, “might just mean a piece of ignorance, an absence of something, a blank. A „failure to acknowledge,“ [by comparison, signifies] the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, [or] a coldness.”<sup>239</sup>

As Hammer argues, in what Cavell “calls Emersonian perfectionism, he not only hopes to counter the selflessness of philosophy, but to demonstrate that serious reflection on ethics and politics requires an emphasis on the self.”<sup>240</sup> What is at the heart of the matter, then, is the problem of—but also the potential for— self-knowledge in an uncertain world. We may learn from others, and be taught by others, but the education is less „received“ than it is produced by the ways in which what we are being „taught“ rubs up against or complements the concepts and criteria that we already use to make sense of ourselves and our worlds. “If there is a perfectionism,” Cavell suggests, it is “not only compatible with democracy but necessary to it, it lies not in excusing democracy for its inevitable failures, or looking to rise above them, but in teaching how to respond to those

---

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. 264.

<sup>240</sup> Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, 134.

failures, and to one's compromise by them, otherwise than by excuse or withdrawal."<sup>241</sup>

And while cynicism offers one possible mode of response, one that is decidedly confrontational but that certainly does not amount to a withdrawal from society, Cavell notes that there are others. We might, he suggests, respond with civility, and try to converse with one another and to work through our particular problems with the aim of changing our understanding of our community and of our selves.

## Doubt and democracy

Cavell's writing on Emersonian Perfectionism does not aim to produce a comprehensive theory of the subject that could „compete“ with other theories of moral life.<sup>242</sup> (Indeed, he refuses to provide a formal definition of the concept, arguing that “a complete list of necessary and sufficient conditions for using the term” would not help his readers make sense of it.<sup>243</sup>) Rather, he focuses on illuminating what he calls the two dominant themes of Emersonian Perfectionism, both of which he culls from Emerson's preoccupation with the possibility (and the need) for invention and transformation in human life. “The first theme,” Cavell argues, “is that the human self—confined by itself, aspiring toward itself—is always becoming, as on a journey, always partially in a further state.”<sup>244</sup> Emersonian perfectionism, then, describes an activity of cultivation, one in which the individual is provoked to see him- or herself in a new light and to consider the ways in which this experience of change alters his or her relations with others and with the world. And Cavell contends that the “second dominating theme is that the other to

---

<sup>241</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court), 18.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>244</sup> Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 26.

whom I can use the words I discover in which to express myself is the Friend.”<sup>245</sup> For Cavell, perfectionism constitutes an examination of one’s life brought about by a moment of morality (or a moment of crisis) that demands recognition and that is provoked by someone (or something), but the „whom“ (or the what) that prompts such a moment varies from individual to individual.<sup>246</sup> And the „friend“ who provokes such an examination may very well do so by telling us „rude“ and unwanted truths about ourselves and our society, or about the particular ways in which we relate to our society and participate in its culture. Such a friend pushes us to face the unknown precisely by taking stock of what we *do* know about ourselves and about others and the world, and warns us that we may or may not like what we find when we question our knowledge and beliefs.

As Russell B. Goodman notes, “Cavell addresses „existing individuals“ (not least himself), whose lives are governed by norms and claims as well as by the laws of nature, and who yet have the chance—indeed who cannot avoid the chance—to determine those lives through their own free actions.”<sup>247</sup> And doing this is something that Cavell, drawing upon his reading of Emerson, argues that we may fear, because we may be afraid of what we can and cannot, do and do not, know about one another, our communities, and ultimately about our own selves. Emerson’s work, Cavell notes, was a response to what he considered to be a mood of „silent melancholy“ permeating his society, and he presses us to ask ourselves what might be done about it, or how we, as individuals and as a society, might respond to this mood and possibly assuage it. Cavell asks us to consider

---

<sup>245</sup> Ibid. 27.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>247</sup> Russell B. Goodman, “Introduction,” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

the value of „friends“ such as Emerson who can provoke us to change our moods, melancholic or otherwise. The very idea of friendship implies a bond or a connection (Cavell insists that the friend need not be another human being), but such a bond may not be based on feelings of affection in the usual sense (pleasant, comforting, etc.). In fact, he suggests that the friendships that trouble us are as important as those that provide us with a sense of love or peace or security. In either case, to enter into a friendship is to share something, perhaps a conversation or perhaps an argument, but it entails a sense of connection either way. Like Diogenes and Mencken, Emerson treats his audience with tough love by delivering the rude truth and asking his readers to consider the possibility of resisting conformity, questioning their convictions, and confronting their peers.

Cavell notes that in Emerson“s

sense of human existence, there is no question of reaching a final state of the soul but only an endlessly taking the next step to what Emerson calls “an unattained but attainable self”—a self that is always and never ours—a step that turns us not from bad to good, or wrong or right, but from confusion and constriction toward self-knowledge and sociability.<sup>248</sup>

What Cavell aims to demonstrate here is that a certain practice of thinking and giving voice to one“s thoughts can expose a deep and meaningful connectedness with others and with the worlds that we share; consequently, it can inspire individual as well as collective action. This connectedness places ethical responsibilities upon us that we may reject, but Cavell argues that rejection or avoidance is only one mode of responding to it. We can also acknowledge our connectedness, and to see that we strive for connection is a first step toward assuming a sense of ethical responsibility for others and for the world *because* of rather than despite the limits to what we can know.

---

<sup>248</sup> Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 13.

Hammer argues that “the hero of Cavell’s thought in [his work on ethics and politics] is constantly ready for self-transformation through education and reflection: thus democracy becomes an ongoing task of repositioning the self in response to others.”<sup>249</sup> For Cavell, skepticism in the extreme (and dogmatic) form destroys the possibility of political engagement because the practice of continuously questioning what we can and cannot know is profoundly isolating. This does not mean, however, that this process of questioning is *necessarily* isolating. To the contrary, Cavell shows us that engaging in a practice of pushing the boundaries of one’s knowledge, though often unnerving, can offer new occasions for collective action and engagement. He does not aim to propose a „solution“ to the problems of democratic life. Rather, Cavell reminds us that we, as individuals and as a society, are responsible for either acknowledging or avoiding the difficulties of a life lived with others. And in doing so, Cavell provides a more hopeful and potentially fruitful model for political criticism (and, in a more specific sense, criticism of American political culture) than those offered by cynics such as Diogenes and Mencken. Mencken sang the praises of self-reliance and sincerity, and went about exposing lies and hypocrisy, but his focus was (generally) on renouncing the rationality of American social and political practices rather than reforming them. And exposing lies does little when people are committed to preserving or protecting pre-existing beliefs.

While cynics throughout the ages have exposed the fragility of truth in society and politics, they have offered very little insight as to how we might practically and politically work towards mitigating the threats that this fragility can pose. Cavell’s work on skepticism and on Emersonian Perfectionism suggests that we might find ways to work together if we, as individuals, are willing to *respond* to one another and to take the

---

<sup>249</sup> Hammer, *Stanley Cavell*, 120.

risk of speaking out in order to provoke our fellows into responding to us. Cavell has a reputation as an individualist, and he *is*, I think, an individualist at heart: he does ultimately place the responsibility for choosing acknowledgment over avoidance in the hands of each of and every one of us. But he does so under the assumption that we are all in this together. As members of communities, societies and the world, Cavell asks us to consider what we share with others as much as he encourages us to question what we know about ourselves. And, he dares us to consider the extent to which we care about what we share, about our commitments to one another and to the world, and the responsibilities for responding to these commitments this care places upon us.

## **Conclusion: Politics, the Public and Perceptions of 'America'**

*"The misgovernment of the American people is misgovernment by the American people."*—Lincoln Steffens, 1904

When it comes to politics today, it is often taken for granted that the American people are bitterly divided over just about everything, from the proper size of government to the scope of its powers at home and abroad. But is this really the case, and to what extent is public polarization to blame for the fact that political stalemate has become the status quo in Washington? The infighting in Congress and the open hostility between the executive and legislative branches do in part stem from significant ideological differences between the Democratic and Republican parties, and these differences do reflect a divergence in the political beliefs of the American electorate. Alan I. Abramowitz argue that "there is no question that policy differences between Democrats and Republicans have increased over the past several decades," and he goes on to suggest that party

polarization reflects the political polarization of the American public and, in particular, that of citizens belonging to what he calls the „engaged public“ (a sector of the public comprised of individuals who make an effort to stay informed about and active in political affairs).<sup>250</sup> While Abramowitz concedes that this polarization does have some negative consequences (such as fostering gridlock), he claims that the size of the sector of „engaged“ citizens in America is increasing and that it is incorrect to conceive of polarization as purely problematic for the democratic process. To the contrary, Abramowitz asserts that an increase in polarization is related to an increase in public interest in politics, and that it is indicative of the fact that “more Americans appear to be excited and energized by the choice between a consistently liberal Democratic Party and a consistently conservative Republican Party.”<sup>251</sup> For Abramowitz, “the political attitudes of the engaged public resemble those of political elites”; while polarization can result in political gridlock, our leaders are ultimately representing the interests and beliefs of their constituents.<sup>252</sup>

Yet are we, the people, really showing an increased interest in political affairs? Are we passionately divided over the state and fate of our nation and what should be done about it, and is this why Congress cannot seem to get anything done? Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman have argued that “there is virtually full agreement among scholars that political parties and politicians, in recent decades, have become more ideological and more likely to take extreme positions on a broad set of political

---

<sup>250</sup> Alan I Abramowitz, *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid. 33.

issues.”<sup>253</sup> But there is not a consensus as to whether this is reflective of an increasingly divided American public. Indeed, according to Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, investigations into the increase of popular polarization have proven largely inconclusive, and these authors contend that contemporary literature on the subject of mass polarization “provides little evidence that the hypothesized dire consequences of polarized politics (or, for that matter, *any* consequences of polarized politics), are showing up in the American public.”<sup>254</sup> For Fiorina and Abrams, while politics and the parties are increasingly polarized, this is not necessarily a reflection of the political sentiments (or the political passion) of the American people as a whole. In sum, Fiorina and Abrams claim that while the Democratic and Republican parties (and those who identify strongly with them) have become more polarized over the past few decades, we should not assume that the general public has followed suit. They are not challenging Abramowitz’s assessment of the relationship between the attitudes of the „engaged public“ and those of political elites. But their work casts doubt on the correlation between the political interests and attitudes of „engaged“ citizens and those of the American public at large (and whether the ranks of engaged citizens are growing).

Like Fiorina and Abrams, I question the purported rise in popular political interest that Abramowitz associates with the increase in polarization. And I do not think, at root, that ideological divergences across the populace are the root of the problems at hand. Of larger significance, it seems to me, is the problem of popular ignorance. This is not to say that ideological differences on issues such as immigration, gay marriage, climate change

---

<sup>253</sup> Delia Baldassarri and Andrew Gelman, “Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion,” *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 2 (September 2008): 408-46.

<sup>254</sup> Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams, “Political Polarization in the American Public,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 583.

and the like do not have a powerful effect on politics. But the American electorate does not just increasingly disagree about the major political issues of our time; quite often, voters do not understand either these issues or the mechanics of the American political system and the institutions of government that it sustains. This is significant because it points to gaps in the public's overall political knowledge, gaps that even Abramowitz's „engaged“ citizens may suffer from. Take, for example, the controversy that has surrounded the Affordable Care Act since it was signed into law in 2010. As Frank Bruni notes in a New York Times column published on May 11, 2013 and entitled “America the Clueless,” polls conducted three years after the signing showed that forty percent of the American public was still unaware that the ACA was, in fact, a law. This means that when a Tea-Party-led backlash against this law forced a government shutdown „in the interest of the American people“ later that same year, a considerable swath of the American people, whether Tea-Party sympathizers or otherwise, did not know *what* was being rallied against in their name. That this is unsurprising does not make it unremarkable, and it gives us cause to consider the nature of American democracy.

In fact, it appears that Americans are ignorant about a lot of things—according to a National Science Foundation poll released in February 2014, 26% of respondents did not know that the earth revolves around the sun.<sup>255</sup> Bruni sums up the importance of the ACA findings as follows:

That we Americans are out to lunch isn't news. But every once in a while a factoid like the Obamacare ignorance comes along to remind us that we are out to breakfast and dinner as well. And it adds an important, infrequently

---

<sup>255</sup> Scott Neuman, “1 In 4 Americans Thinks The Sun Goes Around The Earth, Survey Says,” <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/02/14/277058739/1-in-4-americans-think-the-sun-goes-around-the-earth-survey-says>.

acknowledged bit of perspective to all the commentary, from us journalists and political strategists alike, about how voters behave and whom they reward.<sup>256</sup>

For Bruni, what is „infrequently acknowledged“ when it comes to Americans“ political behavior is the irrationality of an electorate easily swayed by misinformation and disinformation. And his suggestion prompts further questions about the desire for information and the value of knowledge in American political culture. Do voters, by and large, reward politicians who tell them what they want to hear, regardless of whether or not it is true? Could it be that they are „easily swayed“ because they refuse to question the validity of what they want to believe? Mencken would have answered both of these questions with a resounding yes, arguing that politicians peddle fiction rather than facts because it is fantasy that yields the highest return in political contests. “The smarter the politician,” Mencken claimed, “the more things he believes and the less he believes any of them,” but he also insisted that lying politicians are as much a product of American democracy as a source of its problems.<sup>257</sup> Similarly, Ginsberg argues that those who are of “the opinion that politics is driven by an altruistic pursuit of the public good probably also believe in the tooth fairy and the Easter bunny and have total confidence in the claims of telemarketers.”<sup>258</sup> For Mencken and, I think, Ginsberg“s cynical realist, the very concept of a „political truth“ is oxymoronic in this country. Yet Ginsberg seems to blame this on the nature of politics—the reality of politics as a cold and brutish and self-serving enterprise—while Mencken suggests that politicians lie because the American people, by and large, are *afraid* to face truths, whether pertaining to their nation, their society, or themselves. This fear of the truth, Mencken complained, explains why misinformation

---

<sup>256</sup> Frank Bruni, “America the Clueless,” *The New York Times*, May 11, 2013.

<sup>257</sup> Mencken, *Mencken Chrestomathy*, 623.

<sup>258</sup> Ginsberg, *American Lie*, 2 and 37, respectively.

and disinformation generally triumph over factual information in political battles. And it also explains why, as Mencken famously complained, American democracy amounts to little more than “a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance.”

Mencken’s cynical claims are as sweeping as they are severe, and there is no doubt that he discounted (or even outright dismissed) the difficulties of drawing definitive lines between fact and fiction in a democratic public sphere fraught with competitive truth-claims. But Mencken’s proposal that fantasy is related to fear in American politics—and individual fears at that—speaks to Cavell’s work (and in particular his work on Emerson) in significant ways. Emerson, Cavell notes, reminds us that the prospect of seeking out and speaking the truths of society and of oneself is frightening, and not only because we might find ourselves faced with social or political reprisal. We might also discover that we do not really know one another or ourselves, and that the beliefs that had buoyed our understanding of ourselves and others and the world have been a façade. It is for this reason in particular, Emerson suggests, that we cling to „consistency,” to something that holds our understanding of ourselves and of our society together because it allows us to define others and be defined by them through past acts and words. It is our „consistency,” he argues, that continues to reinforce these definitions and provides us with a sense of security that we know both who, as individuals and as a society, we are, as well as who we *should* be. But Emerson encourages us to shuck this habit. “A foolish consistency,” he asserts, “is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by statesmen and philosophers and divines”: consistency keeps us from embracing change.<sup>259</sup> We cannot become who we are (always an ongoing process for Emerson) if we insist on falling back on cherished definitions of who we want to believe we are based

---

<sup>259</sup> Emerson, *Essential Writings*, 138.

on who we want to believe we have been. This goes for individuals as well as for American society at large, and Emerson's points here remain relevant today. Why would statesmen adore consistency, as Emerson claims? Because they assume that their success depends on their talent for telling people what they want to believe and that what they „know“ is the truth.

The consistency that Emerson condemns is, I think, akin to the certainty condemned by Diogenes and Mencken, and contemplated and challenged by Cavell. Certainty, for the cynics, blinds us from the realities of our lives and of ourselves—this is something that, as their critics continually point out, they claim to *know* is true. But the force of pointing out a „performative contradiction“ is not as strong as these critics assume. Neither Diogenes nor Mencken develops or *seeks* to develop a logically consistent or comprehensive *theory* of knowledge. Instead, they pursue ways to cultivate or activate the powers of human reason to separate fact from fiction and the true from the false (powers that they did not think many human beings cared to make much use of). Diogenes and Mencken saw certainty as an excuse to avoid finding out what human life consists of practically, and the concept's rigidity was something each challenged in his own way. And though the issue of what constitutes reason and knowledge is more complicated for Cavell, it is a concern he shares with the cynics. While the cynics simply naturalize the human faculty of reason, Cavell asks what it actually means to „reason,“ a question that he ponders in his magnum opus *The Claim of Reason*. For Cavell, reason must be *recognized*, and it requires recognition of community. But like Diogenes and Mencken, Cavell asserts that reasoning is also something we must *do*. As Laugier argues, for Cavell “[r]eason is never merely given; it has to be claimed...[and] the individual's

demand to speak in the name of others, even if it has no further foundation, is *rational*, and is definitive of something essential to human rationality.”<sup>260</sup> Following Wittgenstein, Cavell argues that we agree and disagree in language, and that the fact that we sometimes cannot come to an agreement is hardly indicative of our individual or collective irrationality. It is, rather, a sign that we are part of a community of others who can recognize our claims, and who can recognize that we are *making* a claim, even if they do not agree with the claims that we make. Indeed, Cavell is quite sensitive to the fact that our agreements may be quite fragile. But he insists that this need not be cause for panic. For Cavell, the fact that we are separate beings does not entail that we are *separated* from others, or that we cannot also belong to or be part of a community of others (or communities of others).

Cavell endeavors to show that human understanding is not a matter of certainty, but, rather a matter of either acknowledging or avoiding what we share with others and with the world as well as what makes each of us separate and unique. Acknowledgment, Cavell demonstrates, constitutes a *response* (he describes it alternately as a confession, an admission or an acceptance) to what we presume to know, and what we understand is never static but changes, even if we choose to avoid acknowledging it. For Cavell, “acknowledgment ,goes beyond“ knowledge, not in the order, or as a feat, of cognition, but in the call upon me to express the knowledge at its core, to recognize what I know, to do something in light of it, apart from which this knowledge remains without expression, hence perhaps without possession.”<sup>261</sup> Human understanding of ourselves and of others and the world is something that, as individuals, we must seek, and this requires

---

<sup>260</sup> Laugier, “Wittgenstein and Cavell,” in Norris, *Claim to Community*, 34.

<sup>261</sup> Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 428.

questioning and overcoming the fear of responding to what we find. As Cavell argues, “the anxiety in teaching, in serious communication, is that I myself require education. And for grownups this is not natural growth, but change.”<sup>262</sup> For Cavell, learning *is* changing. It entails shifting the boundaries between the known and the unknown without breaking them completely—there will always be limits to what we can know, and the drive to find an unshakable underlying truth for why we and the world are the way we are is not only futile but, even more importantly, distracting. It distracts us from *living*. This living implies much more than enjoying one’s existence; it requires caring for it, which means giving serious attention to and concern for what our lives are comprised of. Learning to live means learning to cultivate the capacity to care for oneself, for one’s relationships with others, and for the world, and it requires respect for the uncertainty that troubles not only our experiences but also our expectations for life.

What are the political implications of this? The first concerns the *necessity* of collective action. For Cavell, the only way to understand ourselves and the knowledge that we have is to seriously consider what we *share*. Cavell asks us to find the courage to have faith in a world irreducible to one or another vision but open to many, a world in which we must accept that honoring and pursuing our ethical responsibilities will bring consequences we cannot foresee. And accepting ethical responsibility for others and the world can have powerful motivational potential when it comes to political action and engagement, because it entails a commitment to acting to preserve, protect and support them. In *The Avoidance of Love*, Cavell states that “Our problem is that society can no longer hear its own screams. Our problem, in getting back to beginnings, will not be to find the thing we have always cared about, but to discover whether we have it in us to

---

<sup>262</sup> Ibid. 125.

always care about something.”<sup>263</sup> He challenges us to acknowledge and accept change, both as individuals and a society, even if the road is bumpy and there is no final destination. But Cavell is also adamant that learning and change, as „philosophy for grown-ups,“ comes from the self, and this leads me to the second political implication of his work on acknowledgment and avoidance. As Norris notes,

the question of the relation of soul and society is hardly a pre-political matter but arguably the central question of politics, as [Plato’s] *The Republic* reminds us. [And] Cavell stakes himself as a political thinker upon his sense that its answer(s) requires both politics and philosophy, and neither in isolation from the other. If this makes politics more „idealistic“ than many contemporary theorists would have it, it hardly pushes it in a utopian or moralistic direction.<sup>264</sup>

Cavell is by no means suggesting that all voices count equally in American politics and society, but he is, I think, suggesting that we consider what we can do about that, or how we, as individuals, might help to widen possibilities for different voices to emerge. What Cavell does, then, is dare us to learn to live better by daring us to acknowledge what we care about while considering the cares of others and of the world we share. He implores us to seek to better understand our selves, others and the world by asking us to consider *how* we come by our knowledge and how this affects how we all live. This is not far from the mission of the cynics.

## The promises and problems of publicity

Like Diogenes, Mencken never claimed to hold a monopoly on the truth, even as he exercised his natural right to insert his voice into the social and political mix. Rather, he used this right to chide the American public for its general lack of interest in

---

<sup>263</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 350.

<sup>264</sup> Norris, “Introduction, in Norris, *Claim to Community*, 17.

investigating the legitimacy of the vast majority of the truth-claims that *were* advanced. Determined to debunk the popular myth that the United States was the land of liberty and equality for all, Mencken insisted that the American people merely paid lip service to these ideals. The reality, he argued, was that they seldom practiced what they preached and were all too willing to kowtow and conform, and to restrict both liberty and equality in honor of „virtues“ such as patriotism, piety, propriety, and the like. This is significant because although much of Mencken“s notoriety sprang from his habit of hounding politicians and other prominent public figures for peddling lies to the public, his criticism, at root, was aimed at the American people for buying into such lies and for selling out on ideals that they claimed to revere. The average American, he declared,

is a violent nationalist and patriot...[who is] violently jealous of what he conceives to be his rights, but brutally disregardful of the other fellow“s... Around every one of his principal delusions—of the sacredness of democracy, of the feasibility of sumptuary law, of the incurable sinfulness of all other peoples, of the menace of ideas, of the corruption lying in all the arts—there is thrown a barrier of taboos, and woe to the anarchist who seeks to break it down.<sup>265</sup>

Mencken was such an anarchist, though his purpose was not just to tear at the barrier of taboos but also, and more pointedly, to break down the fantasies of liberty and equality that buoyed American social and political culture. That he did this in *defense* of these ideals and of the truth is, I think, the defining mark of his cynicism.

Yet Mencken was also highly critical of the profession of journalism for what he considered its contribution to the perpetuation of public ignorance and its disregard for the ideals of liberty and equality. “A newspaper,” he claimed, “is a device for making the ignorant more ignorant and the crazy crazier.”<sup>266</sup> (Incidentally, Franklin Delano

---

<sup>265</sup> Mencken, *Prejudices: First, Second and Third Series*, 311.

<sup>266</sup> Mencken, *Mencken Chrestomathy*, 625.

Roosevelt notoriously criticized at the White House Correspondents' dinner in 1934 when the President launched into an acid-tongued speech condemning the Washington press that was drawn expressly from Mencken's own writing on the subject of journalism. Roosevelt thus turned Mencken's criticism of the press back upon Mencken himself, taking a cue from his cynical tactics.) And this brings me to the somewhat paradoxical relationship Mencken had with publicity and its impact on politics, which echoes Diogenes' simultaneous need for and rejection of the Athenian public in his commitment to freedom of speech. They both valued publicity as a mode or process of increasing public awareness of social and political issues, and they were both dedicated to a highly individualistic practice of truth-telling that lent itself to the project of enhancing such awareness. Yet Diogenes dismissed the possibility that his *parrhesiatic* could ever lead to significant change, and Mencken castigated not only the American public for disliking the truth but also the vast majority of his colleagues in the news industry for pandering to the public's preference for fiction and fantasy. Why would they do so? Part of the reason, Mencken argued, was for personal and political profit, but the other part was that they were as shy of the truth (and as stupid and fearful) as the public. "Most of the evils that continue to beset American journalism to-day," he proposed, "in truth, are not due to the rascality of owners or even to the Kiwanian bombast of business managers, but simply and solely to the stupidity, cowardice and Philistinism of working newspaper men. The majority of them, in almost every American city, are still ignoramuses, and proud of it."<sup>267</sup> In so doing Mencken described most newsmen in the same terms that he described the American public, and this was one of the very descriptions of the press that Roosevelt used, much to Mencken's chagrin, in his speech at the White House

---

<sup>267</sup> Mencken, *Prejudices: Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Series*, 366.

Correspondents“ Dinner. All in all, however, what it expresses is a frustration with the lack of appreciation for truth in American political culture, and with the tendency of politicians and the news media to cater to (and profit from) the public’s desire to avoid hearing it.

Nevertheless, Mencken clearly did not give up on publicity, given his own dedication to truth seeking and speaking, and actually his understanding of the possibility and problems of publicity is much closer to that of his contemporary John Dewey than he would have liked to admit. Dewey, Mencken claimed, wrote in „muffled sonorities,“ and his advocacy of the democratic process hardly endeared itself to Mencken’s thinking and writing.<sup>268</sup> But in his 1927 book *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey laments what he suggests is the “present meaning” (and misuse) of publicity, which he describes as “advertising, propaganda, misuse of private life, the „featuring“ of passing incidents in a way which violates all the moving logic of continuity, and which leaves us with those isolated intrusions and shocks which are the essence of sensations.”<sup>269</sup> For Dewey, publicity had become a means of manipulation by political insiders (and the press), a means of directing public opinion by distorting the truth. But Dewey argues that this state of affairs can be challenged, and that the American public needs to embrace freedom of inquiry and expression in order to restore democracy’s promise of participatory politics. “The prime condition of a democratically organized public,” Dewey asserts, “is a kind of knowledge and insight which does not yet exist...[And] there can be no public without full publicity in respects to all consequences which concern it.”<sup>270</sup> Unlike advertising, propaganda, and the like, „proper“ publicity, for Dewey, entails freedom of expression,

---

<sup>268</sup> Mencken, *Minority Report*, 293.

<sup>269</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1927), 168-9.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.* 167.

including individual, social and political inquiry and a public discussion of one's conclusions; it entails communication, which he contends is key to the establishment of a „Great Society,“ or „Great Community,“ which is indeed the establishment of a „public“ itself.<sup>271</sup> According to Dewey, one of the factors that hampers Americans' political interest, and hence „proper“ publicity, is an excess of extraneous entertainment sources and distractions in addition to work. Such interests, he notes, compete with political interests and concerns and make for a weakened democratic life, but Dewey is hopeful that a resurgence of political interest and appreciation for the merits of publicity can turn American democracy around.

Mencken was decidedly less hopeful about such prospects for democracy as a theory of government, but he did share Dewey's sentiments about publicity, and about the need for (and avoidance of) political concern and discussion in American political culture. They both argued that politicians and the news had abused publicity—roughly construed as a move to increase public awareness. But according to Mencken, this was above all because the American people do not want to know the truth, and politicians not only pandered for their own profit but also (and like the majority of newsmen) were „ignoramuses“ themselves. In sum, Mencken argues that because they fear the truth, the majority of Americans would prefer to fall back on the comforts of belief than purport to really know, or care for, what happens across their society or the politics that affect it. And it is my contention that his views on this were, and still are, quite relevant, and that this issue is compounded today by the technological changes that have facilitated the proliferation of information (as well as misinformation and disinformation) driven above all by the advent of the Internet. The Internet opens a wealth of possibilities for learning,

---

<sup>271</sup> Ibid. 142.

communication, and publicity in the sense of expanding public awareness, but it also offers a seemingly infinite number of possibilities for self-selecting one's news according to particular political proclivities (not to mention a whole new host of „distractions“ from political interest that it is safe to assume would frustrate Dewey). There is also scant evidence to show that the Internet has made the American public more inclined to search for truths and information about what is actually happening in politics and government. And while it may allow members of the public to search for information freely, these same members of the public will also be exposed to the kinds of pernicious „publicity“ stunts that Dewey mentions (advertising, propaganda, etc.), tools used by politicians as well as the press to distort their understanding of policy, the political process and government.

My aim here is not to condemn the Internet. Rather, I mean to suggest that its value as a tool searching for and finding out what is happening in American politics, society, and indeed, the world, depends on a level of critical curiosity and care that the American public, taken as a whole, does not seem to have. I think this is in line with Mencken's thinking on the fear of truth and the preference for fantasy in American political culture, and it is also in line with Cavell's concerns for how the news functions in American society, albeit in a different tone. Cavell laments

The newspaper tells me everything is relevant, but I cannot really accept that because it would mean that I do not have one life, to which some things are relevant and some not. I cannot really deny it either because I do not know why things happen as they do and why I am responsible for any and all of it. And so to the extent that I still have feeling to contend with, it is a generalized guilt, which only confirms my paralysis; or else I convert the disasters and sensations reported to me into topics of conversation, for mutual entertainment, which in turn irritates the guilt.<sup>272</sup>

---

<sup>272</sup> Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 348

For Cavell, the glut of information available today can enhance one's chance to choose avoidance over acknowledgment when it comes to one's concerns for others and the world. So publicity, in this sense, has not enhanced the extent to which awareness transforms into an enhancement in one's cares for the relations between the self, others and the world.

## Politics, responsibility and speaking the rude truth

One of the underlying themes connecting the thinkers I have discussed—Diogenes, Mencken, Cavell, and Emerson—is responsibility. I use the term loosely here, but what I would like to focus on is that each thinker is concerned with the capacity of individual human beings to account for their experiences and to take action and *respond* with consideration and intelligence when provoked by something that they find unsettling. Sometimes this entails speaking the „rude“ truth as Diogenes, Mencken and Emerson demonstrated, not out of malice but out of a sense of care for the truth itself. And this is what Thoreau is getting at when he likens his mission in writing *Walden* to that of chanticleer, which is namely „to wake his neighbors up.“<sup>273</sup> Accounting for our experiences does entail speaking about them, and sometimes it entails provoking one another into recognizing what we are saying. But it also, I think, entails *listening* to others, and questioning what we know, before settling on a response to an individual, social and political condition. The thinkers I have listed here all ask us to do both—speak and listen—in order to better understand our selves, others and the world.

Following Cavell, Budick argues that “responsibility is the powerful response human beings can make to the „ineluctable fact that we cannot know.“ This responsibility

---

<sup>273</sup> Henry David Thoreau, cited in Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 36.

extends to words as well as to deeds; and it results in a relationship to the world defined, not by knowing, but rather by what Cavell calls „acknowledgment.“<sup>274</sup> This requires taking an interest in one’s world as much as in oneself, and questioning one’s understanding of the self and society and the world instead of taking what one „knows“ for granted. And politically, it entails questioning one’s leaders but also one’s sources of political knowledge and information. There is no doubt that this is easier said than done, but that does not mean that it cannot be done. And while Diogenes and Mencken scoffed at the notion that there could be such a thing as honesty in politics, they served as dutiful examples that honesty did have a place in society (even if it is generally unwelcome). Similarly, Cavell does not shy away from the subject of honesty, political or otherwise, and his concern with the „concept“ of America and the notion of its discovery helps illuminate this. As James Conant notes,

for Cavell, following Thoreau, the monstrous illusion that threatens America is the illusion of an already discovered America—a state of affairs in which every American citizen imagines that the sole obstacle to reaping the benefits of the American dream are of a local and logistical variety... The discovery and constitution of America are taken to be accomplished facts, rather than ongoing projects whose vitality measures the pulse of America’s heartbeat.<sup>275</sup>

For Cavell, we, as individuals and as a society, are responsible for re-thinking the concept of America. This is not to say we should simply write it off as mere fantasy. Though the American dream is quite rightly in question these days, the concept has yet to die away and it is still something that we can (and, I think, *do*) look to with varying degrees of frustration and hope. As citizens, we must ask ourselves what this „dream“ means to us, but in order to do so we must first endeavor to understand what the concept even means.

---

<sup>274</sup> Budick, “Sacvan Bercovitch...” in Colatrella, and Alkana, *Cohesion and Dissent*, 56.

<sup>275</sup> Conant, “Recovery of Greece,” in Crary and Shieh, *Reading Cavell*, 236.

What *is* the American Dream? Cyril Ghosh argues that exactly when and by whom the term „the American dream“ was coined is debatable, but it is largely believed to have emerged from the Gilded Age and at that time encompassed the themes that Horatio Alger celebrated in his popular *Ragged Dick* „rags-to riches“ stories: “enterprise, drive, luck, intelligence, talent, and above all, initiative.”<sup>276</sup> Ghosh argues that the central tenets of the term can be whittled down to individualism, equal opportunity and success. And while many Americans consider the dream a myth, the concept still resonates in political and public discourse frequently enough that its influence deserves consideration.<sup>277</sup> These are ideals that may be invoked in myriad ways, and that have been and continue to be used to justify diverse political, social and personal issues and causes. As Ghosh points out, “although not all people believe in its promises, most people continue to think that the Dream is either achievable or ought to be achievable. Belief in the tenets of the Dream, it appears, has remained fairly stable over the last several decades.”<sup>278</sup> The „ought“ in that statement is critical. While some of us may have lost faith in the validity of the „Dream,“ that does not necessarily mean that we have lost faith in the principles that compose it. And how we, as individuals and as a larger society and nation, appeal to these principles of individualism, equality of opportunity, and success, very broadly defined, has serious social and political import. Should we sacrifice some individualism in order to ensure greater equal opportunity, and perhaps garner greater success for all of us? Or should we endeavor to „level the playing field“ and let the best man or woman win? Could this theoretical playing field ever be leveled when the forces facing us as individuals and as a society are not only economic, historical and

---

<sup>276</sup> Cyril Ghosh, *The Politics of the American Dream* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 28.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.* 33.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.* 1.

cultural but also environmental? These are big questions with no definitive answers, but the larger issue I mean to highlight in asking them is how the principles of individualism and equality of opportunity, in particular, are imbricated in American political culture.

What Cavell is getting at in his discussion of keeping the idea of „America“ open is not that we ought to seek a way to conclusively define „America“ or what is meant by individualism, equal opportunity and success, but rather that we, as citizens, need to acknowledge the extent to which what they mean in a given context shifts and sways with *us*, as individuals and as a society. We can and do have a say in the direction, and intention, of these shifts, which is not to suggest that we can control them. There is little to fault in the idea of equality and opportunity for all, but there is a good deal to fault in the ways that these ideas have been applied in practice and in political policy throughout American history. Still, although some (or even many) of us may have lost faith in their practical purpose, this does not necessarily entail that we have lost faith in their appeal. And instead of turning away from these ideals, perhaps we can try to acknowledge what they mean to us, and how this meaning has changed (and will continue to change) over the course of the nation“s history. Doing so requires serious individual and social reflection and a response to what such an inquiry uncovers. Mencken did not harbor much hope that the American public was willing or even capable of such a practice of thinking and questioning, but maybe he missed the mark on this. And maybe there is something to be said for keeping the possibility that he missed the mark open rather than trying to affirm or deny it.

## Cynicism and America

Is the tendency to eschew facts in favor of fictions a defining characteristic of the American political scenery? Is it an inherent feature of our democracy? Lincoln Steffens was on to something when, at the turn of the twentieth century, he blamed the American people for their own governmental mismanagement (he may be most famous for his communist sympathies, but he also, and perhaps because of said sympathies, held the American people accountable for government corruption and abuses of power). It is my contention that the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation in political rhetoric is not so much the cause as the consequence of American ignorance, itself a by-product of the public's refusal to acknowledge the realities of life in the so-called „land of opportunity.“ Citing Brendan Nyhan, Paul Krugman has commented on what he calls “a troubling aspect of the current American scene—the stark partisan divide over issues that should be simply factual, like whether the planet is warming or evolution happened.”<sup>279</sup> He argues that this problem has nothing to do with the accessibility of information. The problem, he says, is not ignorance but “wishful thinking.”<sup>280</sup> I think that it is a bit of an exaggeration to state that it has nothing to do with accessibility of information, or at least of access to an education that fosters one's faculties of interpreting information. But I do agree that it is also a problem of avoidance, of willful ignorance. Many of us sit back and blame our leaders for screwing up, for being corrupt, and for lying, and there is little doubt that some or even many of them do all of these things. But in blaming our leaders we also shirk our own responsibilities; we fail to get involved in the discussion of the

---

<sup>279</sup> Paul Krugman, “Conservative Delusions About Inflation,” *The New York Times*, July 6, 2014.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

issues on the table. And this starts with actually thinking about social and political issues. Diogenes, Mencken and Emerson all remind us of this in different ways, as does Cavell. And they have all aimed to provoke us into responding to their criticism as a means of provoking us to consider the state of our own lives as well as our society, and to take stock of what they are comprised of.

Ginsberg's theory of cynical realism suggests that the best response to the fact of political mendacity is to practice what he calls „defensive politics,“ a practice which in many ways involves rejecting aspects of the traditional models of political participation—such as voting—and maintaining a measure of critical distance from the political process and the government.<sup>281</sup> He argues, however, that this does not entail staying „quiet“ about politics, or avoiding political discussion. To the contrary, he contends that “even if [politicians and the state] cannot be defeated, the political class can and should continually be subjected to embarrassment, ridicule and harassment. Not only does constant pressure keep the politicians and officials uncertain and off-balance, but the exercise reminds the citizenry of the clay feet of their erstwhile idols.”<sup>282</sup> Ginsberg urges us to aim for political action over participation, noting that demonstrations, protests, and other forms of criticism and resistance can be more powerful than voting, which (unless one is actively working to remove a candidate from office) simply re-enforces the corruption of the political system. I do not disagree with Ginsberg on this. But I also think that consideration of the kind of Perfectionist tactics Cavell endorses might help us find a more hopeful vision of our political future, because these focus less on the faults of our leaders and political system and more on the ways in which we, as individuals and as

---

<sup>281</sup> Ginsberg, *American Lie*, 198.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.* 198.

a society, are a part of and contribute to this system. And if we can acknowledge and accept our own capacity to change maybe we can find a way to change our perceptions of politics and of what we value in American political culture.

Critics such as Diogenes, Mencken, Emerson and Cavell all, in different ways, push us to engage with their work. And I think that they can teach us to value political criticism and to covet its ability to press us to re-consider our political beliefs as well as our understanding of our society and of ourselves. The cynics' outrageous outspokenness demands attention, and what we can learn from Cavell is what is at stake in how and why we might respond to them. But are there any cynics in our midst today? There are certainly some widely known political satirists, some of whom have even endorsed cynicism (unlike Stewart and Colbert). Bill Maher, for example, did a comedy show in 2000 entitled *Be More Cynical*, in which he addresses the value of cynicism's critical capacities and discusses it in light of an array of topics including politics and religion. Maher argues that Americans need to be more cynical because we need to question what we read and what we hear, a point that Mencken (and, I think, Cavell) would agree upon. And like Mencken, Maher's controversial comments have landed him in hot water publicly and professionally. His comments following the 9/11 terrorist attacks serve as a case in point. On the September 17, 2001 episode of his show *Politically Incorrect*, Maher took issue with then President George W. Bush's labeling of the 9/11 terrorists as cowards, saying the following: "we have been the cowards, lobbying cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away. That's cowardly. Staying in the airplane when it hits the building, say what you want about it, but it's not cowardly." This sparked an outcry, cost him

sponsorships for his show, and, it seems, led to the show's cancellation the following year.

Maier publicly apologized for the comment, something that Mencken would not likely have done (he was willing to admit he was wrong, but not to take back statements deemed offensive or crude). But Maier does harbor cynical elements in his criticism of American political culture, and it's fair to say that Mencken would approve of his satirical practices and mode of political speech. And I think that Cavell would too, even if Maier's style is far from his own. The terrorist controversy certainly created a debate about the legitimacy of America's status as the world super-power, with politicians, pundits and even intellectuals such as Susan Sontag weighing in. And, if not for the first time, it provoked the following questions: who are we as Americans, how do we want to be known, and what kinds of assertions and actions are we willing to allow our political leaders to put forth to define us as a nation? These are important questions that are better left open than closed. Mencken asserted that "every decent man is ashamed of the government he lives under," and like Diogenes he contended that decent men were very far and few between.<sup>283</sup> What Cavell asks us is to consider questions such as these, and to consider whether we, as individuals and as a society, have the strength to care about how we might answer them. Maier also asks the American public to do this, albeit in a style that, like that of Diogenes and Mencken, is decidedly impolite.

I think that, even more so than Maier, it is worth considering the actor, writer, producer and activist Seth MacFarlane as an example of contemporary cynicism. MacFarlane's satire on shows such as *The Family Guy* certainly pushes the line when it comes to offensiveness, but when it comes to making a point with an inappropriate joke

---

<sup>283</sup> Mencken, *Mencken Chrestomathy*, 621.

he excels at getting attention. He calls himself an „equal-opportunity offender,“ and has infuriated a diverse array of individuals and groups including but hardly limited to Sarah Palin, the Parents Television Council, and The Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (incidentally, he has been a very public supporter LGBT issues and of equal marriage rights). But it is MacFarlane’s work as host of the 2013 Oscar ceremony that I think makes the best case for his cynicism. His „We Saw Your Boobs“ song generated a storm of (mostly negative) reactions, and women’s advocacy groups as well as the actresses Jane Fonda, Jaime Lee Curtis and Geena Davis all roundly criticized MacFarlane and accused him of perpetuating the pervasive problem of sexualizing the female body in Hollywood. Yet what his song did, above all else, was bring attention to and generate debate about the portrayal of women in movies. Despite her criticism, Geena Davis inadvertently acknowledges this. In a speech about female empowerment delivered in front of the California State Assembly on March 5, 2013, she stated that “it’s a shame that triumph was enveloped in an awards ceremony containing disrespect for women. But it helps illustrate how tone-deaf we can still be regarding the status of women.” Davis admits then, that MacFarlane provoked conversation about the status of women in Hollywood and elsewhere. Whether or not his song was tasteless or funny is, of course, a matter of personal opinion, but it did get people talking, writing, and therefore *responding* to the issues. Was this his intention? One need only watch *The Family Guy* to see that he is well versed in offensive rhetoric, and I think it is fair to say that he knew his song would be controversial.

Like Diogenes, Mencken, and (albeit with a different tone) Cavell, both Maher and MacFarlane are provocative figures who demand that we, as Americans and as

members of their audiences (or those who disdain from counting themselves as such), think about the state of our selves, our society and our nation. Their work obviously does not capture those in the middle—those who do not know about or watch or chime in their antics. But they still raise questions regarding the relationship between publicity and public responsibility, and they push us to take an interest in the social and political intricacies of our time. Like Diogenes and Mencken, Maher and MacFarlane demonstrate what I argue is a healthy cynical mood towards politics and society. Are we willing to acknowledge what they have to say, and respond to it? Or are we too afraid to face the realities of our circumstances, and when it comes to politics choose instead to embrace sentiments of anger, disillusionment, apathy and the like? Cynicism, at the end of the day, is not about creating or succumbing to fear but rather about confronting it. It a practice of speaking the rude truth, of „telling the whole truth and nothing but,“ and it requires courage because the truth is something that is often feared—because it is so often stressful and unsettling.

On this point, despite his criticism of cynicism, Cavell agrees. “Philosophy,” he asserts, “begins in loss, in finding yourself at a loss,” at the moment when we question who or what we are, or what we can be, because we don’t understand our selves or others or the world.<sup>284</sup> Cynicism is valuable precisely because it can push us to ask these questions, to *engage* in philosophical and political questions. For Cavell, one of the integral aspects of the vision of Emersonian Perfectionism that he endorses is that it can come from anywhere, and that we can be struck at any moment to think about, reflect on, and respond to what we have seen and experienced. And this notion of being „struck“ is integral to his understanding of the concept. For Cavell, “to feel small for the moment,

---

<sup>284</sup> Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable*, 114.

wordless, abashed, say crushed, before a piece of writing seems to me a sign of reading its claim correctly.”<sup>285</sup> It is a humbling moment, one which teaches us that we cannot approach the world alone, even though we are separate individuals. But it is also a moment that calls for strength and asks us to respond to the feeling of being small and crushed. This can have myriad political implications, yet I think Cavell’s point is that we need to think about the feeling of being crushed and consider it alongside our understanding of social and political relations. We need to learn from the experience, and to care for the insight into life and all of its complexities that it gives us.

---

<sup>285</sup> Ibid. 105.

## WORKS CITED

- Abramowitz, Alan. *The Disappearing Center: Engaged Citizens, Polarization, and American Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Babbitt, Irving. "The Critic and American Life." In *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, edited by Douglas C. Stenerson. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1987.
- Baker, Peter. "Nation's Confidence Ebbs at a Steady Drip." *The New York Times*, October 21, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/22/us/nations-confidence-ebbs-at-a-steady-drip.html>.
- Baldassarri, Delia, and Andrew Gelman. "Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion." *The American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 2 (2008): 408–46.
- Bennet, James. "We're Not Going to Let Our Campaign Be Dictated by Fact-Checkers," *The Atlantic*, August 28, 2012. <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/08/were-not-going-to-let-our-campaign-be-dictated-by-fact-checkers/261674/>
- Bierce, Ambrose. *The Unabridged Devil's Dictionary*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).
- Billerbeck, Margarethe. "The Ideal Cynic from Epictetus to Julius." In *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, edited by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé and Robert Bracht Branham, 202–21. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=13054>.
- Bode, Carl. *Mencken*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969.
- Branham, Robert Bracht. "Defacing the Currency: Diogenes' Rhetoric and the Invention of Cynicism." In *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, edited by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé and Robert Bracht Branham, 81–104. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=13054>.
- Branham, Robert Bracht, and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé. *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=13054>.
- Brown, Wendy. "Speaking Power to Truth." In *Truth and Democracy*, edited by Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, 87–95. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Budick, Emily Miller. "Sacvan Bercovitch, Stanley Cavell, and the Romance of American Fiction." In *Cohesion and Dissent in America*, edited by Carol Colatrella and Joseph Alkana, 48–74. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004.
- . *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*. La Salle, IL ; Chicago: Open Court ; University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- . *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
- . *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005.

- . *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- . *The Senses of Walden*. Expanded. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- . *This New yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein*. Albuquerque, NM: Living Batch Press, 1989.
- Chaloupka, William. *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Colatrella, Carol, and Joseph Alkana. *Cohesion and Dissent in America*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Conant, James. “The Recovery of Greece and the Discovery of America.” In *Reading Cavell*, edited by Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh, 239–58. New York: Routledge, 2006. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10163766>.
- Cooke, Alistaire. “Mencken and the English Language.” In *On Mencken: Essays*, edited by John R. Dorsey. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- Crary, Alice, and Sanford Shieh, eds. *Reading Cavell*. New York: Routledge, 2006. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10163766>.
- Desmond, William D. *The Greek Praise of Poverty: Origins of Ancient Cynicism*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006.
- Dewey, John. *The Public and Its Problems*. New York: H. Holt and Company, 1927.
- Dio, Chrysostom. *Dio Chrysostom*. Edited by J. W. Cohoon and Henry Lamar Crosby. 5 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949.
- Donatelli, Piergiorgio. “Bringing the Truth Home: Mill, Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Moral Perfectionism.” In *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, edited by Andrew Norris, 38–57. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Dornbrook, James. “Obama Speech Fights Cynicism, Presses for Optimism.” *Kansas City Business Journal*, July 30, 2014. <http://www.bizjournals.com/kansascity/news/2014/07/30/obama-speech-fights-cynicism-presses-for-optimism.html>.
- Dorsey, John R., ed. *On Mencken: Essays*. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- Douglas, George H. *H.L. Mencken: Critic of American Life*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978.
- Dudley, Donald Reynolds. *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* London: Methuen, 1937.
- Eldridge, Richard Thomas. “Between Acknowledgment and Avoidance.” In *Stanley Cavell*, edited by Richard Thomas Eldridge, 1–14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10073572>.
- . , ed. *Stanley Cavell*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10073572>.
- Elkins, Jeremy. “Concerning Practices of Truth.” In *Truth and Democracy*, edited by Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, 19–53. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Elkins, Jeremy, and Andrew Norris. “Politics, Political Theory, and the Question of Truth.” In *Truth and Democracy*, edited by Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, 1–8. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- . , eds. *Truth and Democracy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by Brooks Atkinson. New York: Modern Library, 2000.
- Fecher, Charles A. "The Comfortable Bourgeois: The Thought of H.L. Mencken." In *On Mencken: Essays*, edited by John R. Dorsey. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- Flathman, Richard. "Perfectionism without Perfection: Cavell, Montaigne, and the Conditions of Morals and Politics." In *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, edited by Andrew Norris, 98–127. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Foucault, Michel. *The courage of truth (the government of self and others II): lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Friedman, Thomas L. "The Whole Truth and Nothing But." *The New York Times*, September 6, 2011, sec. Opinion. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/07/opinion/friedman-the-whole-truth-and-nothing-but.html>.
- Galston, William A. "Truth and Democracy: Theme and Variations." In *Truth and Democracy*, edited by Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, 130–45. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Ghosh, Cyril. *The Politics of the American Dream: Democratic Inclusion in Contemporary American Political Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Ginsberg, Benjamin. *The American Lie: Government by the People and Other Political Fables*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007.
- Goldfarb, Jeffrey C. *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Goodman, Russell B. "Cavell and American Philosophy." In *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, edited by Russell B. Goodman, 100–117. Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=138253>.
- . , ed. *Contending with Stanley Cavell*. Oxford, UK; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=138253>.
- Gould, Timothy. "The Names of Action." In *Stanley Cavell*, edited by Richard Thomas Eldridge, 48–78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.  
<http://site.ebrary.com/id/10073572>.
- Goulet-Cazé, Marie-Odile. "Appendix A: Who Was the First Dog?" In *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, edited by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé and Robert Bracht Branham, 414–16. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=13054>.
- . "Religion and the Early Cynics." In *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, edited by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé and Robert Bracht Branham, 47–80. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=13054>.
- Goulet-Cazé, Marie-Odile, and Robert Bracht Branham. "Introduction." In *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, edited by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé and

- Robert Bracht Branham, 1–27. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=13054>.
- Greenberg, David. “Lippmann vs. Mencken: Debating Democracy.” *Raritan* 32, no. 2 (2012): 117–40.
- Hammer, Espen. *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary*. Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2002.
- Hatchett, Louis. *Mencken’s Americana*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002.
- Hobson, Fred. “‘This Hellawful South’: Mencken and the Late Confederacy.” In *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, edited by Douglas C. Stenerson. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1987.
- Johnson, James Weldon. “American Genius and Its Locale.” In *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, edited by Douglas C. Stenerson. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1987.
- Kohn, Sally. “Paul Ryan’s Campaign Speech in 3 Words,” *Fox News*, August 30, 2013.  
<http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/08/30/paul-ryans-speech-in-three-words/>
- Laertius, Diogenes. *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume II*. Translated by Robert Drew Hicks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925.
- Laugier, Sandra. “Wittgenstein and Cavell: Anthropology, Skepticism and Politics.” In *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, edited by Andrew Norris, 19–37. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Levine, Alan, and Daniel S. Malachuk. *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011.  
<http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=792343>.
- Lippmann, Walter. *Men of Destiny*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1927.
- Long, A.A. “The Socratic Tradition: Diogenes, Crates, and Hellenistic Ethics.” In *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, edited by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé and Robert Bracht Branham, 28–46. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=13054>.
- Madison, Lucy, Paula Reid and Stephanie Condon. “Fact-checking 6 Claims in Paul Ryan’s Campaign Speech.” *CBS News*, August 30, 2012  
<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/fact-checking-6-claims-in-paul-ryans-convention-speech/2/>
- Martin, Edward A. *H.L. Mencken and the Debunkers*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984.
- May, Henry Farnham. *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of Our Own Time, 1912-1917*. New York: Knopf, 1959.
- Mazella, David. *The Making of Modern Cynicism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007.
- Mencken, H. L. *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982.
- . “Melancholy Reflections.” *The Chicago Tribune*, May 23, 1926.
- . *Menckeniana: A Schimpflexikon*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928.
- . *Minority Report: H.L. Mencken’s Notebooks*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- . *Notes on Democracy*. New York: Dissident Books, 2009.
- . *A Mencken Chrestomathy*. First Vintage Books Edition, 1982

- . *Prejudices: First, Second, and Third Series*. New York: Literary classics of the United States, 2010.
- . *Prejudices: Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Series*. New York: Literary classics of the United States, 2010.
- . *The American Scene: A Reader*. Edited by Huntington Cairns. New York: Knopf, 1965.
- . *The Impossible H.L. Mencken: A Selection of His Best Newspaper Stories*. Edited by Marion Elizabeth Rodgers. New York: Doubleday, 1991.
- . *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Chicago, IL: See Sharp Press, 2003.  
<http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=809568>.
- . “What I Believe.” *The Forum* 84 (September 1930): 133–39.
- Moles, John L., Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, and Robert Bracht Branham. “Cynic Cosmopolitanism.” In *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, 105–20. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=13054>.
- Mulhall, Stephen. “Stanley Cavell’s Vision of the Normativity of Language: Grammar, Criteria, and Rules.” In *Stanley Cavell*, edited by Richard Thomas Eldridge, 79–106. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10073572>.
- Nathan, George Jean, and H.L. Mencken. *The American Credo*. New York: Knopf, 1921.
- Navia, Luis E. *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- . *Diogenes of Sinope: The Man in the Tub*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Neuman, Scott. “1 In 4 Americans Think The Sun Goes Around The Earth, Survey Says.” *NPR.org*. Accessed November 14, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/02/14/277058739/1-in-4-americans-think-the-sun-goes-around-the-earth-survey-says>.
- Niehues-Probsting, Heinrich. “The Modern Reception of Cynicism: Diogenes in the Enlightenment.” In *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, edited by Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé and Robert Bracht Branham, 329–65. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.  
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=13054>.
- Nolte, William H. “The Literary Critic.” In *On Mencken: Essays*, edited by John R. Dorsey. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- Norris, Andrew. “Introduction: Stanley Cavell and the Claim to Community.” In *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, edited by Andrew Norris, 1–18. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- . , ed. *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.
- Oxford University Press. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Parnes, Amy. “Obama: Don’t Be so Cynical.” *The Hill*, August 8, 2014.  
<http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/214636-obama-dont-be-so-cynical>.
- Pinter, Harold. “From Nobel Lecture: Art, Truth, and Politics.” In *Truth and Democracy*, edited by Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, 9–17. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

- Post, Robert. "Truth and Disagreement." In *Truth and Democracy*, edited by Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, 76–86. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Putnam, Hilary. "The Recovery of Greece and the Discovery of America." In *Reading Cavell*, edited by Alice Crary and Sanford Shieh, 119–30. New York: Routledge, 2006. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10163766>.
- Sayre, Ferdinand. *Diogenes of Sinope: A Study of Greek Cynicism*. Baltimore, MD: J.H. Furst, 1938.
- Scruggs, Charles. "H.L. Mencken and James Weldon Johnson: Two Men Who Helped Shape a Renaissance." In *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, edited by Douglas C. Stenerson. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1987.
- Semper, I.J. "H.L. Mencken : Doctor Rhetoricus." In *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, edited by Douglas C. Stenerson. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1987.
- Sergeant, Elizabeth Shepley. "H.L. Mencken." In *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, edited by Douglas C. Stenerson. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1987.
- Shea, Louisa. *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10365013>.
- Stanley, Sharon. "Retreat from Politics: The Cynic in Modern Times." *Polity* 39, no. 3 (2007): 384–407.
- Stenerson, Douglas C., ed. *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1987.
- . "The 'Forgotten Man' of H.L. Mencken." In *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken*, edited by Douglas C. Stenerson. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall, 1987.
- Williams, W. H. A. *H.L. Mencken*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977.
- Zerilli, Linda M. G. "Truth and Politics." In *Truth and Democracy*, edited by Jeremy Elkins and Andrew Norris, 54–75. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Zezima, Katie. "President Obama Brought Back 'hope and Change' This Summer — and Exported It to Estonia." *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/09/03/president-obama-brought-back-hope-and-change-this-summer-and-exported-it-to-estonia/>.

## **CURRICULAM VITAE**

### **SUVI MAARIA IRVINE**

**Born: April 23, 1979 in Woodland, California**

#### **Education:**

**2006-2014: Johns Hopkins University**

PhD in Political Science

Major Field: Political Theory

Minor Field: American Politics

Masters of Arts, Political Science (December 2007)

**1998-2000, 2004-2005: University of California, Berkeley**

B.A. in Political Science, Magna Cum Laude

High Honor's in Political Science

#### **Fellowships and Awards:**

**Fall 2010/Spring 2011:** Malcolm H. Lauchheimer Fellowship

**Spring 2009:** Harold Seidman Award for Graduate Paper in American Politics,  
Department of Political Science, Johns Hopkins University

#### **Research and Teaching Experience:**

##### **Research:**

01/09- Research Assistant for Professor Benjamin Ginsberg—archival research on the manuscript for Moses of South Carolina; published by Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010

##### **Teaching Experience:**

**At: The Johns Hopkins University Center for Advance Governmental Studies**

Course(s):

--Government and Politics in the United States, (Fall 2008, Fall 2009 and Fall 2010, Spring 2011 semesters), Professor Benjamin Ginsberg; discussion seminar instructor for students in the MA in Government Program

**At: Johns Hopkins University, Homewood Campus**

Courses:

--Introduction to American Politics, Undergraduate Course (Fall 2008 and Fall 2010), instructor: Professor Benjamin Ginsberg; head teaching assistant both semesters, duties include: assuming all administrative responsibilities for the course, assigning extra readings and course assignments, writing midterm and final exams, communicating and coordinating expectations for student performance with the other teaching assistants

--Classics of Political Thought (Fall 2009), instructor: Professor Samuel Chambers; teaching assistant

--The Ethics of War (Spring 2008), instructor: Professor Siba Grovogui; teaching assistant