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DOROTA TYMURA

THE CYNICS' *PARRHESIA*: THE EXAMPLE OF ANTISTHENES OF ATHENS

Abstract. This article re-examines the Cynic concept of *parrhesia* – fearless and truth-telling speech – through the largely overlooked figure of Antisthenes of Athens. In contrast to the prevailing scholarly view, which identifies Diogenes of Sinope as the central exemplar of Cynic candor, this study argues that Antisthenes established both the theoretical and practical foundations of this tradition by integrating Socratic *elenchos* with a new, publicly oriented rhetoric. After outlining the semantic evolution of *parrhesia* – from Homeric custom to the democratic ideology of the fifth century BCE – the article offers a close analysis of the extant fragments by Antisthenes, as well as relevant testimonies from Diogenes Laertius, Xenophon, and later doxographers. It advances three central claims: (1) Antisthenes reconceived philosophy as a lived mission of moral provocation aimed at exposing conventional values; (2) his *bios kynikos*—marked by voluntary poverty, a life "according to nature", and the unity of word and deed – functioned as a performative vehicle for *parrhesia*; and (3) his model significantly shaped subsequent Cynic and Stoic takes on candid speech as an ethical and political practice. By analyzing Antisthenes' aphorisms, his criticism of power and his self-creation as a public person, the article fills a significant historiographical gap and demonstrates how Cynic *parrhesia* evolved from Socratic dialectic into an embodied rhetoric of ethical confrontation.

Keywords: parrhesia; Cynicism; Antisthenes; Greek ethics; *bios kynikos*

CYNICKA PAREZJA – PRZYKŁAD ANTYSTENESA Z ATEN

Abstrakt. Artykuł podejmuje ponowną analizę cynickiej koncepcji parezji – otwartej i niczym nieskrępowanej szczerości w mówieniu – poprzez postać Antystenesa z Aten, dotąd w dużej mierze pomijaną w badaniach. W przeciwieństwie do dominującego stanowiska naukowego, które za głównego reprezentanta cynickiej szczerości uznaje Diogenesa z Synopy, autorka argumentuje, że to Antystenes stworzył zarówno teoretyczne, jak i praktyczne fundamenty tej tradycji, łącząc sokratejski *elenchos* z nową, publicznie realizowaną formą retoryki. Po zarysowaniu semantycznej

Dr DOROTA TYMURA, Assistant Professor at the Institute of Philosophy, Maria-Curie Sklodowska University; correspondence address: Instytut Filozofii UMCS, pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4, 20-031 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: dorota.tymura@mail.umcs.pl; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7836-9591.

ewolucji pojęcia parezji przedstawia szczegółową analizę zachowanych fragmentów Antystenesa oraz relewantnych świadectw u Diogenesa Laertiosa, Ksenofonta i późniejszych doksografów. Autor formułuje trzy zasadnicze tezy: (1) Antystenes przekształcił filozofię w egzystencjalną misję moralnej prowokacji, mającą na celu demaskowanie konwencjonalnych wartości; (2) jego *bios kynikos* – charakteryzujący się dobrowolnym ubóstwem, życiem „zgodnym z naturą" oraz jednością słowa i czynu – stanowił performatywne narzędzie parezji; oraz (3) jego model istotnie wpłynął na późniejsze cynickie i stoickie ujęcia szczerości jako praktyki etycznej i politycznej. Analiza aforyzmów Antystenesa, jego krytyki władzy oraz sposobu konstruowania własnej postaci publicznej pozwala wypełnić istotną lukę historiograficzną i ukazuje, w jaki sposób cynicka parezja przekształciła się z sokratejskiej dialektyki w ucieleśnioną retorykę etycznej konfrontacji.

Słowa kluczowe: parezja, cynizm, Antystenes, etyka grecka, *bios kynikos*

The development of Greek culture is characterized by the spoken word's potency and the distinct *dynamis* of its impact. This was likely the outcome of a longstanding oral tradition.[1] In this tradition, the word itself – along with its sound and semantic and emotional content – played a significant role in both interpersonal communication and, importantly, the preservation and transmission of tradition.

In addition to its evident and fundamental communicative function, the word also serves an important persuasive role. It becomes a tool for directly influencing mental states, particularly their emotional aspects. The word's persuasive power is evidenced, above all, by its kindness, gentleness, charm, and beauty – qualities that few can resist.[2] The impact of the spoken word is best exemplified by a quote from the *Encomium of Helen* by Gorgias:

> Speech is a great potentate, who by means of the tiniest and most invisible body achieves the most godlike results. For it is able to dispel fear, to assuage grief, to inculcate joy, and to evoke pity. (8)[3]

[1] See, e.g., Eric A. Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), or *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, CI: Yale University Press, 1986); Walter J. Ong's *Interfaces of the Word* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977) or *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[2] Pedro L. Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity*, trans. L. J. Rather and John M. Sharp (New Haven, CI: Yale University Press, 1970), 67.

[3] Gorgias of Leontini, *Encomium of Helen*, in *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, Part 2, trans. Daniel W. Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 759.

> Λόγος δυνάστης μέγας ἐστίν, ὃς σμικροτάτῳ σώματι καὶ ἀφανεστάτῳ θειότατα ἔργα ἀποτελεῖ· δύναται γὰρ καὶ φόβον παῦσαι καὶ λύπην ἀφελεῖν καὶ χαρὰν ἐνεργάσασθαι καὶ ἔλεον ἐπαυξῆσαι.

This quote underscores the strong emotive function of language – its capacity to evoke salient emotional states, feelings, and sensations. Philosophers like Socrates, Antisthenes, and Diogenes of Sinope notably utilized this capacity. Sometimes accompanied by street performances (in the case of the Cynics), these philosophers sought to evoke powerful emotions in their audiences through the spoken word. The goal was to instill specific ethical messages. Their philosophical activities were aimed at persuading Athenian society to reassess the prevailing system of values, which prioritized material over spiritual goods. The primary instrument of this moral revolution was *parrhesia*, which blends emotiveness with the potency of a dynamic and expressive verbal message.[4]

Parrhesia, understood as speaking the truth without any concern for the consequences or the opinions of others, is one of the key concepts in the philosophical activity of Antisthenes of Athens, one of the main representatives of ancient Cynicism. This philosopher, living in the fourth century BCE, rejected traditional social norms and conventions, seeing them as obstacles to the pursuit of true virtue and freedom. His approach to *parrhesia* was not merely a philosophical doctrine but a practice aimed at liberating the individual from dependence on the opinions and judgments of others or material goods. In this context, *parrhesia* in Antisthenes' philosophy becomes a tool for authentic self-expression, in line with one's own reason and virtue, even at the cost of social rejection or criticism.

The aim of this article is to examine the significance of the concept of *parrhesia* in Antisthenes' philosophical activity, analyzing its role in his understanding of moral life, his attitude toward social norms, and its relevance to his teachings on the autonomy and independence of the individual. The concept of *parrhesia* is one of the fundamental tenets of Cynic philosophy. However, most scholarly works dedicated to this term or the Cynics primarily focus on the activities of Diogenes of Sinope, who famously cultivated *parrhesia* as

[4] Regarding the term "parrhesia" itself and its evolution, see Ineke Sluiter and Ralph M. Rosen, eds., *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Peter-Ben Smit and Eva van Urk, eds., *Parrhesia. Ancient and Modern Perspectives on Freedom of Speech* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

both frankness in speech and boldness in action.[5] There are several reasons for this thematic narrowing, including the limited availability of source material, its content and nature, and the fact that existing works on Cynics' philosophy emphasize the *parrhesiastic* activity of Diogenes the Dog, for which he remains famous to this day. This article, therefore, seeks to address this research gap by exploring how the concept of *parrhesia*, rooted in the philosophy of Socrates, evolved alongside the emergence of Cynic philosophy and transformed during the transition from Socratic dialectics to a distinct Cynic rhetoric as a method of philosophical inquiry.

1. THE TERM "PARRHESIA"

The concept of *parrhesia* originated in the social realm and can already be observed in Homeric society, although the term itself does not appear in Greek literature until the fifth century BCE. During this period, it was adopted by Athenian democratic ideology and became politicized. As a result, it was widely discussed, analyzed, and practiced in political contexts and processes. But, as Raaflaub observes, "a less specific understanding of freedom of speech continued to be valued on a more basic social level, indicating that at least the free members of a community should be able to speak their minds in daily life without being intimidated or silenced by those more powerful socially and politically."[6]

Etymologically, the term "parrhesia" is a combination of two words, πᾶν (everything) and ῥῆσις or ῥῆμα (speech/speaking). It therefore literally means "saying everything", which might mean everything, good and bad. In its original meaning, *parrhesia* encompasses both positive and negative aspects. The concept functioned as a positive value in the ideology of democratic Athens, and this positive evaluation is mostly emphatically reinforced by the context: people "flourish" in their *parrhesia*, it is associated with the courageous expression of one's beliefs, however unpopular they may be. It always involves candor and the complete disclosure of one's thoughts – in that sense it is opposed to dissimulation, hiding one's real thoughts or the unpleasant truth, or

[5] See Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001); Leif F. Vaage, "Like Dogs Barking: Cynic Parresia and Shameless Ascetism," *Semeia* 57 (1992): 25–39; Kristen Kennedy, "Cynic Rhetoric: The Ethics and Tactics of Resistance," *Rhetoric Review* 18 (1999): 26–45.

[6] Kurt A. Raaflaub, "Aristocracy and Freedom of Speech," in Rosen and Sluiter, *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, 43.

to silence applied as a discourse strategy to get one's way as the strategy of a "moderate politician", or as the despicable attitude of someone "lacking in political commitment".[7] In short, such *parrhesia* denotes the ability to speak honestly and openly, conveying the whole truth without embellishments. These positive connotations are reflected in some of the term's sundry meanings: "frankness", "openness", "free speaking", and "freedom of speech".

Yet, when someone speaks without restraint, they might say anything that comes to their mind, whatever the substance or validity of their statements. An unrestrained flow of words (or *parrhesia*) is then interpreted as "looseness of tongue" or, literally, "lack of control in speech". This negative aspect mostly emerged in the political sphere as an abuse of the right to freedom of speech – one of Athenian democracy's fundamental ideological values. In this context, *parrhesia* typically refers to freedom in critical public discourse. This freedom enabled every citizen to freely express themselves in public forums, council meetings, and assembly or court proceedings. However, numerous abuses arose in this realm because of the continuous evolution of Athenian democratic systems, which increasingly granted poor and uneducated people access to power.[8] By the fourth century, *parrhesia* ceased to be a privilege of the Athenian elite. It became a right of the masses, "who judged in view of the desires of the crowd, not in terms of what was best for *polis*".[9]

There is exceptional unity of thought and word when it comes to *parrhesia*'s ethical dimension. A person who practices *parrhesia* – a parrhesiast – speaks the unvarnished truth, he expresses everything he recognizes in his deepest soul as the truth. He articulates his statements as they align with his personal knowledge and beliefs. Such *parrhesia* entails frankness and a complete disclosure of one's thoughts. However, this approach poses a significant risk: the parrhesiast's candid words can provoke an unfavorable or even hostile reaction in an audience. Nevertheless, he consciously accepts this risk because truth and its proclamation outweigh the fear of others' hostility. To the parrhesiast, truth and its pursuit represent an indisputably superior value. In

[7] Ineke Sluiter and Ralph M. Rosen, "General Introduction," in Rosen and Sluiter, *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, 6–7.

[8] Such negative evaluations of *parrhesia* are mainly found in texts of Euripides (e.g., *Orestes* 902–6), Plato (e.g., *Phaidros* 240e) and Isocrates (e.g., *Areopagiticus* 7.20).

[9] Thomas Flynn, "Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Course at the College de France (1984)," in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James W. Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 105.

this context, *parrhesia* entails extraordinary courage.[10] It involves the unabashedly honest communication of what one believes is true on all matters related to one's knowledge and experience.[11] As Demosthenes underlines,

> it is impossible to deter *parrhesia*, which depends upon speaking the truth, from exposing the truth.[12]
>
> τὴν παρρησίαν ἐκ τῆς ἀληθείας ἠρτημένην οὐκ ἔστι τἀληθὲς δηλοῦν ἀποτρέψαι.

Importantly, the parrhesiast also utilizes language that is comprehensible to his audience. His words necessitate no interpretation because they, in principle, reveal everything transparently and clearly. The parrhesiast also speaks truthfully regarding facts, circumstances or situations that comprise his wealth of experience and to the individuals with whom he directly interacts. He is not a sage who imparts truth through enigmatic aphorisms or lengthy monologues. Instead, he engages in lively dialogue with his audience, attentively observing their reactions and adjusting both substantive and linguistic aspects of his speech to suit their understanding. His ultimate objective is to persuade listeners that they must enact significant changes in their lifestyles, thereby rendering life itself more meaningful.

In ethical discourse, the parrhesiast should embody the ethos of a morally cultivated individual. He aims to positively influence his interlocutors' souls and shape their personalities accordingly. Through dialogue, he might expose their ignorance and the illusory nature of their beliefs. He critiques faulty moral stances and rebuts all arguments in their favor. Naturally, such actions are only justifiable when the parrhesiast holds some moral authority.

The best compilation of the semantic richness contained in the term *parrhesia*, as used in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, is found in the final passage of Demosthenes' fourth *Philipic oration*:

> There you have the truth spoken with all freedom (*parrhesia*), simply in goodwill and for the best—no speech packed by flattery with mischief and deceit, and

[10] The close connection between *parrhesia* and courage is presented in Ryan K. Balot's "Free Speech, Courage, and Democratic Deliberation," in Rosen and Sluiter, *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, 233–60.

[11] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 14–18.

[12] Dem. 60.26 (trans. Norman W. DeWitt), in *Demostenes Orations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926–1984).

> intended to put money into the speaker's pocket and the control of the State into our enemies' hands.
>
> ταῦτ᾽ ἐστὶ τἀληθῆ, μετὰ πάσης παρρησίας, ἁπλῶς εὐνοίᾳ τὰ βέλτιστ᾽ εἰρημένα, οὐ κολακείᾳ βλάβης καὶ ἀπάτης λόγος μεστός, ἀργύριον τῷ λέγοντι ποιήσων, τὰ δὲ πράγματα τῆς πόλεως τοῖς ἐχθροῖς ἐγχειριῶν.[13]

What is also worth mentioning is the fact that the parrhesiast treats his endeavors as a mission of sorts. Even if support is lacking or, perhaps, others show outright hostility, he soldiers on. This is because he considers helping others to be his moral obligation. As Michel Foucault says:

> In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.[14]

As we can see, *parrhesia* in the ethical dimension delineates the act of truth-telling. This act is closely intertwined with criticism and, thus, no doubt involves certain risks and moral obligations but also a kind of dialectical freedom. Parrhesia represents a moral virtue because it calls for an acknowledgment of truth, even at the expense of one's self-image. This motif aligns with the views of the Cynics, who shared the goal of morally rejuvenating Athenian society.

2. THE CYNICS' *PARRHESIA*

Cynicism represents a distinctive philosophical trend, one characterized by the near-complete transition of theoretical considerations from the realm of normative ethics to practical life. The Cynics imbued their philosophical discourse with a pragmatic dimension, thereby embracing what is often called "the philosophy of life". They also often employed *parrhesia* when propagating and internalizing these ideas, lending it a distinctly characteristic and unique aspect.

[13] Dem. 10.76 (trans. James H. Vince), in *Demostenes Orations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926–1984).

[14] Dem. 19–20.

Antisthenes played a pivotal role in popularizing cynicism, forging a trend where lifestyle and truth-telling are directly and intimately intertwined. Among the many anecdotes about the Cynics found in Diogenes Laertius' writings, one stands out. When asked about the most beautiful aspect of humanity, Diogenes of Sinope simply replied, "parrhesia".[15] This illustrates the Cynics' belief in an intrinsic connection between the beauty of human existence and the practice of truth-telling.

In fact, *parrhesia* became the Cynics' typical mode of discourse. They used "street" language, which represented the opposite of polite, refined speech. Although it could be described as "tasteless talk", it also "came highly spiced, both with wit and with denunciatory verve".[16] This was a key feature of Cynic *parrhesia*. It was pointless to engage with such "boldness of speech" without a sense of humor.

Cynic *parrhesia* was, thus, a contextual form of speech. According to Kristen Kennedy, it signified "a kairotic tactic".[17] *Kairos* refers to the opportune moment or the right time to take action, in this case, to speak parrhesiatically. Cynic philosophy thus epitomized a situational and variable approach. It encompassed the art of adapting and reacting to whatever circumstances at hand. The Cynics created kairotic moments to prompt others to self-scrutinize and take proper action. Their interest was not mostly aroused by logical consistency or argumentative validity but rather by the relevant pragmatics and contexts. Leif Vaage has also highlighted *parrhesia*'s central kairotic element:

> Cynic parresia was distinguished less by its specific content and more by its relation to the socio-rhetorical situation in which a given statement was uttered. In the mouth of a Cynic, parresia meant whatever whenever wherever in such a way as to provoke the consistent sensation of "boldness".[18]

Such boldness of speech demanded courage and the ability to maintain an appropriate distance from both oneself and one's interlocutor. The Cynic parrhesiast often spoke at grave personal risk because his statements were honest

[15] DL II, 69. All translations of passages from Laertius' *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* [henceforth DL] are from Charles D. Yonge and Keith Seddon, *An Outline of Cynic Philosophy: Antisthenes of Athens and Diogenes of Sinope in Diogenes Laertius Book Six* (Constantia: Lulu, 2008).

[16] Leif F. Vaage, "Like Dogs Barking: Cynic Parresia and Shameless Ascetism," *Semeia* 57 (1992): 28.

[17] Kristen Kennedy, "Cynic Rhetoric: The Ethics and Tactics of Resistance," *Rhetoric Review* 18 (1999): 36.

[18] Vaage, "Like Dogs Barking," 27.

and sometimes painfully true. He would also speak out of place and out of turn in crowded public places like streets, public baths, or marketplaces. As Rebecca Higgie notes, Cynic *parrhesia* represented "a philosophy that seeks truth through subversive challenge rather than reasoned argument".[19] The Cynic parrhesiast engaged in such activities because he considered them to be his moral duty. He was responsible for urging others to reassess their values and transform their lives. The goal was to help them embody suitable ethical principles, thereby making life worth living.

The risks associated with the use of *parrhesia* were heightened by a kind of uniformity of tone in the Cynics' discourse. A commitment to freedom of expression meant that the Cynics addressed each interlocutor in a similarly direct manner, flouting social distinctions. They addressed kings, humble craftsmen, women, and paupers in the same candid style. Among the most renowned examples are statements that Diogenes and Crates directed at Alexander the Great:

> Once, while [Diogenes] was sitting in the sun in the Craneum, Alexander was standing by, and said to him, "Ask of me any favour you choose." And he replied, "Stop casting your shadow over me."[20]
>
> ἐν τῷ Κρανείῳ ἡλιουμένῳ αὐτῷ Ἀλέξανδρος ἐπιστάς φησιν, 'αἴτησόν με ὃ θέλεις', καὶ ὅς, 'ἀποσκότησόν μου', φησί.
>
> When Alexander asked [Crates] whether he wished to see his native city rebuilt, he said, "What would be the use of it? For perhaps some other Alexander would come at some future time and destroy it again."[21]
>
> Πρὸς Ἀλέξανδρον πυθόμενον εἰ βούλεται αὐτοῦ τὴν πατρίδα ἀνορθωθῆναι, ἔφη, 'καὶ τί δεῖ; πάλιν γὰρ ἴσως Ἀλέξανδρος ἄλλος αὐτὴν κατασκάψει'.

The Cynics aimed to level all principles and participants in whatever discourse, thereby disregarding accepted social hierarchies and norms. They spurned decorum and decency in favor of impoliteness, a lack of tact, and even disregard for the respect demanded by those holding honorable positions in the *polis*. Vaage aptly summarizes the Cynics' behavior as follows:

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[19] Rebecca Higgie, "Kynical Dogs and Cynical Masters: Contemporary Satire, Politics and Truth-Telling," *Humor* 27 (2014): 186.

[20] DL VI, 38.

[21] DL VI, 93.

> Cynic parresia is best displayed, however, in those instances where brazenness and belly-laugh combine to show how utterly unconstrained the Cynics were by contemporary standards of personal comportment.[22]

In addition to truthfulness, criticism was also a crucial aspect of the Cynics' style of *parrhesia*. Speaking with *parrhesia* involved confronting and opposing someone; it involved identifying discrepancies or errors in people's actions or beliefs. This mode of public speaking not only demonstrated the orator's immense courage but also reflected his profound belief in the truthfulness of the words spoken, because the Cynic parrhesiast would not utter words he did not genuinely believe. This aspect underscores the extraordinary power of his speech to influence others. Belief in one's own words coupled with an assertion aligned with that belief significantly augmented both the Cynic parrhesiast's verbal message and its emotional reception. Indeed, we can think of Cynic *parrhesia* as a spectacle used to gather and then "confront its attracted audience with their own distorted values".[23]

We have seen that Cynic philosophy was closely intertwined with a life of action. In this, the Cynics demonstrated and advocated for the practice of a virtuous (i.e., ethically grounded) life. They were advocates of freedom from materialism, social conventions, hierarchies, and etiquette, which they considered to be malevolent and destructive. They exemplified these beliefs with their own lives, embodying the truths they proclaimed. Their lifestyle could be viewed as a model to emulate or, at the very least, as inspiration for altering one's way of living. The aim of their philosophy – in keeping with their emphasis on caring for others – was to persuade members of society to improve themselves by challenging commonly accepted beliefs and norms.

The Cynics believed that their lifestyle, *bios kynikos*, served as the most effective means toward that end. It represented a form of virtuous living and, as we shall see, a philosophy that was both in harmony with nature and rooted in individualism. Yet, such a lifestyle necessitated a reassessment of prevailing philosophical values. As such, Cynicism appears to have been a somewhat reactionary philosophical movement. As Dennis Schutijser has noticed,

> [cynicism] denounces existing values, unmasks their allegedly absolute truth, and confronts them with dialectically opposed alternatives. Only by going against

[22] Vaage, "Like Dogs Barking," 30.

[23] Philip Bosman, "Selling Cynicism: The Pragmatics of Diogenes' Comic Performances," *The Classical Quarterly* 56 (2006): 97.

> existing values will it become possible to consider or even perceive any alternative and seek for change.[24]

One of the salient tenets of Cynic philosophy was the injunction to live in harmony with nature. This command is, however, quite ambiguous. It can, potentially, be interpreted in (at least) two ways.

On the first interpretation, it presupposes that individuals should adopt a lifestyle in harmony with nature, that is, with the natural world surrounding them. People, as part of nature, ought to live in accordance with its rhythms and principles. Such a life, essentially, is simple because everything necessary for survival is readily available. The Cynics viewed the artifacts people create to purportedly enhance their lives as contrary to nature and indicative of undesirable luxury. They instead insisted on "returning to nature" – shunning civilizational conveniences and accomplishments.

On the second interpretation, nature is equated with humanity's essential trait – reason. Here, the directive to live in accordance with nature would encourage a life guided by reason, transcending all passions and desires. This would resemble a kind of Socratic self-care. This interpretation implies a life marked by daily endeavors to conquer certain impulses. It encourages one to turn inward – toward one's inner nature. Alternatively, it could suggest living in harmony with one's innate inclinations and desires (encompassing basic needs related to food, excretion, and sexuality). Such impulses should then be gratified without restraint (regardless of time or place), while those deemed unnatural should be rejected.

Bios kynikos represented an exceedingly individualistic form of existence. Schutijser has the following to say in this regard:

> Against the background of the ancient Greek city-state, the Cynic's message was aimed at the dominant cultural conventions where the social and public spheres were considered primordial. Up and against this status quo, Cynicism proposed that the individual should first of all be himself, based on his own individual nature.[25]

This is why the Cynics advocated the rejection of objects or social conventions that potentially constrain or taint individuality (including money, property, family, and public roles). They even promoted a struggle against anything

[24] Dennis Schutijser, "Cynicism as a Way of Life: From the Classical Cynic to a New Cynicism," *Akropolis* 1 (2017): 43.

[25] Schutijser, 44.

rooted in *nomos*, which they contrasted with nature itself. For the Cynics, *nomos* rids us of our freedom, molding us into something we ought not to be. Embracing this lifestyle meant that the Cynics lived their lives openly and publicly; they aimed to exemplify an ethical life worthy of emulation. As Schutijser notes,

> the Cynic actually *lives out* and *enacts*, his way of life. He does this not only because he considers it the most natural way of living, but also because it is the best means to show his peers his way of living. In other words, does not only live his own way of life, he also explicitly assumes the role of educator – although an unorthodox one at that. His way of life is enacted in the sense that is *intended* to be noticed.[26]

3. ANTISTHENES' *PARRHESIA*

Antisthenes is renowned in the annals of philosophy, not only as the progenitor of the Cynic school but also as Socrates' most devoted disciple. Following his mentor's demise, Antisthenes experienced a profound transformation in his philosophical view. He believed that the role of a philosopher – as a parrhesiast – should involve a more expansive public dimension than Socrates had maintained.

He recognized that his *parrhesia* might be hindered by the dialogue format and thereby fail to yield the desired outcome (the ethical revitalization of Athenian society). Antisthenes thus pivoted toward disseminating his truths in a universally accessible manner, eschewing any restriction to individual interlocutors. He believed that his moral teachings should manifest in a public, conspicuous and provocative lifestyle. The goal was to inspire introspection in as many people as possible. Employing *parrhesia*, Antisthenes instructed others through the use of examples and concise elucidations pertinent to their circumstances. Through this modality – characterized by public engagement and demonstration – *parrhesia* became one of Cynicism's most fundamental and most recognizable tenets.

An apt illustration of the foregoing can be found in one of Antisthenes' comments directed toward Dionysius:

[26] Schutijser, 46.

> The same man [Antisthenes], when Dionysius was lamenting that he was mortal, said, "But in your case, as time goes by you will lament that you are not yet dying" (32).[27]
>
> ὁ αὐτὸς [scil. Antisthenes] Διονυσίου λυπουμένου, ὅτι θνητός ἐστιν, 'ἀλλὰ σύ γε', ἔφη, 'προελθόντος τοῦ χρόνου λυπηθήσῃ, ὅτι μηδέπω ἀποθνῃσκεις'.

The same goes for this elucidation:

> The same man [Antisthenes], when a tyrant asked him why rich men do not go in quest of wise men, but the opposite, he said, "Because wise men know what they need for life, but rich men do not know, since they have concerned themselves more for money than for wisdom." (166)
>
> ὁ αὐτὸς [scil. Antisthenes] πυνθανομένου, τί δήποτε οὐχ οἱ πλούσιοι πρὸς τοὺς σοφοὺς ἀπίασιν, ἀλλ᾽ ἀνάπαλιν, εἶπεν· 'ὅτι οἱ σοφοὶ ἴσασιν ὧν ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς χρεία πρὸς τὸν βίον, οἱ δὲ οὐκ ἴσασιν, ἐπεὶ μᾶλλον σοφίας χρημάτων ἢ σοφίας ἐπεμελοῦντο'.

Antisthenes also appreciated the value of spoken discourse as an instrument of education. This appreciation likely stemmed from his involvement in rhetorical and pedagogical activities before he became associated with the Socratic circle. Indeed, it is evident in all facets of his parrhesiastic engagements, which impressed Diogenes:

> He kept company with Antisthenes, because he praised not so much the man, but the words that he spoke, and Diogenes considered them alone to be true and most able to benefit the human being. (34a)
>
> τῶν μὲν οὖν ἄλλων ταχὺ κατεφρόνησεν, ᾽Αντισθένει δὲ ἐχρῆτο, οὐκ αὐτὸν οὕτως ἐπαινῶν ὡς τοὺς λόγους οὓς ἔλεγεν, ἡγούμενος μόνους εἶναι ἀληθεῖς καὶ μάλιστα δυναμένους ἄνθρωπον ὠφελῆσαι.

In the council, he dispensed when queried about sound education:

> Antisthenes, when asked by someone what he would teach his son, said, "If he is going to live with gods, [to be] a philosopher, but if with men, [to be] a rhetor." (173a)

[27] All translations of Antisthenes' fragments are from Susan Prince, *Antisthenes of Athens: Texts, Translations, and Commentary* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), 2015.

> Ἀντισθένης ἐρωτηθεὶς ὑπό τινος, τί διδάξει τὸν υἱόν, εἶπεν, ‘Εἰ μὲν θεοῖς μέλλει συμβιοῦν, φιλόσοφον, εἰ δὲ ἀνθρώποις, ῥήτορα’.

To gain a thorough comprehension of *parrhesia* – as a kind of public demonstration practiced by Antisthenes and other Cynics – it is important to reiterate their conviction that the philosopher's life must serve as an exemplar during such engagements. As Foucault states:

> Cynicism presents itself essentially as a certain form of parrhesia, of truth-telling, but which finds its instrument, its site, its point of emergence in the very life of the person who must thus manifest or speak the truth in the form of a manifestation of existence.[28]

Thus, the Cynic's truth-telling assumes a privileged form of life as a testimony to truth. And, the Cynic himself becomes a prophet of truth, one whose own life is an example of living with sincerity.

So, according to Antisthenes, what constitutes the Cynic life or the so-called *bios kynikos*? Part of the answer is that it entails maintaining harmony between one's words and deeds. This alignment allows one to render one's life as a model for others to emulate. As with Socrates, there is a crucial unity of thought, speech, and action. Other key tenets of the *bios kynikos* were (a) voluntary poverty as a deliberate lifestyle choice and (b) a mandate to live in accord with nature. In Xenophon's *Symposium*, Antisthenes states as follows:

> For my own part, my possessions are so great that I can hardly find them myself; yet I have enough so that I can eat until I reach a point where I no longer feel hungry and drink until I do not feel thirsty and have enough clothing so that when out of doors I do not feel the cold any more than my superlatively wealthy friend Callias here. (4. 37)[29]

> ἐγὼ δὲ οὕτω μὲν πολλὰ ἔχω ὡς μόλις αὐτὰ καὶ [ἐγὼ ἂν] αὐτὸς εὑρίσκω· ὅμως δὲ περίεστί μοι καὶ ἐσθίοντι ἄχρι τοῦ μὴ πεινῆν ἀφικέσθαι καὶ πίνοντι μέχρι τοῦ μὴ διψῆν καὶ ἀμφιέννυσθαι ὥστε ἔξω μὲν μηδὲν μᾶλλον Καλλίου τούτου τοῦ πλουσιωτάτου ῥιγοῦν.

[28] Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 217.

[29] Xenophon, *Symposium*, trans. O. J. Todd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 583.

The Cynic lifestyle is characterized by balance and modesty, both in the personal and public domain. Such a way of life enables individuals to reconnect with their inner nature and exist in harmony with the surrounding *physis*. Consequently, it represents the optimal realization of fundamental Cynic principles. Embracing this lifestyle also involves staunchly criticizing flatterers, whom Antisthenes believed poison one's soul by disseminating falsehoods. They stand in stark contrast to the parrhesiastic philosophers, who have high esteem for sincerity and truth:

> Antisthenes says it is preferable to be thrown in among the crows than among the flatterers. For the former make spoil of the body of the dead, the latter, the soul of the living. (131b)
>
> Ἀντισθένης αἱρετώτερον φησίν εἰς κόρακας ἐμπεσεῖν ἢ εἰς κόλακας· οἱ μὲν γὰρ ἀποθανόντος τὸ σῶμα οἱ δὲ ζῶντος τὴν ψυχὴν λυμαίνονται.
>
> Antisthenes used to say that just as female companions pray for all good things to belong to their lovers, except for a mind and intelligence, likewise also flatterers, for those who keep their company. (132)
>
> Ἀντισθένης ἔλεγεν ὥσπερ τὰς ἑταίρας τἀγαθὰ πάντα εὔχεσθαι τοῖς ἐρασταῖς παρεῖναι, πλὴν νοῦ καὶ φρονήσεως, οὕτω καὶ τοὺς κόλακας οἷς σύνεισιν.

The Cynic way of life – *bios kynikos* – necessitated a radical departure from prevailing norms, which (following Socrates) demanded an initiation through self-knowledge. It encompassed not only a precise understanding of oneself but also concomitant self-care. The Cynic life represented both a reflection of truth and a continual endeavor to unearth the truth about oneself. *Bios kynikos* entails an ongoing struggle – a struggle against both external adversity and the inner desires that can corrode the soul. It also demands great effort in unlearning prior misconceptions. This is aptly expressed in the following passage:

> The same man [Antisthenes], when asked what was the most necessary thing to learn, said, "To unlearn the bad things." (87c)
>
> Ἀντισθένης ἐρωτηθείς· τί ἀναγκαιότατον εἴη μάθημα; 'τὸ ἀπομαθεῖν', ἔφη, 'τὰ κακά'.

Another key aspect of Cynic existence (one that is entwined with self-awareness) involved a specific injunction to care for others. As a prophet of truth, Antisthenes keenly observed others' actions and behaviors. This activity formed the cornerstone of his parrhesiastic approach. Indeed, it served a clarifying function; it stripped away the kind of senseless beliefs and obligations that are commonly upheld and accepted without a foundation in natural dictates or rational inference. This passage from Fragment 102 exemplifies Antisthenes' powers of observation:

> Wherefore Antisthenes said it well, when he heard that Ismenias was a good flute player: "But he is a bad human being. For he would not otherwise be such a good flute player."
>
> διὸ καλῶς μὲν Ἀντισθένης ἀκούσας ὅτι σπουδαῖός ἐστιν αὐλητὴς Ἰσμηνίας 'ἀλλ' ἄνθρωπος' ἔφη 'μοχθηρός· οὐ γὰρ ἂν οὕτω σπουδαῖος ἦν αὐλητής'.

The same applies to his commentary on executioners and tyrants:

> Antisthenes the philosopher said that the public executioners are more pious than tyrants. When someone asked why, he said, "Because by the public executioners are slain offenders in justice, but by the tyrants, those who are doing nothing wrong." (75)
>
> Ἀντισθένης ὁ φιλόσοφος τοὺς δημίους εὐσεβεστέρους ἔλεγεν εἶναι τῶν τυράννων· πυθομένου δέ τινος τὴν αἰτίαν, ἔφη, 'ὅτι ὑπὸ μὲν τῶν δημίων οἱ ἀδικοῦντες ἀναιροῦνται, ὑπὸ δὲ τῶν τυράννων οἱ μηδὲν ἁμαρτάνοντες'.

In many anecdotes dedicated to him Diogenes Laertius portrays Antisthenes as a man "caustic in his remarks and brutal in his comments about people, not hesitant to display an abysmal contempt for society at large and for the countless people who crossed his path".[30] Antisthenes had no reverence for laws. He believed that a wise man is not governed by institutional laws but solely by the "law of virtue", namely, his own rational principles.[31] He also disregarded the kind of material things and pursuits that many value, such as fame, wealth, social status, luxury, comfort, physical attractiveness, and similar commodities. He denounced such things and their associated beliefs and

[30] Luis E. Navia, *Antisthenes of Athens: Setting the World Aright* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 33.

[31] DL VI, 11.

behaviors, using *parrhesia* as a tool to do so. Regarding lovers of wealth, he stated bluntly: "No lover of money is good, either as a king or as a free man" (80) (Φιλάργυρος οὐδεὶς ἀγαθὸς οὔτε βασιλεὺς οὔτε ἐλεύθερος).

Antisthenes and subsequent Cynics viewed individuals as equals, dismissing gender, social standing, or lineage as artificial distinctions and illusory assets. He also sharply criticized religious convictions that lack inner conviction and enticed people with promises of a better afterlife. When a priest extolling "the bliss" experienced after death sought to initiate him into Orphism, Antisthenes retorted, "Why then don't you die?"[32] ('τί οὖν', ἔφη, 'οὐκ ἀποθνήσκεις').

Antisthenes also ridiculed the cult of physical beauty that was popular among his fellow Greeks, highlighting how it reduced their lives to the realm of materiality – to the domain of mundane objects. He condemned both (a) their thoughtlessness, conformity, and absence of spiritual cultivation and (b) their reluctance to exert any effort in rationally scrutinizing their own beliefs and actions. As Diogenes Laertius recounts:

> Seeing a young man model for an artist in a carefully studied pose, he said, "Tell me, if the bronze could speak, on what would it pride itself?" And when the young man replied, "On its beauty," he said, "Are you not then ashamed to rejoice in the same thing as an inanimate piece of bronze?"[33]
>
> Πρὸς τὸ παρασχηματίζον αὑτὸ τῷ πλάστῃ μειράκιον, 'εἰπέ μοι', φησίν, 'εἰ φωνὴν λάβοι ὁ χαλκός, ἐπὶ τίνι ἂν οἴει σεμνυνθῆναι'; τοῦ δ' εἰπόντος, 'ἐπὶ κάλλει', 'οὐκ αἰσχύνῃ οὖν', ἔφη, 'τὰ ὅμοια γεγηθὼς ἀψύχῳ'.

Hostile opinions or behaviors did not deter Antisthenes from persisting in his parrhesiastic activities. They might even have affirmed his conviction because they demonstrated the appropriate emotional response. This is affirmed in Fragment 86b, where Antisthenes states the following: "It is kingly to perform well but carry a bad reputation" (βαδιλικὸν εὖ μὲν πράττειν, κακῶς δὲ ἀκούειν).

Many anecdotes depicting Antisthenes' *parrhesia* also narrate his particular rivalry with Plato (possibly vying for the title of Socrates' most faithful disciple):

[32] DL VI, 4.
[33] DL VI, 9.

> He used to laugh at Plato for being conceited. Accordingly, once when there was a fine procession, seeing a horse neighing, he said to Plato, "It seems to me that you would have made just such a proud and showy steed," and he said this all the more because Plato kept on praising the horse. At another time, he had gone to see Plato when he was ill, and when he saw there a dish in which Plato had vomited, he said, "I see your bile there, but I do not see your conceit."[34]
>
> Ἔσκωπτέ τε Πλάτωνα ὡς τετυφωμένον. πομπῆς γοῦν γενομένης ἵππον θεασάμενος φρυακτήν φησι πρὸς τὸν Πλάτωνα, 'ἐδόκεις μοι καὶ σὺ ἵππος ἂν εἶναι λαμπρυντής'· τοῦτο δὲ ἐπεὶ καὶ συνεχὲς ὁ Πλάτων ἵππον ἐπήνει. καί ποτ᾽ ἐλθὼν πρὸς αὐτὸν νοσοῦντα καὶ θεασάμενος λεκάνην ἔνθα ὁ Πλάτων ἐμημέκει ἔφη, 'χολὴν μὲν ὁρῶ ἐνταῦθα, τῦφον δὲ οὐχ ὁρῶ'.

As mentioned, Antisthenes did not confine his *parrhesia* to individuals and their conduct. He targeted state institutions and the political frameworks they operate in. He also disapproved of the electoral system in democratic Athens, primarily due to its lack of rational justification. He even advised Athenians to vote for donkeys as horses. When they found this notion absurd, he retorted as follows: "Why, those whom you make generals have never learnt to be really generals – they have only been voted such."[35] He also remarked that it "is an absurd thing to clear a corn field of weeds, and in war to get rid of unfit soldiers, and yet not to exclude wicked citizens from service to the state".[36]

Following Luis Navia, one can say that Antisthenes pierced through

> the mantle of social illusions that, like enticing and elusive ghosts, make people move aimlessly in all directions. He seeks to purge language, his own and that of others, of euphemisms that cover up the truth. His freedom of speech knows no bounds – he speaks the truth as he sees it, regardless of the consequences of his words.[37]

Despite his parrhesiastic endeavors, Antisthenes was regarded as a kind man, capable of persuading almost anyone with the charm of his discourse. This amiable disposition likely allowed him to continue his candid way with others and even persuade some to follow him. This might explain why Antisthenes could even confidently enter homes of others to inspect their possessions, as in the following anecdote:

[34] DL VI, 7.
[35] DL VI, 8.
[36] DL VI, 6.
[37] Navia, *Antisthenes of Athens*, 33.

> And whenever he saw a woman beautifully adorned, he would go off to her house and bid her husband to bring out his horse and his arms; and then if he had such things, he would give him leave to indulge in luxury, seeing that he possessed the means of defending himself. But if he did not have these things, then he would bid him strip his wife of her ornaments.[38]
>
> εἰ δέ ποθι θεάσαιτο γύναιον κεκοσμημένον, ἀπῄει ἐπὶ τὴν οἰκίαν αὐτῆς καὶ ἐκέλευε τὸν ἄνδρα ἐξαγαγεῖν ἵππον καὶ ὅπλα, ὥστ᾽ εἰ μὲν ἔχοι ταῦτα, ἐᾶν τρυφᾶν· ἀμυνεῖσθαι γὰρ τούτοις· εἰ δὲ μή, περιαιρεῖν τὸν κόσμον.

CONCLUSION

Antisthenes had a significant influence on the evolution of the concept of philosophical *parrhesia*, establishing it as the cornerstone of Cynic philosophy. His interpretation of *parrhesia* represented both a continuation and an expansion of the notion of candid expression, placing specific emphasis on authenticity, asceticism, and moral fortitude.

This philosopher believed that *parrhesia* should constitute a characteristic of every wise man. He did not think of it as just a rhetorical resource or communication skill but as a fundamental moral and intellectual attitude, one that shaped a person's entire life. He maintained that open speech should steer clear of superfluous linguistic adornments and one should seek simplicity and directness when articulating ideas. For Antisthenes, *parrhesia* encompasses not only the courage to speak forthrightly but also a commitment to conveying truth straightforwardly and unequivocally.

Antisthenes often highlighted the hypocrisy he believed pervades society and recommended confronting it. He also repudiated social norms and conventions he deemed to be false or detrimental. His unwavering stance was evident in his candid criticism of both the prevailing values and the political and social order of his time. Antisthenes also targeted those who failed to adhere to the principles of honesty and moderation, which he considered to be foundational for genuine living. In his view, *parrhesia* was intended to emancipate individuals from the grip of societal expectations, thereby facilitating the pursuit of an authentic and meaningful life.

He thought of moral courage as paramount when exercising *parrhesia.* Antisthenes maintained that *parrhesia* necessitated one's unwavering honesty and

[38] DL VI, 10.

transparency in expressing one's convictions. He consequently emphasized the importance of truth-telling, irrespective of social or political repercussions. Sincere articulation of one's beliefs signifies not only courage but also the attainment of genuineness in life and truthfulness to one's conscience. For him, *parrhesia* thus constitutes a fundamental component of authentic human existence.

Antisthenes also considered *parrhesia* to be akin to a moral mission. For him, it was an authentic service to the truth and the good. This is why he tried to show people when they lived in a way that did not accord with how things ought to be. He urged people to change their attitudes toward others and themselves, presenting his own life as an embodiment of harmonious speech, thought, and action. He argued such a transformation would both reform individual people's lives and revolutionize society more broadly. This represents the primary aim of his parrhesiastic endeavors – the moral rejuvenation of all humanity. Unfortunately, his moral mission (like that of Socrates) ended in failure.

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