

The Corrosive Nature of Cynicism



The Cynic, Vilko Gecan, 1921

Utopia is not under the slightest obligation to produce results: its sole function is to allow its devotees to condemn what exists in the name of what does not. –Jean-Francois Revel, *Last Exit to Utopia*, 2009.

For moral and spiritually healthy people, cynicism surfaces as one of the leading causes of moral fragmentation in postmodern life. Part of the temptation of cynicism is that it concentrates on the projection of life as some people imagine

it should be. Eschewing the real while strong-arming the imaginary into existence can have a devastating effect on a person's ability to become well adjusted.

As an ancient Greek philosophical doctrine that dates to Antisthenes, a thinker who was born in 445 B.C., cynicism was suspicious of the inherent worth and purpose of man's plight through the spatial-temporal world. This was a devastating admission of defeat for ancient cynics, for the here-and-now was their only haven.

As a postmodern phenomenon and way of life, virulent institutionalized cynicism has plagued man since the second half of the twentieth century, making it a modish, pervasive and corrosive pandemic that afflicts man's moral and spiritual health.

Postmodern cynicism exhibits several root causes. Some of these spring from personal temperament and inadequacies, disappointment and disenchantment with the contingencies of life, and as we are witnesses to in postmodernity, a self-serving manner of turning human reality on its head for the promulgation of infinite varieties of hedonism. All of these aspects of cynicism are exploited by social-political ideologues for political gain.

Ultimately, cynicism shrugs its shoulders in the manner of "who cares" abandonment of transcendence and beauty. Cynics are repulsed by the idea of transcendence and beauty, for cynicism eventually becomes a moral/spiritual justification for the defense of purposeless, nihilistic self-indulgence.

If the causes attributable to cynicism are said to be multiple—and these continue to grow in direct proportion to the mutually-contradictory spread of competing forms of hedonism today—so are its destructive effects. Cynicism's ability to breed moral/spiritual dysfunctionality is analogous to Satan's legions of demons.

Ancient Greek cynicism was tame—a form of autonomous reflection that, while recognizing the futility of social conventions as a hypocritical carnival spectacle—remained prudent in the cultivation of understanding.

Ancient cynicism realized the limitations of human nature. It was also constructive in its ability to re-direct human vital energy away from the mundane and fleeting. By today's standards, ancient cynicism appears quaint and child-like in its purity of intention and execution.

On the other hand, post World War II cynicism is vile and ruinous not only of institutions, the grounding of human existence on the guiding principles of truth, conscience and good will, but also in the sinister way that it stamps out the quest for beauty and truth.

Postmodern cynicism is not content to exist as a humble, quasi-withdrawal from the world. What untold salvation and renewal would it bring to mankind if postmodern cynics moved to remote islands or mountain tops? What greater vision of hell can there be than a colony of cynics?

Instead, cynicism demands to be allowed to raise its incoherent and infective voice against professed life-affirming values. While for ancient cynics the search for truth often delivered them to life-guiding wisdom, contemporary cynics have succeeded in dismantling truth and wisdom as viable vehicles for grounding the human condition in the most practical foundation that it can hope for: the possibility of happiness or mere contentment.

What is more anathema to the practice of hedonism than the vital cohesion of a sincere quest for self-knowledge? The latter reminds us of Dracula's reaction to the cross.

Like the awe and wonder aspiring Icarus who does not heed his father's, Daedalus, advice to practice moderation in using his newly found wax wings, the intemperance that defines

contemporary cynicism plunges us ever deeper into soulless barbarism. Cynicism corrupts all aspects of man today. This mutilating force echoes and is felt in personal relationships that were formerly ruled by mutual respect and love.

The idea that culture serves to lift human aspirations from the merely sensual to moral and spiritual transcendence has been substituted by tribal instincts and the embrace of base values.

One surprising difference between ancient and postmodern cynicism is that the latter relishes masochism. In the absence of beauty, hapless postmodern man has built an altar to dead-end and purposeless sensual existence. Postmodern cynics advocate for social/political institutions that promote destructive, albeit fashionable biologism. Today's cynicism is the result of existential bankruptcy and pathological self-loathing.

We are the hollow men and the men without chests that T.S. Eliot and C.S. Lewis warned us about, respectively. We are the inhabitants of the waste land. I wonder if the world has indeed already ended in a whimper that we missed, or is the bang yet to come? I suspect that the verdict is split among thoughtful people who reflect on such things.

In literature, the humanities and philosophy, cynicism has become the vulgar *modus operandi* of pent-up primitive passions. This is an odd predicament to find ourselves in after at least twenty-five hundred years of steady cultural creations that have, according to progressives, removed man from the most negative aspects of primal human nature.

Having given up on forms of transcendence and traditional institutions that have enabled us to seek enlightenment by removing us from base human whims, the illusion of moral deliverance that today's cynicism promotes is a hollow cause célèbre.

Postmodern man's incessant race to establish the latest, most timely installment of hedonism, has made great progress in our calculated refusal to experience shame. Postmodernity is the cemetery where the cultivation of moral/spiritual higher ground is laid to rest.

Ours is a mankind-altering era. The brave-new-world man that rules par excellence over all aspects of human existence today is quickly coming to resemble pre-articulate man. Is postmodernity a re-enactment of what took place before written history?

Cynicism has relegated human life to the inner fog of Pandora's Box, pinning all against all and everyone against himself. Our moral/existential bankruptcy seeks destructive ends that—in the estimation of cynics—fill our fundamental moral/spiritual void. Yet for cynics to attain self-worth, everyone must join the fray; everyone must embrace the road to perdition. Human reality has been turned into a colossal arena for self-mutilation, pretense and social/political affection.

Ours will undoubtedly be seen by future generations and imaginative archaeologists as an epoch ruled by criminal radical ideologues. How horrific will it seem to astute people in the future—after we have consumed ourselves with progressive moral and spiritual experimentation—that a civilization can be brought to its knees by infirm and self-loathing entities.

Postmodern Man's Sickness unto Self-Hatred

Postmodern man has traded the life-affirming autonomy and liberty that defines the human person for the vacuous glare of social/political utopia. Postmodern radical ideologues justify their existence by rejecting the human person and replacing man with transhumanism: a bio-tech modified entity. This is a symbol of an atrophied, aberrant imagination and insolvent moral will.

People who understand Ortega y Gasset's contention in *The Revolt of the Masses* that mass man exists today as a demoralized entity grasp the prophetic and visionary importance of sincere philosophical reflection.

Postmodern man's greatest hope lies in taking a constructive glance to the future that refuses to ground human existence in timely, social/political historicity.

Postmodern cynicism's lasting legacy will be its stranglehold on our ability to renew ourselves as differentiated and responsible persons; the necessary moral/existential condition that enable us to live well-adjusted contented lives.