

*The Greek Praise of Poverty: Origins of Ancient Cynicism*, William D. Desmond (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006). Pp. x+240. ISBN. 0-268-02581-9 (cloth). ISBN. 0-268-02582-7 (pbk). Price\$48/\$25

The substance of this book is that praise of poverty is implicit and latent in Greek culture before the Cynics begin to praise it openly in the late fifth and early fourth centuries. It is sometimes forgotten when contemplating the glory that was Greece that the country had a subsistence economy where a fall into

abject poverty was an ever-present danger. In such circumstances two situations can arise. The wealth of the famous is desired and praised by all. Yet there may be also be praise for the real toil of the unknown worker on the land, who though poor, can keep the state from disaster. Where previous scholarship on the Cynics,

for example, privileges praise of wealth in Greek culture, Desmond seeks to privilege praise of poverty. Chapter 1 'Approaches to Ancient Cynicism' (pp. 1-25), describes the discrete avenues usually trodden in studies of ancient Cynicism. The Hellenistic, the philosophical, the 'oriental' the psychological, and the Marxist, explain the origin of the pervasiveness of Cynicism in the late Classical world. Desmond summarises the ways in which these approaches fix on different cultural and political processes. From the decline of the polis in the Hellenistic period leading to the re-evaluation of life along individualistic minimalist lines (and perhaps corresponding to the rise of the 'ordinary man' in New Comedy), he proceeds to consideration of the notion that Cynicism especially in its asceticism is un-Greek and oriental. Again, admiration for the lone figure standing against all odds in his yearning for true freedom, or the idea that Socrates and others such as his follower Antisthenes are seen as 'spoilers' of 'aristocratic' philosophical ideas has led to the conclusion that class exclusion is the impetus for the increased popularity of Cynicism. Marxist ideas that money excludes meaning that those previously included such as intellectuals, or those unluckily newly impoverished, become the fertile ground for the growth in Cynicism. These exclusivist approaches are not rejected by Desmond but characteristically subsumed into his approach which stresses inclusivity: the rise of the ideas that later crystallised in Cynicism have deep roots in Greek history, politics, philosophy, and even in the limits imposed by the actual

harsh and unforgiving landscape of Greece itself. His view that praise of poverty is latent in Greek culture - it is there and not there before the Cynics ever appear as a force - is the paradox he himself creates and seeks to explicate through close reading and wide knowledge in this book. Desmond proceeds methodically.

Prefaced by quotations from Crates, Chapter 2 'Praise of Poverty and Work' (pp. 27-103) is the longest chapter of five making up 45% of the text. The purpose is to track traces of two famous Cynic paradoxes that 'poverty is wealth' and 'idleness is work' through extant literature. There are three main sections dealt with under the headings: 'Wealth: What is Wealth? What is Poverty?' with subheadings 'Qualitative and quantitative wealth' 'Sources, uses, and abuses of wealth', 'The burdens and benefits of wealth'; second, 'Idleness is Work: the Cynic Version of An 'Industrious Optimism'' with subheadings 'The traditional work ethic', 'The imperial work ethic', 'The philosophical work ethic'; and lastly, 'The Economic Background to Cynic Asceticism'. The processes of thought which eventually produced these paradoxes are traced with subtlety and cleverness not without resort to Cynic anecdotes. The ways in which traditional praise of wealth evolve and become part of the Cynic world-view are followed through consideration of 'opposites' or binary ideas. Subjective wealth or internal wealth is contrasted with external possessions, qualitative wealth and quantitative wealth, high philosophical theory with popular notions of wealth, the internal 'riches' an individual might possess versus his external goods. The analysis exploits

the clash of different systems of evaluation of what actually constitute 'wealth' and 'poverty' using examples adduced from the life of Solon, Plato, or the Comic playwrights among many others (p. 63). So for example, the consistent method of philosophy in formulating ideas is placed side by side with the subjective, qualitative, internal understanding of wealth as popularly understood. 'Popular thought' cannot construct as consistent and rigorous a system as philosophers might wish, but such diffuse 'thought' is what Desmond seeks to investigate. He shows that 'poverty is wealth' is found in Greek culture before the Cynics principally in the general 'belief' in popular thought that wealth itself is a kind of poverty. Because of all the demands made on external wealth (contributions to the state shipbuilding programme for example), the notion persists that 'material benefits are a specious form of influence' (p. 69). The second paradox ('idleness is work'), sees the same method applied: Desmond considers Hesiod's definition of the individual who works solely to satisfy his needs in a subsistence economy. Both this definition and the idea of an imperial work ethic smiled upon by an industrious optimism are two sides of the same coin. The former emphasises the necessity of work often frowned upon by vicious gods, by inclement weather or by the vagaries of chance. The latter emphasises the toil necessary to promote expansion of the Athenian empire and its industrious optimism. Seemingly exempt from the vicissitudes of fortune, that expansion could proceed endlessly. The honest

toil of the poor worker becomes identified with the worker-General like Philip II or Alexander. Stories that depict the apparent difference between the world conqueror and the Hellenistic sage can also be used to display a latent 'certain accord' between the two: Alexander would choose to be none other than Diogenes were he not Alexander (p. 81). The insatiable general's realisation of the limitlessness of the boundaries of empire is easily transformed into the recognition of the boundaries of the mind by the philosopher and the possibility he can master them. From consideration of sources, for example, Prodicus, or Xenophon, or Socrates in Plato's *Apology* who compares his efforts in the examination of craftsmen and politicians to the labours of Hercules (p. 87) we proceed to the philosopher-king of the *Republic* an 'abstract' person removed from base desires by his own innate good nature and by his training in ways to approach the Good, working ceaselessly not only towards the Good but also towards the common good. Diogenes Laertius' report of the huge number of books written by philosophers (almost four hundred by Aristotle) adorns the account of Aristotle's industrious optimism regarding the highest duty of man: to philosophize, a task for which humankind is uniquely equipped. The Cynic ascetics, we are told, give a radical twist to the philosophic work ethic: ascetic *ponoi* bring the true wealth of self-mastery (p. 93). This wealth is available to Everyman if he would but work towards achieving it.

The Cynic paradox 'weakness is strength' or powerlessness is power

is dealt with in Chapter 3 'Praise of Poverty and War' (p. 105-142). The context is military in keeping with Desmond's view that this aspect of Cynicism has been somewhat overlooked. Here again literary sources are used with some imagination and lots of scholarship to reconstruct a view of the notion of the victory of the just mind (rather than of brute force). The idealised philosopher-soldier fighting for an ideal rather than plunder or money enters the Greek imagination: the reluctant hero Odysseus in rags 'nourished' by the earth of Ithaca though it be poor or precisely because it is so, conquers not by his offering of twelve ships but mainly by means of his native intelligence (p. 113). Similarly, the hardship and poverty of his native place can form a 'gymnasium of virtue' for the soldier (p. 114), in circumstances where he fights solely for freedom from tyranny. This is a sentiment notable in funeral speeches (p. 110). Material poverty is the Cynic philosopher's 'Ithaca' and from there he launches his fight against the tyranny of greed for material goods (p. 137). These are goods that can be taken away at the whim of fortune but a heroic philosopher-soldier can, like Odysseus in Antisthenes' *Odysseus*, alone and through his innate wit bring down such tyranny (p. 139). Such a hero can never be said to be truly defeated in spirit. Funeral orations and also mythical traditions about the lone military hero wealthy in his victories and nourished in situations of material hardship, combine to produce the idea of the lone philosopher soldiering unconquered and true to his soul against myriad enemies

bound to the fallibility of external goods and buffeted by fortune.

Chapter 4 'Praise of Poverty and Philosophical Wisdom' (pp. 143-67) traces the intellectual asceticism of the Cynics back to Eleatic ontology and attempts to give the Cynic paradox 'the fool is wise' a respectable ancestry, one rooted in Greek philosophy. Again, Desmond interprets sensitively the tenuous links between Eleaticism and the Cynics, yet shows these links are an all pervasive philosophical atmosphere breathed by the Cynics and 'unconsciously adopted' by them (p. 145). Now since the Cynics professed not to care a whit about and indeed rejected the formulations of all philosophies (p. 145), Desmond solves this by having the Cynics soak up these formulations through their pores, so to speak, and so they make of Eleatic ontology an ethical system. The wise man separates himself from life and death even to the extent of seeming foolish and thinks his way to a higher, happier reality (p. 152). He must be ready to be a laughing stock just as Socrates was, and though he may be relatively poor he will be wealthy in wisdom. The language of the Platonic dialogues, for example, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus*, and *Republic* is adduced to show this dualism and presages the 'separation' of the Cynic philosopher from worldly values and his orientation towards the higher value of Truth. It is precisely because the Cynics were highly sceptical about the possibility of knowledge that the individual is all for them. The ties a person might have to family, work, war and so on are as nought. The Cynic philosopher is all, is, all else is not. Everything else

is smoke. This is the sage's best defence against fortune. The notion that the sage is all is the one big idea of cynic philosophy and affirms the dignity of the individual. Horace is quoted: the sage is 'complete in himself, smooth and rounded' (*Serm.* 2.7.86). For the practical Romans the notion of the self-sufficient satirist as commentator on excess in life and in art owes much to the thought and writings of the Cynics. Diogenes' *pêra*, his virtual homeland, finds a corresponding 'homeland' in the Sabine farm acquired by Horace with its modest amount of timber and little clear water stream.

Chapter 5 'The Persistence of Cynic Ideals' (pp. 169-74) is a conclusion to the book and revisits the basic premise that Cynic ideas, though not so called, were the common coin of Greek thought both popular and rarefied long before Cynic philosophy arrived in the late classical period. The inward looking psychology characteristic of the Hellenistic period is not surprising given the decrease in the military power of the polis and contribute to the notion of the 'self-contained impassive self' the Cynic adopted and married to Eleatic ontology (170). Ambiguous attitudes towards wealth resonate in Greek literature and

culture – the demands on wealth make material assets more bother than they may be worth; or, because wars bring less rewards than losses, Greek culture esteems valour, worthless in money terms, even in defeat. These attitudes are very difficult to pin down but the Cynics have found a champion in Desmond who at once firmly links them to the 'smoke' they did not care for and who also finds roots for them at the very core of Greek culture and thought.

There are copious notes carefully explaining many ideas, for example, on Cynicism as a 'school' (p. 177n17), on work and *logoi* (p. 182-3n16), or on the 'wealth' of wisdom (p. 211n52), all replete with references to Greek authors. A well organized Bibliography and Index complete the book.

This book is a welcome addition to consideration of Cynic ideas especially because these ideas have informed much of later Roman culture and so even our own. The text itself ends with mention of Cynic ideas in Menippean Satire, Christianity, and finally even in Shakespeare. The virtuous Cynic along with the often ambiguous nature of his worldview receives careful treatment in this original and thoughtful book

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*Phenomenology and Imagination in Husserl and Heidegger*, Brian Elliot (London: Routledge, 2005). Pp. 183. ISBN # 0-415-32403-3. £75 (hbk).

Elliot's book on Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger's notions of

imagination is not only ambitious in its attempt to be explicatively