



The Megaric School and Cynicism Frederick Mayer

Euclid of Alegara represents a mixture of Eleatic concepts and the Socratic way of life. As a student of Socrates, he admired the Socratic concept of virtue and felt that evil has no metaphysical reality.

Since he maintained that Being and thinking are one, monism is the keynote to his philosophy. What appears as changing and transitory is purely illusory. The One and the Good were united by Euclid. How he conceived of the One does not appear too clearly. Occasionally he spoke of it in theistic terms and thus equated it with a personal god; sometimes he regarded the One in impersonal terms.

Among the disciples of Euclid's school we find Stilpo of Megara, who distinguished himself by skepticism in religion. He was considered so subversive in religion that he was banished from Athens. In his ethical ideals we find a strong trace of intellectualism. The goal of life he regarded as emancipation from external goods. The wise man, according to Stilpo, will cultivate his own independence and not cherish the illusory values of the masses. Almost Stoic in his philosophical life, he spoke of the virtue of apathy. In his system we find the seeds of the system of Zeno, one of his pupils.

Related to the Megaric tendencies was the philosophy of Phaedo of Elis. As an outstanding student of Socrates, Phaedo mainly repeated the views of his teacher, for he identified virtue with knowledge and considered philosophy the best guide to a rational life. Like many other thinkers of his age, he felt that society was in a state of decay and that philosophy had an ethical function.

Menedemus of Eretria is a vague figure in ancient philosophy. He left no writings, and thus it is impossible to give an exact account of his teachings. But, it appears, he strongly attacked the superstitions of the masses and believed in an emancipated way of life. Hedonism seemed to him an inadequate philosophy, hence he urged the cultivation of man's intellectual capacities.

The reaction against hedonism was represented most clearly by the Cynic philosophers. They stressed the cultivation of virtue, which they regarded as an absolute Good. They believed that society was in a decadent state; that the only hope for man was to cultivate his inner self. Their scientific interests were almost nonexistent. Like Rousseau, they thought scientific knowledge prevents man from attaining true morality.

The Cynics made a vigorous attack on all social and civilizing institutions. Marriage they regarded as an evil which makes man dependent on emotional security. They abhorred property, for it creates inequality. They detested political organization, for it leads to oppression and wars. They did not believe in nationalism, since they believed that man is a universal citizen and thus cannot find himself by membership in any one nation.

They objected to all external values. Those who believe in fame, the Cynics concluded, are deluded, for it is of no lasting value. As for wealth, it merely creates wickedness. Most of all, however, they attacked man's reliance on pleasures, for life based on physical sensations cannot lead to the cultivation of virtue. The Cynics were moral athletes who tried to strengthen their souls in the same way as an athlete builds up his body.

Intellectually, the Cynics were nominalists. Nominalism was quite consistent with their

view that all universal institutions are bad and that the individual alone is the judge of his needs. No laws, no commandments, no pre-established beliefs can coerce him.

Among the Cynic philosophers we find Antisthenes, c. 445-365 B.C., whose mother was a Thracian slave and who was constantly ridiculed by Plato. He contradicted Plato, who believed in universal, for he felt that only individual facts are real. To him, Socrates represented the Cynic view of life, and, like the latter, he was interested primarily in virtue.

Another outstanding Cynic was Diogenes, who taught the Cynic doctrines in a spectacular way. His father was a banker, but Diogenes had no respect for wealth. His adult years were spent in Athens and Corinth, where he became one of the noted citizens. His ideal was the life of animals, because it is completely free of human follies.

One of his pupils was Crates of Thebes, who was extremely wealthy but so impressed by the Cynic ideal of life that he devoted himself to a life of poverty. He represented a very warm and human aspect of the Cynic school and in his teachings exemplified the rule of compassion.

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