

WILLIAM DESMOND. *Cynics*. Ancient Philosophies, 3. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008. Pp. 290. US \$18.95. ISBN: 978-0-520-25861-7.

William Desmond's *Cynics* is an introduction to Cynicism, its champions and their beliefs, and its place within the historical, political, intellectual, ethical, and religious contexts of antiquity and beyond. The *Ancient Philosophies* series has been "created especially for students [...] [and] offers a clear yet rigorous presentation of core ideas." The volumes in the series are "designed to lay the foundation for a thorough understanding of their subjects," and Desmond's volume does just this.

The author takes ancient Cynicism "as a body of loosely related ideas that, as a whole, remained *fairly* consistent from Diogenes to Sallustius" (6). To provide a complete overview of Cynicism is a grand undertaking, yet the author's purpose and scope in this volume are clear: "Here one can only select major names, quote some of their ideas or sayings, evoke the spirit of their times and sketch general lines of development" (6). Despite the variation of ideas, Desmond argues that there is an "overall continuity of theme" which he proceeds to trace from the Classical to the Roman Period (6). In the author's own words, "although its fundamental ideas endured, they also took on many local variations, for as Cynicism was adapted by different personalities from different areas over a period of nine centuries, each observer selected and emphasized certain ideas over others, and so lent his own style to the underlying Cynic outlook. It is a challenge to recognize both the variety of ancient Cynicism, and the unity that under-lies this multiplicity" (6). This volume is up to the challenge, however, as the author proceeds to navigate and "piece together a mad jigsaw of ancient fragments," which provides an overall picture of Cynicism in context (8). The limitations of this book are reasonable and appropriate considering its nature as an introductory student text with such a broad scope. Nevertheless, given its limitations, the author still manages to provide detailed analysis throughout.

Desmond's Introduction is followed by six chapters. The first chapter, "Ancient Cynics and their times," introduces the reader to the movement's important historical figures and their general ideas from the Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods. Desmond's discussion is interspersed with and illustrated by quotations from primary texts. This first 70 or so pages is historical in nature yet it also establishes the ideological ground on which the following chapters build. The second part of the book (Chapters 2–5) is topical, engaging thematically with general tenets of Cynic philosophy. Chapter 2, "Renunciation of custom," deals with the day-to-day life of the Cynic and his relation to cultural norms. Chapter 3, "A life according to nature," attempts to set out (insofar as it is possible) the Cynic ontology according to which the Cynic conducts his or her life. The fourth chapter, "Chance, fate, fortune and the self," lays out the Cynic's understanding of one's place in the cosmos. Chapter 5, "Anarchists, democrats, cosmo-politans, kings," deals mainly with the Cynic's relation to politics. Each of these chapters incorporates primary

sources to illustrate the claims that the author makes and applies the particular historical figures to the given themes of the chapter. Because some of the material in chapters 2–5 is introduced in the first chapter, the author’s method leads to the repetition of anecdotes and examples, as well as to the recurrence of particular phrases. Perhaps some more careful editing could have helped to tighten up these chapters. The last chapter of the book, entitled “Cynic legacies,” examines Cynic influences upon Christianity, the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and upon particular figures such as Rousseau and Nietzsche.

Each chapter is accompanied by endnotes providing further information, citations, and bibliographical information which make connections to other works and avenues of interpretation. Unfortunately, these notes get sparser in the later chapters. In a positive light, this might be the natural result of the corresponding decrease in length of the chapters as the text proceeds; in a more negative light, the lack of notes might be due to the repetition in the text, these points having already been made. Furthermore, the book lacks a discussion on the state of the primary material which the author quotes and from which he draws his arguments. However, in addition to the glossaries of names and Greek terms, there is a detailed subject index as well as a bibliography and guide to further reading, all of which help to point the reader who desires to delve further into Cynic philosophy in the right direction and which should prove useful to students and scholars alike.

The author emphasizes some of the main tenets of Cynic philosophy throughout this volume, arguing that Cynic ideas are loose and varied, simple and adaptable, and perhaps even natural and universal. The author suggests that “such was the elasticity of Cynic ideas that they could appeal across the divide” (10). Further, “because the fundamental ideas of Cynicism were simple and adaptable, they often appear piecemeal, here and there, long before the appearance of a Diogenes or even an Antisthenes” (13). While this makes it difficult for one to pin down Cynicism as a philosophy (or philosophical system), this feature also lends to it broad appeal. On the other hand, while Desmond argues that Cynic ideas last and can be seen to influence other ideas, systems, and philosophies, the more general the influence, the less clear it becomes for the reader who exactly the Cynics were and what exactly they believed. This, however, is a natural result of the task at hand and the author does manage to provide the reader with some definitive, defining characteristics: the Cynic lived in the ‘here and now’ and as far as possible strived to be self sufficient while believing that the “elemental good and wise simplicity trumps the passing vanities of kings” (2). Fundamentally, the author explains that “Cynicism may be most defined by concentration on the simple present” (128) and by living a “life according to nature” (132). Insofar as these tenets are explained and demonstrated with a lively and engaging clarity, this volume achieves its goal.

Desmond likens Cynicism to Socrates, “as praised by Alcibiades in Plato’s *Symposium*: rough and ugly on the exterior, but on the soul-side, beautiful and golden” (75). It is the latter that seems to be missing in one’s

passing acquaintance with Cynicism, and one of the greatest achievements of this volume is that it demonstrates and emphasises the positive side of Cynicism against the modern view of the Cynic “as one who rejects all ideals, denigrates all mankind and can see nothing good anywhere” (221). The author’s juxtaposition of this positive view against Platonism, however, is misleading. Here Desmond invokes the definition of philosophy in Plato’s *Phaedo* as the “practice of death”, yet the world-transcending Plato of the *Phaedo* is indicative of neither Plato nor Platonism as a whole. Speaking of the ultimate Platonic vision, Desmond writes, “But if it comes, it will make the philosopher a stranger to the world, just as Plato’s Socrates is a stranger to the Athenians among whom he lived his entire biological life” (144). While the author argues convincingly that the Cynics were not the world-denying ascetics one is often presented with, he mischaracterises Platonism, making it into a foil to make his point, and painting it with the same brush from which he attempts to save the Cynics.

The volume is well written and is both lively and engaging. The inclusion of primary texts in the form of long passages and shorter fragments not only helps to make this volume useful for students and an appropriate textbook for a course on the Cynics, but also render it valuable to scholars as well. Desmond has done much of the work to collect examples of Cynic philosophy which, due to its fragmentary and second-hand nature together with the historical scope addressed in the volume, would be difficult to find in one text. Desmond’s *Cynics* is a welcome and useful edition to the University of California Press’ *Ancient Philosophies* series.

SEAMUS O’NEILL
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND
ST. JOHN’S, NL A1C 5S7
sjoneill@mun.ca