6. The cynics, stoics and sceptics

From our historical vantage point it can seem as though Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were the only serious philosophers alive and at large in Ancient Greece. But this is only a quirk of our distant temporal perspective, a trick of the historical light.

Those now cursed with the disparaging epithet ‘minor Socratics’ were probably much more than the name suggests. A few might have known Socrates well and must have been moved when he died. Perhaps they really did see themselves as minor Socratics in some sense, carrying on the great man’s mission, but others went off in different intellectual directions, building on insights of their own. Almost all were well-known in their day, and for generations their work was studied carefully. We barely remember their names, and mostly just fragments and whispers survive, but they attracted students, opened schools, wrote hundreds of books, and got on with pursuing wisdom as they understood it.

It might have gone on in that way for a while, but something dramatic happened to philosophy, and to the Western world, following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. As his vast empire collapsed into violent factions competing for land and wealth, new centres of trade and learning coalesced in Africa, Asia Minor, and the Middle East. Rome – once an independent city the size of Athens – gobbled up territory until, from the point of view of those within it, the whole world was the Roman Empire. While the Romans clearly had a handle on soldiering, admin and occupation, compared to the Greeks, they were the muddy-booted children of uncouth farmers. As the Romans prospered and aspired to greater sophistication, they looked almost exclusively to Greek culture.

They marched across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, embedding outposts of Greek thinking in alien worlds. New philosophical outlooks appeared, no doubt owed in part to the novel mix of ideas stirred up by the times. Eastern superstitions mingled with Greek logic. Entirely new lines of thought opened up.

Philosophical ideas that got a start in and around Athens were, in a few hundred years, debated and discussed in Latin all over the Roman world. Beggars living on city streets, even former slaves, found consolation in Greek conceptions of fate and virtue. Roman emperors, senators and their advisors made Greek philosophy their own. Greek thoughts were in the heads of people at every level of Roman society. And of course the Romans brought their own notions and agendas to the table. The result wasn’t entirely Greek or Roman, but a new intermingling of ideas.

From the death of Alexander to the Battle of Actium and the start of the Roman Empire in 31 CE, Hellenistic philosophy takes centre stage. These points in time are just conventions – one sort of philosophy didn’t stop and another start on a particular afternoon – and some of the philosophers we’ll consider in this chapter fall outside of those dates. But the philosophy of this era really is a departure from what came before it. The fear and uncertainty which resulted from the collapse of Alexander’s world and the turmoil accompanying the Roman consolation of power must have had a lot to do with it. The world was no longer a pleasant backdrop for reflection on universals, particulars, and the good life. As Russell puts it, “Aristotle is the last Greek philosopher who faces the world cheerfully; after him, all have, in one form or another, a philosophy of retreat.” Philosophy, born in curiosity and wonder, matured into a means of escape from uncertainty and ill fortune. It became a way of life, a path to peace of mind.
The times changed very quickly at first. As Long and Sedley put it in their treatment of the early days of Hellenistic philosophy, “If Aristotle could have returned to Athens in 272 BC, on the fiftieth anniversary of his death, he would hardly have recognized it as the intellectual milieu in which he had taught and researched for much of his life.”

Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum were still around, of course, but both schools were transformed. The Academy was run by Arcesilaus, who ushered in its so-called “Middle Age” by turning from Plato’s intellectualism to a kind of ultra-Socratic scepticism. Cicero tells us that he professed to “know nothing, not even his own ignorance”. The slightly insipid Strato of Lampsacus was the uninspiring head of the Lyceum at the time, presiding over its slow decline by replacing philosophical enquiry with the study of the natural world. For a time Aristotle’s philosophy passed entirely into obscurity. No one knows why.

What’s remarkable is not just that those two famous schools had changed so much in so little time, but that the best-known philosophers in Athens were not even within them. The philosophical descendants of Plato and Aristotle had been brushed aside. Athens was under the sway of entirely new thinkers.

What were they talking about, and who were they? Hellenistic philosophy is dominated by the stoics and the epicureans. We’ll take up the epicureans and their main influence, the atomists, in the next chapter, but we turn now to the stoics. To understand them, however, we’ll have to consider two other schools of philosophy. The best place to begin is with Diogenes the cynic. If you’re well-mannered and easily offended, you might want to look away now.

The dog philosophers

Ancient reporters have passed on an unusually large number of stories about Diogenes of Sinope. He was probably hard to forget. We know he wrote books, but only the anecdotes survive. It is in a way fitting that we have the stories, not the writing. His life, in a sense, was his philosophy.

He had a penchant for wordplay and seemed ready to wade into, and win, any verbal dispute. He wasn’t above using his fists either. He rejected all aspects of tradition, the dictates of culture, and the rules of civilised life as artificial, unnatural encumbrances which can only get in the way of freedom and genuine happiness. Virtue, for him, was to be found in living according to one’s natural endowments, rather than seeking happiness in money, fame, the mindless accumulation of objects or the slavish devotion to the dictates of society.

Diogenes rejected social conventions wholesale. He begged for food or foraged for what he could in the marketplace, slept in an old wine barrel, and wore little more than simple cloth. He dealt with his “bodily requirements” as and when he had the need, and there’s talk of him urinating publicly (occasionally on people who perhaps did grasp the implications of his views with sufficient clarity), defecating in a theatre, advocating free love, eating whatever and whenever he chose (including a raw ox foot, which might have killed him), and engaging in open, shameless masturbation.
He shouted at people in the streets, made fun of their petty conformity, and they shouted back, calling him a dog for living as he did. “Cynic” comes from the Greek word κυνικός, meaning canine or dog-like. The word as it is in English retains something of its ancient meaning – seeing the worst in people, particularly focusing on their selfish attachments. Diogenes the Dog, as he was called, was the exemplar of the cynic sage. He was wretched and poor by the measures of society, but, by his own lights, happy, free and rich in virtue.

As you might expect, he didn’t get on very well with Plato, who allegedly called him “Socrates gone mad”. There’s some truth in this. If he wasn’t a gadfly, Diogenes certainly hounded his fellow citizens in a Socratic manner, all in the name of virtue. He made sport of what he took to be their vain and ridiculous attachment to things that don’t really matter – there are echoes of Socratic irony in Diogenes’ snarl. Diogenes also shared Socrates’ disdain for money and social standing, as well as his insistence on simplicity, being true to one’s principles, and self-mastery. But even Socrates slept in a bed.

It’s said that Plato held a banquet for some visiting friends, and somehow Diogenes crashed the party, stomping around and ruining Plato’s fine carpets. “Thus I trample on the empty pride of Plato”, was his way of pointing out that happiness cannot lie in inflating one’s standing with finery. Diogenes allegedly threw away one of his few possessions, a cup, after seeing a boy drink from his cupped hands. “That child has beaten me in simplicity”, he said. He jettisoned his spoon too, after noticing another boy scooping up lentils with a crust of bread.

The carpet incident might have been on Plato’s mind in another story that’s come down to us, an episode in which Diogenes appears to gate-crash one of Plato’s lectures.

When Plato was discoursing about his ‘ideas’, and using the nouns ‘tableness’ and ‘cupness’; ‘I, O Plato!’ interrupted Diogenes, ‘see a table and a cup, but I see no tableness or cupness.’ Plato made answer, ‘That is natural enough, for you have eyes, by which a cup and a table are contemplated; but you have not intellect, by which tableness and cupness are seen.’

Diogenes also took issue with Plato’s insistence on definitions, and in particular he objected to what he probably took to be Plato’s shallow definition of man as a “featherless biped”. Is there not more to a human being than this? Diogenes made the point by appearing with a plucked chicken, saying, “This is Plato’s man.” We don’t have Plato’s response, but you can easily picture him slapping himself in the forehead.

A number of notable cynics followed Diogenes, including a husband and wife team, the hunchbacked Crates of Thebes and Hipparchia of Maronea. Crates, it is said, gave away a fortune to follow Diogenes’ example, and lived on entirely equal terms with Hipparchia, who has a claim to be the first female philosopher. Crates started a tradition of cynic literature – he left behind work with inspired titles such as Knapsack and Praise of the Lentil – largely parodies which aimed at unseating received opinion. But the cynics went quiet, and seem to have all but vanished in the shadow of the stoics and epicureans, until the first century, when they reappear, of all things, as devastating political critics. They and other philosophical schools were deemed so threatening, apparently, that philosophers were banished from the city of Rome more than once. Though many cynics gave sermons on the simple life and handed out pamphlets decrying convention, the paradigmatic cynic had nothing to do with
politics or organized philosophical instruction. Groups of begging cynics, or lone sages haranguing a crowd with talk of virtue, were common enough in parts of Rome.

Before they went quiet, though, the cynics made one last contribution to philosophy. It’s said that Zeno of Citium travelled to Athens in 313 BCE, where, inspired by the legend of Socrates, he decided to devote his life to philosophy. He asked around, searching for the sage of the day, the person most like Socrates, and was pointed to the cynic Crates of Thebes, who happened to be passing by. Zeno became his disciple. He also studied at the Academy for a time, but it was his contact with cynicism that had the most profound effect on him.

Eventually Zeno gathered disciples of his own around him and taught at a well-known landmark along the agora, a kind of covered space, decorated with murals, half open to the air through a row of columns. It was called the Painted Porch, in Greek, the Stoa Poikile. He and his followers, the people of the porch or stoa people, turned the Socratic madness of Diogenes the Dog into a worldview synonymous with calm, imperturbability, and steadfast indifference. It was the start of stoicism, one of the most dominant and powerful schools of philosophy for perhaps the next five hundred years.

The stoics

None of the work of the early stoics survives, but three names are attached to the very beginning of stoicism. Zeno, its founder, divided the stoic curriculum into the study of logic, physics and ethics. His successor Cleanthes was an impoverished ex-boxer who couldn’t afford paper and scribbled the sayings of Zeno on what he took to be the next best thing: oyster shells and ox bones. It’s said by some that he was a bit dim.

But his successor, Chrysippus, clearly had the philosophical goods and, along with Zeno, seems to have been the brains behind the rise of stoicism. He was a master of argumentation and wrote several hundred books, including some highly technical analyses of logical inference. He also had an irritatingly high opinion of himself, as well as a flair for vulgarity – Diogenes Laertius tells us that one of his histories devotes “six hundred lines to what no one could repeat without polluting his mouth”. But by most accounts he was a philosophical genius. As an ancient line has it

For if Chrysippus had not lived and taught,
The stoic school would surely have been nought.

He was remarkably unkind to his master Cleanthes, saying, at one point, that he just wanted to learn the school’s dogma from him – he’d work out the proofs for himself. It’s likely that Chrysippus refined Zeno’s setup into what is almost certainly the first genuinely systematic school of philosophy. The stoics said that their philosophical system was like an orchard – logic was the protective wall around it, physics was the soil and the trees, and ethics was the fruit.

Logic, for the stoics, encompassed not just the rules governing right inferences but also what we would now call epistemology or theory of knowledge, as well as the philosophy of language. The stoics founded their views on what they took to be unassailable impressions of the mind, a move which invited the attack of the sceptics. Stoic logic was viewed as a competitor to Aristotle’s work by later thinkers, and certainly their account of the nature of propositions and inference was as complex and intricate as anything Aristotle produced.
Much of it was stimulated by sceptical critiques – hence the thought that logic is like a protective wall.

Stoic physics has it that the world is in some sense a living, rational, divine creature. In a nod to Heraclitus, they held that the world began in a great, cosmic conflagration, and so it shall return in an endless, repeating cycle of fiery beginnings and endings. Throughout each identical phase, every event is predetermined, governed by fate, and entirely for the good. The world itself is made up of material bodies, permeated by a divine rationality that underlies and directs all change according to a benevolent plan.

It was the stoic’s conception of ethical conduct, however, that is most responsible for its spread and influence. If stoic logic was beyond you, you could still manage a grip on its ethical outlook, and many did. Stoic ethics was a departure from the dark musings of the presocratics and the complexity of the Academy and the Lyceum. For the first time, philosophers produced a philosophical framework that spoke directly to everyday people. Following in the footsteps of Diogenes and Socrates, the stoics argue that what matters most is virtue, and virtue consists entirely in living in accord with the whole of the divinely ordered universe. But how could anyone do otherwise, how could anyone fail to live in accord with nature, if everything is predestined and governed by fate?

The divine plan will work itself out no matter what, and there’s nothing anyone can do about that, but what one can do is react to events in the right way, which is to say harmoniously, virtuously, in tune with the flow of things. A stoic image that makes the point is of a dog tied to a wagon. When the wagon moves, the dog can tranquilly walk along beside it or be dragged, yelping and choking. Either way, the dog is going to follow the wagon. So too with a human life. We can be dragged kicking and screaming and protesting or – and you can spot Diogenes’ DNA in this – we can recognize what really matters, and live according to nature.

But thanks to the stoic conception of “preferred indifferents”, we don’t have to seek virtue with Diogenes in the bottom of a barrel. Writing in the fifth century, the chronicler Joannes Stobaeus tells us that:

Zeno says that ... of those things which exist some are good, some bad, some indifferent. Good are ... wisdom, moderation, justice, courage, and all that is virtue ... Bad are ... folly, intemperance, injustice, cowardice, and all that is vice ... Indifferent are ... life and death, reputation and ill-repute, pleasure and exertion, wealth and poverty, health and sickness, and things like these.

There are two notions at work in this sort of stoic claim. First, the thought is that conventional goods – health, wealth, social standing, fame, and the other large things most people pursue – could, depending on the circumstances, be to one’s detriment or benefit. If you inherit a lot of money and then squander it in a brief blast of debauched decadence, the money didn’t really do you any good. It might have made things. Strictly speaking, money and the rest aren’t actually good in themselves. Only virtue is good no matter what.

Second, the acquisition of conventional goods is “not up to us”. As the stoic Epictetus puts it, “Up to us are opinion, impulse, desire, aversion ... Not up to us are body, property, reputation, office.” Whether or not you end up healthy, wealthy and famous depends on the luck of the draw. You can’t do anything about it, and anyway, given the goodness of the divine plan, it’s all for the best. So such things are classed as merely “indifferent” by the
stoics. There is nothing gained in worrying about them, therefore it is irrational to do so. A stoic might, however, regard the conventional goods as preferable – they are, in stoic terminology, “preferred indifferents” – but whether and when we acquire them is “not up to us”. Health, reputation, even living and dying are therefore matters of indifference. Maybe ending up in a fine house is preferable to sleeping in a barrel, but the stoic is indifferent either way. It’s this indifference to one’s fortunes that’s still reflected in English when we say, if someone meets disaster with equanimity, that he or she is “being philosophical about it”.

What matters, however, is virtue, and that is entirely up to us, because it’s in us – it’s our attitude to the world around us. There’s a straight line from this thought, through the cynics and back to the Socratic idea that virtue is knowledge, and what matters most is the inner you, your soul. In the hands of the stoics, these views became something more than philosophical doctrine: stoicism was a way to find peace in a difficult world, largely by controlling one’s impulses. As the stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius puts it in his Meditations, “A cucumber is bitter. Throw it away. There are briars in the road. Turn aside from them. This is enough. Do not add, ‘And why were such things made in the world?’”

But all of this should not suggest that the philosophy of this age is characterised entirely by the stilted reflection of imperturbable stoics, with the occasional howl of a cynical momentarily fracturing their composure. Other schools of thought jostled alongside them. A large part of Hellenistic philosophy can be understood as a protracted disagreement between the stoics and epicureans on the one hand, and sceptics on the other. At issue was the very possibility of securing knowledge.

The sceptics

Depending on how you count them, two or three schools of scepticism emerged in Greece and Rome. The oldest begins with Pyrrho, who was active around 300 BCE, the second with Arcesilaus and the sceptics of Plato’s Academy, and finally a scepticism motivated by Pyrrho, owed to Aenesidemus in the first century BCE and carried on by Sextus Empiricus into the second century.

It’s said that Pyrrho travelled to India with Alexander’s army, where he found inspiration among “naked wise men”. Whatever he discovered in his travels, he then suspended judgement in all matters – neither affirming nor denying any proposition, holding on to no opinion – and so found a kind of peace. His friends, it’s said, were constantly yanking him out of the way of traffic, steering him away from cliffs and other hazards, and generally stewarding him out of danger as he wandered around, unmoved and unconcerned by anything at all. According to Diogenes, “He used to clean all the furniture of the house without expressing any annoyance. And it is said that he carried his indifference so far that he even washed a pig.”

Pyrrho wrote no books of philosophy, and reports of what he actually believed, coming to us second and third hand, are difficult to decipher. His student Timon says Pyrrho considered three questions. First, what are things like by nature? His three-part answer admits of various translations, but some take it that he said things are indifferent, unstable, and indeterminate. How should we be disposed towards things? We should have no opinions about them. What is the result of this attitude? Pyrrho tells us that our reward is freedom from anxiety.
The Academic sceptics didn’t write much either, preferring instead the flow of verbal argumentation. Inspired by Socrates’ endless scrutinizing and questioning, as well as Plato’s use of the dialogue, the academic sceptics cranked out arguments for and against any proposition. Reason, it was thought, leaves us with equally compelling arguments all around, so we can’t profess to know anything.

The academic sceptic’s skill was satisfyingly in evidence in 155 CE, when philosophical emissaries from the Academy, the Lyceum and the Stoic school were dispatched to Rome. The Academy’s representative, Carneades, lectured breathtakingly and entirely convincingly in favour of justice, to the edification of the young men in attendance. The next day he delivered an equally persuasive lecture against justice, comprehensively overturning everything he said before. His Roman hosts, fearing for the virtue of his audience, threw him out of the city.

The academic sceptics were most exercised by the positive assertions of their adversaries, the stoics and the epicureans. Those two schools argued for their conclusions based on foundations rooted in sense perception or truths taken to be self-evident. The sceptics arrayed what they took to be equally compelling arguments against the possibility of any such foundation. The school descended, for a time, to concerning itself with little more than formulating counterarguments.

It was too much for Aenesidemus, who departed the Academy to return to what he took to be the more profound teachings of Pyrrho, and so began a third wave of scepticism. Aenesidemus formulated the Ten Modes, forms of argument which put reason and sensory reports into different sorts of conflict. The hope was that the modes might be leveled against any dogmatic assertion. Considering one will give you a feel for the rest:

The third mode is that which has for its object the difference of the organs of sense. Accordingly, an apple presents itself to the sight as yellow, to the taste as sweet, to the smell as fragrant; and the same form is seen, in very different lights, according to the differences of mirrors. It follows, therefore, that what is seen is just as likely to be something else as the reality.

The argument aims to undercut any claim to know about the properties of an object based on sensory information. How can we know what an apple really is, when our senses report such different things compared to one another? Whatever the reality is, it’s as likely to be something else as what our senses tell us.

Aenesidemus returned scepticism its roots. Pyrrho’s escape from anxiety in the suspension of judgement was now the ultimate point of philosophical argumentation. In this way, Pyrrhonian scepticism is much more in keeping with the spirit of the Hellenistic age than the scepticism of the Academics, much more in tune with the aims of the cynics and the stoics. On that harmonious note, we turn to the Epicureans, the other large school of this time, who thought their way through to tranquility in an entirely different way. Philosophy, for Epicurus and his followers, takes the sting out of death. It even enables you to duck the wrath of the gods.
The impossibility of justification

A sceptical argument, attributed to Agrippa, a philosopher active near the end of the first century, aims to show that knowledge is impossible, because no knowledge claim can ever be justified. There is, in other words, no such thing as a real justification. The argument, sometimes called Agrippa’s trilemma, goes like this.

Suppose you claim to know some proposition (p). One might ask if you know p or are just assuming p. If you claim to know p, it’s fair to ask how you know it, to insist on your reasons for thinking p is true, your evidence for p, in other words. Suppose you then give reasons (r). Whatever your reasons, one can ask once again if you know r or are just making assumptions. You’ve got to claim to know r if r counts a justification for p. According to Agrippa, you now have just three choices, and none of them are justifications. You might continue to give reasons indefinitely (r1, r2, r3, …) and never reach a justification. You might make a dogmatic assumption (r, damn it!), and just assert what you believe without justification. Or you might repeat something you already said (p, r1, r2, r3, r1 whoops), and reason in a circle, but circular reasoning is not justification.

Agrippa argues that none of these moves delivers a justification for p and, therefore, all belief is assumption, not knowledge.

Some philosophers quibble with the set up and claim that the burden of proof isn’t always on the person who claims to know. Others maintain that there are more kinds of justification not mentioned by Agrippa. Some attempt to wriggle free while playing by Agrippa’s rules, by trying to find a way to say that one of his choices really does count as giving a justification. What’s wrong with giving an indefinite supply of reasons? What’s wrong with a foundational assumption? What’s wrong with circularity if it’s not vicious? It’s not hard to think of Agrippa’s replies. What is hard to think about, though, is the possibility that we don’t exactly know what we’re talking about, when we talk about knowledge. Agrippa, almost by accident, seems to point to that possibility.

Text box: Jesus the Cynic

Some have argued that there are just too many similarities between the teachings of Jesus and cynic philosophy for it to be merely a coincidence. Was he influenced by a cynic? The cynics were certainly operating at the right time and possibly the right place. Was he, as at least one historian argues, actually a typical cynic figure of the age?

Jesus certainly could have come into contact with cynics. Gadara was home to a number of famous cynics, including the satirical author Menippus, and it was just 30 kilometers from Nazareth, a day’s walk from the Sea of Galilee. There is even some tantalizing biblical evidence for the possibility that Jesus encountered a cynic. It was in “the country of the Gadarenes” that Jesus encountered a lunatic, living in rags among the tombs, possessed by the demon Legion. Diogenes the Dog, of course, was called a madman too. Could this episode point to an encounter between Jesus and a cynic?

Certain expressions and teachings of Jesus are even more suggestive. “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God” and similar exhortations praising poverty and simplicity certainly are in line with cynic teaching. Consider this famous passage from the Gospel of Matthew:
And behold, one came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” He said to him, “Which?” And Jesus said, “You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to him, “All these I have observed; what do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

When you read those lines, it is extremely hard not to think of Crates of Thebes selling his fortune so he could follow Diogenes.