

Shaping the “Divine Man”
*Holiness, Charisma and Leadership
in the Graeco-Roman World*

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The Sage as a Leader and as a Holy Man in the Cynicism of the Imperial Era

Two Polemics

IGNACIO PAJÓN LEYRA

1. Introduction: The Idea of the Sage

The notion of “wisdom” is probably one of the terms that has undergone the most transformation in the history of Graeco-Latin thought. Initially, in as yet non-technical philosophical usage, it referred to the ability to perform a certain operation successfully. It is in this type of sense that Homer, for example, uses the term *sophía* in *The Iliad* (XV, 412) to denominate the capacity of the shipbuilder in terms of his profession. In this sense, the sage is he who dominates a practical skill, and hence the figure of the sage is usually associated not so much with mere knowledge as with its application, implying that the Greek language of the period held as a sage whoever had acquired theoretical knowledge and, in addition, had the capacity to apply it in praxis.

In its transition to a technified philosophical vocabulary, however, the notion of wisdom showed a tendency to split that initial dual dimension, solely intensifying one of its two aspects. In some of the main forms of philosophy from the Classical era – such as those of Platonic origin – the theoretical sense of wisdom as virtue eclipsed the practical to a certain extent. This notwithstanding, in the cynical movement, the tendency observed in the use of the term runs more to the contrary: the theoretical sage, for the cynics, loses every sense due to his disconnection from the problems of life, and the practical sage becomes an authentic sage to the extent that his wisdom responds to a specific way of living.

This tendency to detach from the more speculative aspect of knowledge and uphold what was closer to life would be usual in post-Aristotelian thought. Thus, the idea of the sage would be one of the main axes for articulating Hellenistic philosophy in general, above all its Socratic origins. The impact produced by the figure of Socrates on the philosophical panorama stressed the importance of offering a coherent view of the sage and what characterises him as such. And proceeding from the model of behaviour observed in Socrates, a practical orientation, perseverance, moderation and



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concern with social and ethical questions became, for many Hellenistic philosophers, a basic form of describing the true sage. For this reason, the notion of the sage underlying philosophical positions such as scepticism, epicureanism, stoicism, the Cyrenaic school or cynicism would then tend to have little to do with the vision of the theoretical sage and would insist much more on the idea that the wisdom the sage aspires for is that of knowing how to live, and the fundamental tool for achieving that is experience rather than study.

With regard to cynicism, the paradigmatic notion of the sage soon became more complex when the referential figure of Socrates was joined by a second model, that of Diogenes of Sinope.¹ Plato defined Diogenes as “a Socrates gone mad”², giving the impression of someone who exemplifies the original Socratic character taken to extremes. The irony of Socrates, in Diogenes, is transformed into satire and farce. Austerity becomes a vocation in poverty, spiritual fortitude becomes an exercise in asceticism, and indifference to social image becomes scandal and shamelessness.

The cynic-sage thus becomes an extravagant and provocative figure who reacts to the social milieu with acid repartee, hurtful humour and obscene gestures. In this way he manages to call the attention of his fellow citizens, showing them a life path that accords with nature. From the cynical standpoint, the sage must be heard because his attacks on society represent an attempt to recover the sense lost by human beings in the civilising process. From the social standpoint, however, it is the cynic-sage who has lost his senses, and for that reason he is seen not as a charismatic figure but as a fool mouthing words beyond reason that must be excluded from the scope of what deserves to be heard.

The contrast between such views of cynical thought would only grow with the passing generations. With the passage of time the cynic will cease to be seen as a sage, since he no longer stood for a person endowed with an applicable practical ability. Quite the contrary – during the later period, cynics came to be seen as people who, because of their stridence and exaggeration, had lost all vital and social skills. And it is generally understood that, if his speech seduces the audience, it is because of a kind of charisma that is closer to madness than to classical wisdom. This was to become the manner of conceiving the street preachers of cynicism in the Roman era. And it would also be the predominant way of interpreting the more radical parts of the cynical proposal for a lifestyle. Still, the cynics themselves considered that the spectacular and paradoxical character of a philosopher’s acts did not have to be taken as a reason for disqualifying a sage.³ Cynical acts, however strange they might have seemed in their society, show applied knowledge: the knowledge that society is so badly oriented that only a manner of living contrary to its conventions is truly rational.

1 See Navia 2005, 93–120, and Helmer 2017.

2 D.L., VI, 53.

3 See Pajón 2019, 150–155.



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As part of transmitting this critical message, the cynic-sage not only exercises his philosophy in his acts but also uses his own appearance to embody his questioning of social convention.⁴ He thus takes on a striking image in which every element is endowed with a natural meaning (the staff as the natural travelling prop, the rough cloak as the most reasonable coating, the unkempt hair and beard as the natural aspect, etcetera), while at the same time all such elements are a certain parody of the cultural symbols of power: the staff for the sceptre; the threadbare cloth for the regal cloak; and the unruly beard and hair for the mane of the lion.⁵ This way, the ensuing overall appearance becomes, in the same breath, a claim for pure naturalism and a parody of the power and the powerful.

The cynic thus appears as a man who governs himself – whose kingdom is his own body, his autonomy of decision and the path his life takes – underscoring that the fundamental ingredient in the life of a sage as it is understood in cynicism is independence.

In relation to other human beings, the cynic-sage lives in such a way as to show his full independence with respect to the chains imposed by society in each of his acts. Only the sage is authentically free, because he has managed to break with these kinds of conventional ties. And therein lies the root of his exceptionality and charisma. Cynical tradition will here tend to confront the paradigmatic example of this type of charismatic sage (Diogenes) with the most outstanding example of sage according to the opposite concept (which, for cynicism, will always be Plato) and with multiple examples of applied knowledge that represent power over others instead of over oneself (mainly, the king of the Persia or Alexander the Great).⁶

2. The Evolution of the Sage in Late Cynicism

Following the apogee of the philosophical current, important figures of cynicism would still continue to exist during the Hellenistic period proper – from rhetorician Anaximenes of Lampsacus to Bion of Borysthene, the politician Cercidas of Megalopolis, the poet Meleager of Gadara, Demetrius of Alexandria, Menedemus of Lampsacus, Theombrotus, Sotades or Teles of Megara⁷. However, by then, the main fundamentals of cynicism had already been shaped, and their original contribution was, in most of such cases, restricted.

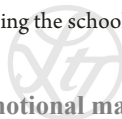
At the same time, a parallel branch of cynicism had separated from the mainstream, gaining independence in its doctrines: that headed by Zeno of Citium and continued

4 See Helmer 2020, 70–72.

5 A detailed analysis of these elements can be found in Pajón 2019, 159–176 and 306–316.

6 Cf. Höistad 1948, 50; Fish 1937, 129–151.

7 For a complete list of the names comprising the school of cynics, see Goulet-Cazé 2000, 389–413.



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