Anarchism in Greek philosophy

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AT FIRST SIGHT THE TITLE "Anarchism in Greek Philosophy" may seem somewhat of a contradiction. Our attitudes towards Hellenism, conditioned as they are by nineteenth century romanticism, have accustomed us to regard Greek thought as the complete antithesis of anarchism. This is the result of close study of Plato and Aristotle at the expense of other philosophers; such study leads to the impression that the beliefs of either of these two thinkers were typical of Greek speculation. If we remember that over one thousand years separates the Ionian physicists from the closing of the schools by Justinian and if we do not lose sight of the fact that during that period philosophy ran the gamut from scientific or quasi-scientific speculation to the esoteric ritualism of the Hermetic Brotherhood, then we shall not find it so surprising that some Greek thinkers evolved theories which led them to adopt an anarchistic position.

Before proceeding to an account of these thinkers I should like to make some preliminary points. Firstly, the purpose of this article is historical, not critical. It is not my aim to give

an analytical discussion of anarchistic theories in Greek philosophy but rather to give an account of one of the doctrines, chiefly that held by the Cynics, which might be termed anarchistic. Secondly I am not in any way concerned to give a comprehensive view of the growth of Greek philosophy during the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C. Those who wish to pursue this field of study may refer to the standard works of reference. My intention is solely to bring to notice some aspects of this branch of Greek philosophy which seems to have been overlooked by most modern writers.

In order to gain an overall perspective of the period it will be necessary to give a brief sketch of the course of Greek history up to the 3rd century B.C. Prior to the conquests of Phillip of Macedon, the Greeks were city-state dwellers, owing allegiance to one or other of the polis each of which was a political and social entity, autonomous and economically self-sufficient. No matter how complex the superstructure of government became, the basic nature of the polis remained and when Athens, by her imperial ambitions, trespassed upon the privileges of the *polis*, Greek sentiment was outraged to the extent of declaring war. This is not, of course, the only reason for the Peloponnesian War. It would be foolish to put forward such a simplification. Nevertheless Athens, by annexing the members of the Delian League, placed upon them a restraint which the military power of Sparta hesitated to place on the members of her own federation: it was this restraint and its implications for the autonomy of the polis which may be said to be at the root of the ill-feeling among the non-Athenian states. Ironically the subsequent conflict and the rise of Macedon led to the destruction of the city-state as a political reality to a philosophical ideal. The trend was to a world-state and Greek philosophy, which had previously been conditioned to situations which might arise in a city-state, was forced to adjust to meet the new demands. As a result, world-systems such as Stoicism and Epicureanism were evolved, systems which attempted to discover philosoph-

ical positions which might explain or rationalise the new political and social situations which the Alexandrian empire had created. The chief characteristic of these two world systems was in their recognition of one universal end for all men and in their acceptance of all men as brothers within the bonds of the system. Unlike the theories of Plato and Aristotle which were designed for the improvement of the few, Stoic and Epicurean beliefs made no barrier to any man's acceptance provided that he followed the tenets of the faith.

A third system, Cynicism, suggested a position very similar to that which we regard as classical anarchism in the form enunciated by Bakunin and Kropotkin. It is, however, not possible to speak of a Cynic school as we can speak of Stoics or Epicureans. There was never a connected corpus of theoretical writings which might be described as Cynic nor was there ever agreement among the Cynics themselves as to the correct methods of interpreting their founders' doctrines in practice. In this refusal to elevate one particular formulation of belief into a Cynic canon, the Cynics were quite atypical of 3rd century philosophical systems.

In order to understand the Cynic position it is essential to understand the connotations of two Greek words *Physis* and *Nomos*. These may best be translated as Nature and Custom, but their semantic developments are most involved. Physis can means the natural form an object takes as a result of normal growth, it can refer to a person's nature or character, it can be used of animals' instinct and it can mean the natural order of things, the regular order of nature. Nomos on the other hand means usage, or law, or the established authority or body of ordinances which govern a set of circumstances. It can be seen that some of the meanings of these two words are widely contradictory while others reconcile these two concepts. Ionian physics was concerned to perceive the order in nature, the Sophists were concerned to unite Nature and Law in the ideal man. Plato preached a life "according to Nature" a cry which

was adopted by the Cynics themselves, and Aristotle devoted a lifetime to the imposing of order upon the natural occurrence of things. The important thing for us to realise is that Greek philosophical systems except that of the Cynics, attempted to reconcile the two concepts. The Cynics alone rejected Nomos and sought a life which might be lived purely by the dictates of Nature. It is illuminating to read such a work as Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* in the light of Cynic doctrine. It is even more instructive for our immediate purpose to examine the implications for the Greeks of a rejection of Nomos.

One of the results of a political system which is based on a small unit such as the city-state, is that appeals to a common interest are less likely to deceive the people than they would in a large system such as our own. In the polis the citizens would be acquainted with each other's prejudices and aspirations, and opportunities for the destruction of one's enemies or the elevation of one's friends would be more readily available. One result of this was that the Greeks never sought to bolster their legal penalties by appeals to divine inspiration or motivation; the notion of custom or usage was never quite submerged in the notion of law. By rejecting the validity of Nomos, the Cynics were not rejecting any theological system, but rather the rule of custom or convention. However, because the Greeks saw through appeals to common interest, once a particular nomos had become accepted as forming part of the general body of Nomos, it was almost impossible to reject this without undermining the whole basis of organised society. The strongest appeal a Greek lawyer can make is to what is customary. Therefore in rejecting Nomos the Cynics were rejecting organised society and denying the right of established authority to prescribe the limits of their actions. When Diogenes slept with prostitutes in the street he was offending far more than the sensibilities of squeamish bystanders. His action struck at the foundations of ordered social existence as Greeks knew it.

of society." It is clear that much of the Cynics' purpose finds its counterpart in anarchist theory.

In the course of what has been a most sketchy account of some aspects of the subject, I have been concerned merely to show some similarities between Cynic thought and anarchist theory. I have not assayed completeness nor have I attempted criticism. Those who are interested to pursue Cynicism further may find D. R. Dudley's book *A History of Cynicism* of value.

This is not easy for twentieth-century man to understand. We are used to the idea that laws are formulated in order to preserve a *status quo* which is divinely commanded. The Greek might have said that the order of the world pleased the Gods, but he would not have been likely to claim that the order of the world was established and maintained by the Gods. Disorder, chaos or anarchy was an offence against man's reason and this was a much more serious affair than irreligion. Of course religion was supported by the state, but it is significant that while Socrates is charged with atheism and impiety, the real sting of the accusation is that he teaches the worse to appear the better case, that is, he perverts what is the "natural order of things".

We have seen therefore, that Greek philosophy as a whole was concerned with uniting the forces of Nature and Custom, while Cynicism rejected the latter out of hand and preached the life according to Nature. It is now time to examine some of the individual doctrines which the Cynics professed, and to discover what qualities in them may be termed anarchistic.

D. R. Dudley points out that, despite the claims of antiquity that Antithesis was the founder of Cynicism, Diogenes of Sinope must be regarded as the true formulator of the Cynic way of life. I have no time to discuss the numerous stories which connected themselves with Diogenes' eccentric way of practicing his doctrines. These stories come mostly from later writers whose main aim is to denigrate Cynicism, and may thus be discounted. Perhaps the most important gift which Diogenes bequeathed to the Cynic brotherhood was his insistence on the practical application of his beliefs. He was no armchair philosopher, no academic theorist divorced from the exigencies of real life situations. The very fact that so many stories grew up around his personality indicates the degree to which he carried his preaching into practice. For the later Cynics, Diogenes became a heroic figure only second in importance to Hercules, their divine patron. In view of his importance it will be of value

to examine those opinions which can reasonably be assigned to him from the mass of conflicting evidence.

One of the most famous paradoxes of Diogenes is his command "Deface the Currency". In order to understand fully the implications of this phrase it is necessary to realise that the word for "currency" is nomisma, a word derived from Nomos. The Greek system of currency was not standardised and coins minted according to various standards were in general circulation: Attic, Aeginitian and Euboic coin-standards were all accepted as valid currency. However, this flux of currency standard meant that counterfeitery or defacing the coinage was a much more serious offence than it is today since its consequences were more far-reaching. Therefore in commanding his followers to deface the coinage, Diogenes was enjoining a wholesale attack on prevailing conventions in all spheres of human activity. "The standard of value of society is wrong", proclaims Diogenes, and his solution is the complete rejection of such a standard. Such a policy demands complete freedom of speech and action, and these became the two qualities most associated with the Cynics. Stories illustrating Diogenes' possession of both these qualities abound in the literature of antiquity, but the burden of all of them is the same; without fear of any consequence Diogenes pursued his policy of attacking conventional mores, no matter into what apparently gross position this might lead him.

Moreover this freedom was didactic in purpose. The aim of Diogenes and his fellow Cynic was to change the situation which seemed to them so full of evil. They were, in other words, moralistic in their intent, and they preached that if their precepts were to be followed, social happiness would result.

This seems very close to the ideas of nineteenth-century anarchism as practised by Kropotkin and is in sharp contrast to professed Libertarian[1] principles, although Libertarian practice often comes very close to proselytising and evangelising. The Cynics, in setting out a programme for happy existence were following the tendency of the other world systems. Greek philosophy was always concerned to find for mankind a way in which the demands of society could be satisfactorily met. The Cynics rejected these demands out of hand; they denied the competence of courts to judge their actions and they propagated the doctrine that all social laws, hierarchies and standards were invalid. If we read the works of Malatesta or Bakunin, or examine the motives of the Anarcho-syndicalist movements in the Spanish anti-fascist conflict, a great many parallels will become apparent.

We have seen that in their insistence on absolute freedom of speech and action, the Cynics formulated an idea which is characteristic of anarchist thought. Another parallel idea was the relative concept of law. As Sayne says, "Since laws were made by men and might have been other than what they were, and since customs varied in different countries, the Cynics held that laws and customs had no validity. They did not consider that the mere fact that observances were required by law and custom gave them a moral validity."

Sayne's book on Diogenes, written as it is from a condemnatory point or view, is most instructive, for it shows up the parallels between Cynicism and anarchism. Julian says in one place, speaking of the Cynic Oenomaus, "This then is his aim, to do away with all reverence to the gods, to bring dishonour on all human wisdom, to trample on all law that can be identified with honour and justice, and more than this, to trample on those laws which have been, as it were, engraved on our souls by the gods … Robbers take cover in desert places, whereas the Cynics go up and down in our midst subverting the institutions