

FROM CYNICAL REASON TO SPIRITUAL CREATIVITY:  
AN EXERCISE IN RELIGIOUS ANTHROPODICY

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the cultural ideology of cynicism as identified and critiqued by Peter Sloterdijk, who describes cynicism as an “enlightened false consciousness” that is “universal and diffuse.” As an ideology, cynicism perpetuates the conditions of unjust society, but it is impervious to criticism. Instead of further critique, the thesis suggests religious traditions can offer means of overcoming the enclosure of cynical consciousness. Chapter one outlines Sloterdijk's approach to cynicism, including its historical development. Chapter two considers cynicism as a problem of self-understanding and proposes religion reveals that human beings are malleable through practices and techniques. Chapter three looks at three such techniques—awareness, compassion, and creativity—and offers them as solutions to cynical consciousness. The thesis aims, overall, to offer a way of considering the continued relevance and possibility of religious traditions, practices, and techniques in a cynical society such that alternative self-understandings and alternative social configurations might be made possible.

## Acknowledgments

The motivation of this thesis emerges from a long wrestling with the problems of cynicism and the relevance of religion in my own life. Ever since I was inducted (or abducted) into the conversations of philosophy at Cornerstone University by professor Mathew Bonzo, who deserves a significant mention as the first in a series of witnesses to prove that one might be both critical and grateful in a world such as ours, I have found myself haunted by the temptation of cynicism and surprised by the gifts of grace. The lives of Dr. Bonzo and his wife, Dorothe, who operate Small Wonders Farm inspired by the work of Wendell Berry, have been and remain warm hearths in a cold society. Their encouragement, faith, and love have kept my philosophical pursuits bearable and joyful. I must also extend a word of gratitude for my friends who have accompanied me on this journey, namely Jordan Skinner, Jazz Feyer Salo, Josh Christianson, Caleb Russel, Matt Plante, Matt and Camella Beale, and a host of others. I should mention Pastor Dan Lute, too, whose kindness and critical thinking inadvertently turned me into a communist.

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The encouragement of my family, especially my mother, Stephanie, and sister, Carley, has been a constant well of support and affirmation in my studies, giving me the courage to continue studying following the death of my father, Dennis Dettloff, whose love and wisdom continue to show up in my life by the grace of God, and whose hope of seeing me complete a doctoral degree is one I have every intention of fulfilling. The presence of my family has managed to keep my cynicism at bay and my hope alive. Indeed, this thesis might be considered the philosophical working-out of two familiar phrases in the Dettloff home, one from my mother—“new day, new way”—and one from my father—“what you are is God's gift to you, what you become is your gift to God.”

Finally, to my partner and my beloved, Emily, for her hard work, for her unfailing love, for her endless support, for her sense of humor, for her forgiveness, for her tenacity—for these things and so much more, to Emily I am forever grateful and be-trothed. Without Emily, this project would not have been possible, not merely because of her willingness to support the two of us financially in a foreign country, but academically, too, as I owe my concluding insights about awareness in Sloterdijk's text to Emily's exploration of Buddhism, which gave me the key to unlock the fundamentally important Eastern inflections in Sloterdijk that remained opaque to me. Thus I dedicate this thesis to Emily, the lotus of my life, looking forward to more conversations, improvisations, and gifts of peace that come with releasement into the present moment of love.

# **From Cynical Reason to Spiritual Creativity: An Exercise in Religious Anthropodicy**

Dean Christopher Dettloff

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## INTRODUCTION: EVERYBODY KNOWS

Ours is a world where the knowledge of injustice, scandal, self-interests, and ulterior motives is taken for granted. It comes as no surprise, for example, when the latest leak of previously classified government documents reveals troubling details about those in political power, or when a company is caught cheating its workers out of their wages, or when a person belonging to a minority group is the victim of a crime that goes unpunished. In light of these events, to reply “well, what did you expect?” is not unreasonable. We have come to expect that the “common good” is quite uncommon, and, if it actually shows up, we greet it with a raised eyebrow—it feels more like bait for a trap than a trustworthy vision. Who has not been duped before by hoping for the best?

If we reflect on these conditions, we not only consider injustice, scandal, self-interests, and their ulterior motives as observers. We are complicit in the unjust structures that surround us. Simply look at the tags of your clothing, or examine the production and transportation of the food you are about to eat, and you will be reminded of the kinds of structural suffering that make your day-to-day life possible. These feelings are not limited to large-scale, institutional dissatisfaction, however. Work a part-time retail job for any length of time, perhaps especially through the holidays, and your sense of fairness and optimism will surely be tested. Try to offer a word of hopeful optimism, or expect a little more from those in authority, and you will be rightly regarded as naive—it's no secret that there are secrets, exceptions, and deceptions. We live in a social situation in which you have to be alert at all times, on your toes, one step ahead, thinking the unrevealed thoughts of those around you. This is a situation of paranoia, requiring us to use our ability to think critically in order to avoid being taken advantage of—but this critical thinking makes us feel embittered and defensive, always expecting the worst, looking to pull the rug out from any potentially good thing. It leads us, in a word, to be cynical.

Cynicism may seem like a disposition that is innocent enough; it might be a bit off-putting or cause a few spells of bitterness, but overall its effects could appear negligible, even beneficial. The

point of this thesis, however, is to suggest nothing could be further from the truth, and that we ignore the real social, psychological, and spiritual ramifications of cynicism to our collective detriment. A society afflicted with widespread cynicism, we will see, not only leads to a general cultural malaise but also retains and reproduces its unjust structures by integrating a critical way of thinking into everyday life. In other words, our cynical dispositions preserve the unjust and seemingly hopeless structures that weigh us down by defanging the importance of our critical reason and, worse, making it impossible to imagine any alternatives.

One might assume cynicism is a phenomenon best investigated by the tools of psychology or social science, in any case not by *philosophical* means. Yet the best expositor of this psychological phenomenon and social condition remains contemporary German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, whose lengthy book *Critique of Cynical Reason*<sup>1</sup> takes cynicism seriously as a problem for philosophical reflection. According to Sloterdijk, “The discontent in our culture has assumed a new quality: It appears as a universal, diffuse cynicism.”<sup>2</sup> When a phenomenon is universal and diffuse, especially a phenomenon of discontentment, we are dealing with a situation that touches our very way of being in the world, a problem that goes deeper than psychology or social science alone. Indeed, Sloterdijk himself sees his analysis of cynicism as a way of reinvigorating philosophical reflection and the joy contained therein.<sup>3</sup> By examining cynicism through a philosophical lens, Sloterdijk allows us to see it

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1 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Sloterdijk remains cynicism's most extensive and widely received examiner, bringing cynicism to the attention of social philosophers like Slavoj Žižek, Terry Eagleton, Franco Berardi, and Edith Wyschogrod, who I will treat throughout this project. Though other thinkers in the twentieth century occasionally discussed cynicism as well, notably Paul Tillich who briefly mentions it in *The Courage To Be*, no study outweighs the depth, length and influence of Sloterdijk's work, which has served to offer authors in cultures other than his native Germany a deep well of concepts and insights. See, for example, its application in America via William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), and its application to British society and capitalism in Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997) and J. D. Taylor, *Negative Capitalism: Cynicism in the Neoliberal Era* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013).

2 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 3.

3 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. xxxviii. Sloterdijk's championing and defense of philosophy remains a theme throughout his career. See especially his short book *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice*, trans. Karen Margolis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

as it appears, phenomenologically showing how it manifests in contemporary society and genealogically considering how it came to be a default position for our cultural discontent.

To set the stage for considering how cynicism came to be so pervasive, we might consider some of the basic contours of cynicism as it appears, according to Sloterdijk, in our day-to-day lives. An essential feature noted by Sloterdijk is that our cynicism functions as a defense mechanism, a move of self-preservation, that allows us to navigate a world like ours made up of competition and criss-crossing injustices. As Sloterdijk writes, in a characteristic flash of aphoristic wit, cynicism “is the universally widespread way in which enlightened people see to it that they are not taken for suckers.”<sup>4</sup> Exercising our cynical reason, seeing behind the presented interests of those in power and our surrounding narratives, is a commitment to resolute realism, for better or worse. If it seems like cynics are always sniffing out the bad, that is because, as the cynic notices, the world really is organized badly. “I’m not a pessimist, I’m a realist,” cynics often say. This colloquial phrase usually results as a response to the challenge that its speaker is too “negative,” or too “critical,” or never quite satisfied, etc. Its distinction between pessimism and realism reveals its cynical quality. The cynic, from the cynic’s perspective, does not expect the worst, but instead is in touch with the way things “really work,” thereby avoiding being taken advantage of by some other interest. Perhaps the most telling aspect of the phrase is the satisfaction, tinged smug or melancholic, felt by the speaker; it is enough to know what is going on. Like pessimism, cynicism dares not posit an alternative vision as a project. But cynicism rejects pessimism because pessimism sees reality through yet another crystal ball, even though the pessimist’s scrying always yields a bad future. Cynicism takes itself to be a realism, plain and simple, and it cannot be held responsible for the facts of life, namely that we live in a competitive milieu wherein the realists will at least have the consolation prize of knowing what goes on behind the curtains.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

5 Ben Jeffrey draws parallels between pessimism and cynicism in *Anti-matter: Michel Houellebecq and Depressive*

If Sloterdijk is right that cynicism is as widespread as he says it is, we might say we live in a situation where everyone is a realist, which means everybody knows what is really going on (or at least we think we do) behind the presented narratives of society. The strange thing about a cynical situation in which everybody knows something is wrong, however, is that not everybody does something about that knowledge—and everybody knows this, too. Instead of imaginatively engaging our social milieu and looking to create alternatives, cynicism accepts this milieu for what it is, knowing full well exactly what it is, allowing it to reproduce itself through our cynical participation. This has led Sloterdijk to call cynicism a new kind of ideology: i.e., a way in which the present social conditions have a hold on our consciousness such that the status quo remains in place. It is the frame of mind common in our society that both reinforces its tendencies to self-destruction and halts any self-reflective moment that might allow us the space to think, and most importantly, to act, differently. If we are to break out of this ideological hold, we must think carefully about our default position of cynicism and how we might find ways to move beyond it. As I mean to show, Sloterdijk's study reveals that cynicism is ultimately a crisis of self-understanding. It is a form of consciousness that, Sloterdijk says, emerges between the battle lines of authority and progress, battered by both sides. With the historical collapse of old ways of knowing as culturally integrative forces, culminating in a disintegration of integrative, ideological hope in the twentieth century, cynicism is a means by which we learn to survive, reacting to our social reality as players in a game of antagonistic relationships.

At issue, then, is finding a way to explain cynicism as a problem of self-understanding, and also finding a way to uncover or invent new forms of self-understanding. In this first chapter, I will sketch

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*Realism* (Winchester, UK: Zero, 2011), an extended literary essay on pessimist currents in Houellebecq's novels. At times Jeffrey seems to conflate cynicism and pessimism unnecessarily, but his text as a whole tries to offer a helpful therapy and reorientation for those stuck in pessimistic and cynical worldviews, even reflecting on the role of religion. My present project aims to address cynicism in particular, noting that pessimism and cynicism are related but not synonymous phenomena. Sloterdijk's later work actually takes pessimism seriously as a significant problem, specifically as presented in the literature of Houellebecq and E. M. Cioran. For the former, see Peter Sloterdijk, "Anthropotechnology," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 40-44. For the latter, see Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013), 73-82.

out a picture of how Sloterdijk describes cynical self-understanding and also how this self-understanding came about. This will require identifying three particular components of Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*. (1) Sloterdijk says cynicism appears as an internal split between what one wants to do and what one actually does, as hinted at above. Cynics see themselves as necessarily divided persons. To see how this split comes about, Sloterdijk offers two genealogies of cynicism, which I will present: a) a transition from the ancient philosophical movement of *kynicism* to modern *cynicism*, and b) a reading of the development of a certain way of knowing based on a competition for power that begins in the Enlightenment. (2) Cynicism manifests as an embittered feeling of defeat, which brings along a paralysis of despair and disappointment. Behind their postured bitterness and critique, cynics understand themselves as vulnerable and hopeless. (3) Cynicism is unable to be challenged through criticism, since it is already the result of critical methods itself, meaning one cannot free cynicism into new imaginative horizons by refining our critiques of society and ruling powers. Cynics know all there is to know about the general negativity of our society, and no extra knowledge can add or subtract from this realization about the whole of society. After outlining these three observations from Sloterdijk about cynicism, I will conclude by suggesting that, taken together, they show cynicism to be an internally closed mindset that forestalls any thoughts about an alternative future or the possibility of meaningful, authentic change in the world, instead reproducing the unjust conditions of our present societies. Chapter one, then, is an attempt to analyze what Sloterdijk identifies as a cynical self-understanding, including its causes and consequences.

But how does one find a way out from this enclosed consciousness? Following an examination of cynical self understanding, in chapter two I will argue that one way of rehabilitating and discovering new ways of thinking about ourselves, and especially putting those new understandings into practice, is through a re-imagined role for *religion*, understood as the history of ways in which humans have transformed and transcended themselves beyond their social situations. Invoking religion in the context

of cynicism is admittedly a dangerous move, given the fact that religion has played no little part in contributing to our cynical malaise and warrants plenty of suspicion. As I intend to show, however, introducing religion in relation to cynicism is not wholly divorced from Sloterdijk's own trajectory, and I draw especially on his later work after *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Further, borrowing from Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, I argue cynicism is a crisis of “anthropodicy,” a lack of justification for or characterization of the human being, and suggest religion contains a well of practices and techniques that can allow us to overcome this problem. Though religion is certainly something we are rightly cynical about, I will argue, with Sloterdijk, that any attempt to reconsider the task of self-understanding requires a look at religion.

Finally, after showing how religion aids in the process of self-understanding, in chapter three I will suggest three components of religion in particular that allow us to overcome our cynicism and fund an alternative world, namely, embodied awareness, saintly compassion, and creative activity. The first, which takes us back to *Critique of Cynical Reason*, comes especially from an awareness of the present as a way to remind ourselves that there is more to life itself than the troubling structures of injustice that surround us. The second, derived from ethicist Edith Wyschogrod, comes through the recognition of the suffering of the Other. The third, returning to Berdyaev, draws on the analysis of religion as the process whereby humans creatively transcend themselves presented in the second chapter and the recognition of the way in which spirituality attests to the possibility of something new entering the world. Thus, as a whole, this project aims both to answer the problem of cynicism, hoping to provide alternative imaginative trajectories away from our society of duplicitous suspicion, and to provide new coordinates for some of our oldest methods of imagining a better world. Before moving to a prescription, however, we must begin with a diagnosis. To that end, I turn to Sloterdijk's two genealogies of cynicism, that we might see how our cynical reason has developed and to get acquainted with the difficulties of overcoming it.

## CHAPTER I | CYNICISM: ITS SYMPTOMS AND CAUSES

### *FROM KYNICISM TO CYNICISM: THE FIRST GENEALOGY OF CYNICAL SPLIT-PERSONALITY*

To understand how our society became so cynical, it is necessary to first establish a working definition of cynicism and then trace the historical developments that led to its appearance. Offering his most succinct and oft-quoted definition, Sloterdijk says that cynicism is “*enlightened false consciousness*. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice.”<sup>6</sup> Herein lies a certain paradox, however, for presumably the shadows of one’s false consciousness dissolve in the bright moment of enlightenment. An “enlightened false consciousness” is a contradiction in terms. We know that something is deeply wrong with the structural conditions of our lives, but we buy into them anyway, even though we feel it would be better to do something else. This feeling of internal division, we will see, is what qualifies cynicism as cynicism. “To act against better knowledge is today the global situation in the superstructure,” writes Sloterdijk,<sup>7</sup> highlighting that cynicism is not just a private experience but is also a widespread phenomenon. Another paradox arises with this aspect of contemporary cynicism, summarized in the above quoted observation that cynicism is “universal and diffuse,” since cynicism would seem to come from a feeling of being “outside” the activities of day-to-day life, in singular personalities and critics. Sloterdijk explains both of these paradoxes, “enlightened false consciousness” and the universality of cynicism, through genealogical presentations, situating cynicism in historical contexts, as a natural product of a long history of Western thinking and politics. First, it will be useful to trace the shift from cynicism as a marginal phenomenon to an integrated and ubiquitous one. Then, following that genealogy, we might consider in more detail how the paradoxical formula of “enlightened false consciousness” emerges after passing through the development of the enlightenment.

<sup>6</sup> Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5. Emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 6.

Beginning his genealogy of cynicism's ubiquity, Sloterdijk returns to Greece, in a standard philosophical move, to consider the ancient forerunner of modern cynicism: Diogenes of Sinope. A lonely and odd philosopher, Diogenes the *kynic* (an etymological help to distinguish this kind of ancient cynicism from modern cynicism) both belongs to the city as its critic but precisely as such is foreign. Even his methods of critique are opposed to the usual democratic practices of deliberation and creating institutions; Diogenes' criticism does not come through conversation with others or the schooling of pupils. Where Plato teaches through rational dialogue in the academy, Diogenes' philosophical approach is to show, with his body, that Athenian society is not the ultimate truth of life itself. Instead of *arguing* against social conventions, Diogenes, for example, takes a bath in public, embodying the very alternative to Athens he wishes to invoke. Diogenes is marked by negativity and being outside, not as a recluse, but as a public enemy; literally, an enemy of the public. His bodily life is in courageous unity with his thoughts about reality. But here we run into a gulf between cultural cynicism and ancient kynicism. Modern society does not appear to host a universally diffuse group of little Diogenesians, and, if it did, this would be something of a contradiction, given that Diogenes is qualified by his marginality. As Sloterdijk narrates, the type figure of ancient kynicism, lonely and individual, was slowly assimilated into the mass in modernity. This assimilation retains a certain obsession with individuality as well as a general ironic distance and suspicion, yet precisely as a *mass* phenomenon modern cynicism loses the particularity of ancient kynicism; modern cynicism is integrated within the *polis*. By continuing to work against their better judgment, integrated cynics forfeit ancient kynicism's position and method of critique.

In contrast to Diogenes, who presents a radical and, most importantly, an existential alternative lifestyle to the city of Athens encouraging others to *live* better, modern cynics retain their urban habits with the assumption that they *know* better. The ironic distance present between Diogenes and Athens is internalized as an ironic distance between the cynic's knowledge of the real nature of a society marked

by competition and any authentic compulsion to actually make things different.<sup>8</sup> As Sloterdijk writes, “[Cynicism] knows itself to be without illusions and yet to have been dragged down by the ‘power of things.’”<sup>9</sup> Diogenes does not allow himself to be dragged down, occupying a locus of self-legitimizing sovereignty, literally auto-nomous, whereas cynics ultimately capitulate to the forces and normative codes surrounding them. Yet if kynicism and cynicism are so different, how does one account for the etymological and perhaps historical link between then (kynicism) and now (cynicism)?

To answer this question, Sloterdijk goes “in search of lost cheekiness,”<sup>10</sup> attempting to see how the provocative, naked, and irreverent witness of Diogenes relates to modern cynicism. This search begins with philosophy itself. Philosophy, or at least ancient philosophy, argues Sloterdijk, is characterized by the harmony between life and ideas; the truth (or falsity) of a doctrine is manifest in the behavior of its adherents. One must embody the truth that one says, an important sticking point for ancient philosophy. But this emphasis gives birth to its own internal criticism, just as much philosophical—one must *say* the truth that one lives.<sup>11</sup> The latter is decisive for kynicism, embodied in the practice of saying the hard truth of life, identified by French philosopher Michel Foucault, another investigator of ancient kynicism, as the ancient practice of *parrhēsia*.<sup>12</sup> Philosophers are suspended between, on the one hand, ideas and the embodiment of those ideas, and on the other hand the way in

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8 On the topic of irony and cynicism, Franco Berardi suggests an ironic posture toward society allows for a creative way out of cynicism and the collapse of social solidarity. See Franco Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012), especially 154-158, which deals critically with Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

9 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 6.

10 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 101.

11 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 101.

12 “In the analysis of *parrhēsia* we will constantly find this opposition between useless knowledge which speaks of the being of things and the world, on the one hand, and on the other the parrhesiast's truth-telling which is always applied, questions, and is directed to individuals and situations in order to say what they are in reality, to tell individuals the truth of themselves hidden from their own eyes, to reveal to them their present situation, their character, failings, the value of their conduct, and the possible consequences of their decisions.” Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 19. Intriguingly, Foucault was aware of Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* by the time he gave these lectures but had not yet read it (cf. *The Courage of Truth*, 179). The similarities between Foucault's analysis of ancient kynicism and Sloterdijk's are profound, and it is telling that Foucault decided to study kynicism and its transformations via religious thought at the end of his life, also, like Sloterdijk, in order to fund a political alternative. For a significant comparison of Foucault and Sloterdijk on kynicism, see Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon*, Parallax (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

which life is actually lived and how one might articulate that living. Philosophy has both a constructive and critical mode. Criticism is crucial here, however, in that fidelity to what can actually be materialized wards off a problematic paternalism that demands behavior must follow ideas simply because they are “true.” As Sloterdijk explains, “By paying attention to what can be embodied, we remain protected from moral demagogy and from the terror of radical abstractions that cannot be lived out.”<sup>13</sup> Protecting us from falling for illusory moral schemes is what kynicism is all about.

Diogenes is characterized by a bodily refusal to take for granted what establishment philosophy and politics are attempting to enforce. “Kynicism is a first reply to Athenian hegemonic idealism that goes beyond theoretical repudiation,” writes Sloterdijk. “It does not speak against idealism, it lives against it.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Diogenes only survives in history through second-hand reporting and parables, not through the establishment of an academy or the transmission of theoretical texts. Again, however, this is not a rejection of philosophy, nor even of politics, but a philosophy and a politics from “below.” When “high theory” finds itself woefully abstracted from actual, lived life, or worse, finds itself imposing its ideals paternally, kynicism comes along with a belly laugh or a public bath to, literally, bring philosophy back to its senses. High theory depends on telling individuals what to be, or attempting to articulate the true nature of reality, while low theory shows individuals what they are. As Foucault explains, “The parrhesiast does not reveal what is to his interlocutor; he discloses or helps him to recognize what he is.”<sup>15</sup> Sloterdijk calls this an “uncivil enlightenment,” a “non-Platonic dialogue” that calls the bluff of anyone willing to think beyond their means.<sup>16</sup>

Kynicism’s cheeky and courageous response to those with their heads in the clouds, however, creates what Sloterdijk identifies as “a previously unknown moral tension,” which he calls “the

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13 “The question is not what is virtue without terror but what is terror other than consistent idealism.” Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 102.

14 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 104.

15 Foucault. *The Courage of Truth*. 19.

16 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 102.

*dialectic of disinhibition.*”<sup>17</sup> By employing comedy and satire to reveal the illusions behind the seriousness of doctrine and dominance, cynicism encourages the powerful, too, to “let go affectively,” as Sloterdijk puts it.<sup>18</sup> The actions precluded, or inhibited, by the moral or political frameworks they use to organize society are no longer off the table, since they are revealed to be farcical. Now the embodied satire of cynicism is met with “an idealism with a disinhibition that is disguised as outrage and that, in the most extreme case, can go as far as extermination. An essential aspect of power is that it only likes to laugh at its own jokes.”<sup>19</sup> Cynicism's jokes become punishable crimes of blasphemy. The product of this dynamic is what Sloterdijk calls a “master cynicism,” wherein, having been uncivilly enlightened, those with power enjoy a double sense of freedom—on the one hand, they have the freedom offered by their social and material status, to do or consume what they like, yet on the other hand they have the freedom to transgress certain codes of nobility that come along with that status simply because *they can*.

Master cynicism recognizes the ideas according to which society is organized are in fact negotiable, not “real,” thereby accepting the critique of cynicism. But because those ideas are useful fictions which regulate society and afford positions of privilege, those in power must at least prop them up in word, if not always in deed, leading to a certain split personality. Sloterdijk outlines the difference between Diogenes and domination as follows: “Ancient cynicism, primary and pugnacious cynicism, was a plebeian antithesis to idealism. [Master] cynicism, by contrast, is the masters' antithesis to their own idealism as ideology and as masquerade.”<sup>20</sup> Or as Slavoj Žižek summarizes, commenting on Sloterdijk’s analysis of cynicism, “cynicism is not a direct position of immorality, it is more like

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17 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 103. Emphasis in original.

18 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 103.

19 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 103.

20 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 111. In the original text, Sloterdijk says “Modern cynicism.” I have changed “modern” to “master” in order to avoid confusion, since “modern cynicism” is, in Sloterdijk’s work, sometimes synonymous with master cynicism and sometimes more general. As we will see below, for Sloterdijk the cynicism of the masses is a result of the cynicism found among the masters, exposed by their enlightenment critics.

morality itself put in the service of immorality—the model of cynical wisdom is to conceive probity, integrity, as a supreme form of dishonesty, and morals as a supreme form of profligacy, the truth as the most effective form of a lie.”<sup>21</sup> Kynicism's critique, the jokes and public offenses of Diogenes, are now internalized behind closed doors, assimilated and mixing in with power structures that survive under the pretext of presenting a good life.

Though kynicism is sublated into modern cynicism, Sloterdijk emphasizes that assimilating kynicism in part does not obliterate it. Embodied kynicism returns in history, bubbles up, as a response to master cynicism, as a cynical resistance that corresponds to cynical illusions: “self-embodiment in resistance and self-splitting in repression,” Sloterdijk summarizes.<sup>22</sup> Kynicism and cynicism are therefore both typological figures, “constants in history, typical forms of a polemical consciousness ‘from below’ and ‘from above,’” as Sloterdijk puts it, manifesting especially in moments of social crisis where cynics scramble to keep their power intact and kynics see an opportunity to pierce through the ideological veil.<sup>23</sup> These two impulses necessarily provoke and develop one another, all along a complicated fault line where “the truth” is regularly mobilized for territorial advances.

Genealogically, then, the move from ancient kynicism to modern cynicism relies on the slow integration, but not abolition, of kynical impulses under the structures of power funded by idealism. Plato does not enjoy a full victory, however, for the rulers themselves understand behind closed doors

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21 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, The Essential Žižek (London: Verso, 2008), 26. Though Žižek disagrees with Sloterdijk's conclusions in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, he largely agrees with Sloterdijk's analysis of cynicism and acknowledges its far-ranging implications though not without some significant psychoanalytic tweaks of Sloterdijk's phenomenological analysis. I will return to Žižek later in this chapter.

22 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 218. While Sloterdijk does not suggest this link, there is a certain similarity here with the work of Julia Kristeva's identification of the “semiotic” and “symbolic” sides of language, the former corresponding to the embodied musicality of language arising from our biological drives, and the latter corresponding to language's thetic or theoretical uses, which often repress but can never eliminate the semiotic drives that give rise to it. Thus for Kristeva, the subject is always “in process/on trial,” since the semiotic component of language and ourselves, by virtue of its inability to be extinguished and its role in constituting normative culture, is always threatening to bubble up within symbolic language and, perhaps more significantly and pertinent to Sloterdijk, within our very culture itself. See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

23 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 218. Kynicism and cynicism are not dialectically related in a Hegelian sense, but they do bear out Sloterdijk's commitment to Heraclitus's contradictory ontology. See especially Chapter 11 of *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

that one need not be a “philosopher,” neither trying to live what one says nor say what one lives, in order to be a king. Modern cynicism results in the form of what Sloterdijk calls a “schizoid realism,”<sup>24</sup> wherein the allegedly universal legitimations of power (ecclesial hierarchy, the Divine right of kings, the normative economic “laws” of supply and demand, etc.) are upheld by those in power in order to remain in power, while they take themselves to be capable of instituting, or simply occupying, their own state of exception.

The majority of people fall in-between those who imagine and bulwark the flexible fictions of master cynicism and those who try to cultivate the removed, sovereign, autonomous center of cynicism. For them (or should I say us?), cynicism emerges as a defensive strategy, a tactic of self-preservation. Becoming a cynic requires that one fails to hold down a job, since the cynic is qualified by saying the truth to power despite the consequences. But the cynical critique, carried out in public, is not lost on those without significant power positions either. We know, like the masters, that the present social configuration is not *really* the result of some noble ideal, like democracy or a common good, but we do not have the power to do anything about this fact other than try to use it to our advantage. This split in our consciousness is especially debilitating because we would really like to believe in the possibility of doing some good action, but we recognize that “nice guys finish last,” as the saying goes. Further, a real shot at holding the reins of power is not available for most, and, even if one had the necessary configurations of advantages and ambition to try to climb the ladder, one knows that inevitably any moral code or authentic belief will need to be quickly abandoned at a moment’s notice. “Others would do it anyway, perhaps worse,” says Sloterdijk articulating our cynical willingness to betray our convictions if the situation calls for it.<sup>25</sup> Caught between the knowledge that the fictions

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24 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 82. See also Louisa Shea’s excellent summation of Sloterdijk’s analysis of cynicism’s “schizoid” split in *The Cynic Enlightenment*. 148-150.

25 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

power tells are illusory and the despair that one's own morality is an obstacle to survival, modern cynicism is, indeed, universal and diffuse.

*FROM ENLIGHTENMENT DIALOGUE TO IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE: THE SECOND GENEALOGY OF CYNICAL SPLIT-  
PERSONALITY*

Sloterdijk's genealogy of cynicism and cynicism, like all genealogies, is not intended to be an air-tight historical or empirical argument;<sup>26</sup> it suggests a deep connection that helps to give us coordinates for how we got to where we are, coordinates which allow us see that where we are is historically conditioned and open to further revision. Not content to rely simply on one genealogical story, Sloterdijk tells another story, this time about the Enlightenment, a constitutive event and process for western society.<sup>27</sup> In the Enlightenment, resistance to power comes not through an embodied alternative *à la* cynicism but through reason. As a direct consequence of this significant epistemological development, cynicism develops not only among the masters but also among the enlighteners, again leaving those in-between with no alternative. On Sloterdijk's account, the history of Enlightenment tells the story of what happens when the academic dream of a purely rational dialogue meets the harsh realities of institutional power and cultural ideology, at which point knowledge is no longer utopic but necessarily strategic. One develops knowledge in order to uncover the truth behind power, a move that also breaks apart our previous ways of making sense, dependent as they were on trusting certain authorities and structures. After a series of disillusionments, understood both denotatively and connotatively, modern cynicism emerges as a means of coping with a new environment. Denotatively, the history of enlightenment is one that seeks to overcome illusions. Connotatively, the involuntary loss

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26 As Andreas Huyssen notes in his foreword to *Critique of Cynical Reason*, as a universal history of cynicism Sloterdijk's book would be seriously flawed (xi). Sloterdijk explicitly says his study is not historical but "physiognomic," an attempt to describe the cynical state of consciousness. But to grasp this structure, he says he must "[localize] it in a political history of polemical reflections." *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 6. Sloterdijk reflects on the genealogical method himself in *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice*.

27 For a detailed and critical summary of Sloterdijk's early critique of Enlightenment, see Neil Wilson, "Punching Out the Enlightenment: A Discussion of Peter Sloterdijk's *Kritik der Zynischen Vernunft*," in "Special Issue on the Critiques of the Enlightenment," *New German Critique* 41 (Spring - Summer, 1987): 53-70.

of illusions that helped one make sense of the world yields a disoriented, embittered, and suspicious attitude.

Enlightenment is the attempt to illuminate the truths of our reality, including our social reality, by developing independent means of investigation such that anyone might find the truth for themselves rather than relying on the authority of tradition. Because our reason is still limited to our own experience, true Enlightenment requires the synthesis of multiple perspectives, each trying to change the other. Sloterdijk begins his genealogy of modernity with Enlightenment's purported vision of changing another person through no coercion other than reason alone, summarized in what contemporary enlightener Jürgen Habermas calls the “unforced force of the better argument.”<sup>28</sup> The enlightener imagines on a plane in which, as Sloterdijk describes, “dispassionate individuals, not enslaved to their own consciousness and not repressed by social ties, come together for a dialogue directed at truth under the laws of reason.”<sup>29</sup> But while the enlightener might imagine on the plane of an “epistemological idyll of peace,”<sup>30</sup> as Sloterdijk calls it, the enlightener *lives* on quite a different plane.

As it turns out, not every person the enlightener encounters really wishes to engage in dialogue about one’s deepest held convictions or the moral frameworks that make their positions of privilege, or simply their means of making sense of their world, possible. Enlightenment encounters a natural reaction of resistance toward its gift of rational discourse. In fact, on the plane of lived experience, when the enlightener tries to speak with another person, it is not really “truth” that is ultimately at issue, as though one’s dialogue partner has an innate and overpowering desire to submit to the results of reason. As Sloterdijk explains:

In the confrontations of enlightenment with preceding stances of consciousness, *everything but truth* is at stake: hegemonic positions, class interests, established doctrines, desires, passions, and the defense of

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28 Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 306. See also Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 14.

29 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 13.

30 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 13.

‘identities.’ These impediments so strongly remold the dialogue of enlightenment that it would be more appropriate to talk of a war of consciousness than a dialogue of peace. The opponents do not submit themselves to a previously agreed upon peace treaty; rather they confront each other in a competition directed at banishment and annihilation; and they are not free in relation to the powers that force their consciousness to speak just so, and in no other way.<sup>31</sup>

Drawing up the battle lines of consciousness forces enlighteners to change strategy, moving from the dream of peaceful dialogue to the problem of speaking to those who do not want to hear—now enlightenment’s Others (whether they are people in power or people under the spell of the fictions told by power) are no longer fellow subjects welcome at the table of truth, but “necessarily become ‘cases,’ their consciousness an object,” writes Sloterdijk. “Because they do not want to talk with us, we have to talk about them.”<sup>32</sup> Specifically, Sloterdijk notes, enlighteners have to talk about the causes and methods of resistance they encounter, especially since those in power will not enter dialogue given the risk of exposure (a critique of authority, tradition, and prejudice threatens to open a lot of intentionally closed doors), and everyday persons will not enter dialogue given either a naive belief in the ruling ideology as a means of making sense of one’s world or simply because doing so puts one in danger with respect to ruling authorities. Sloterdijk suggests this shift, from talking *with* to talking *about* others, marks Enlightenment’s transition from the utopic dream of universal dialogue to a series of unmasking procedures characterized by negativity and suspicion—in short, Sloterdijk calls this Enlightenment’s transformation into ideology critique.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this shift is the lesson and maxim that “Knowledge is power.” “Those who utter the sentence reveal the truth,” writes Sloterdijk. “However, with the utterance they want to achieve more than truth: They want to intervene in the game of power.”<sup>34</sup> Thus

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31 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 13. Emphasis added.

32 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 15.

33 Cf. chapter 2 of *Critique of Cynical Reason*, “Enlightenment as Dialogue: Critique of Ideology as Continuation of the Miscarried Dialogue through Other Means.”

34 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. xxvii.

the way one relates to knowledge becomes a matter of military strategy, where one puts the truth to work in devising ever better ways of taking power. The consequences of militarizing epistemology, Sloterdijk explains, meant the proliferation of a variety of new techniques and methods in an attempt to gain the upper hand—truth becomes an arms race, which requires careful and detailed work in order to stay ahead on the field of knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Naked truth takes on a different meaning in a civil enlightenment, where resistance to master cynicism is no longer found in a body like Diogenes, standing for itself, but in the proliferation of research methodologies and sciences, aiming to lay bare the nakedness of reality. Moreover, the critique of Diogenes has no need for intervening in the game of power, and, indeed, eschews the game of power entirely, knowing that by living his life outside the confines of the ruling ideology he is already powerful enough. Enlightenment, on the other hand, looks for the naked truth of reason, which it can mobilize against the fictional clothing of master cynics. Yet it only rolls these weapons out in dialogical situations that, on paper, should lead to peace but, in actuality, lead to conflict (a situation I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter). In making knowledge a game of war, enlightenment, which still harbors the dream of universal dialogue until that dialogue becomes impossible, has to conceal the power grabs underneath its attempt to reason in order to gain a position of respectability, a seat at the dialogical table which is really a matter of ideology critique. In the Enlightenment, the work of reason turns into critique, and the work of critique trades in public baths for secret weapons.

Because enlightenment emerges as critique, however, it is unable to mobilize its secret weapons into a significant alternative program. “Critique does not have a unified bearer,” writes Sloterdijk, “but rather is splintered into a multitude of schools, factions, currents, avant-gardes. Basically, there is no unified and unambiguous enlightenment ‘movement.’ One feature of the dialectic of enlightenment is that it was never able to build a massive front; rather, early on, it developed, so to speak, into its own

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<sup>35</sup> See chapter 10 of *Critique of Cynical Reason*, entitled “Black Empiricism: Enlightenment as Organization of Polemical Knowledge.”

opponent.”<sup>36</sup> This meant there was no alternative, cohesive worldview for premodern, modern, and now postmodern persons to trade for their previous one, and also that every proposed enlightenment development could be revealed to be another mask of power or an insufficient picture of reality. Modernity, Sloterdijk says, “begins with splits, inconsistencies, and ironies.”<sup>37</sup> Sorting out what truths from tradition are worth keeping and which ones are worth rejecting is no simple task, and it is unclear that the allegedly new truths are really all that much better. Thus Enlightenment, too, like the dialectic of disinhibition, contributes to our split consciousness, a cynical space in which we hold on to morals and ideas as long as they help us make sense of our world or get us somewhere advantageous, but abandon them or agonize over them when the situation calls for it.

This creates a problem in unjust societies like ours, because while one knows the present configuration is a mixture of competing interests, one is unable to resolutely reject parts of it because our information is always suspect. Our very actions could be hurting rather than helping, or the causes we support could just be another scheme for profit. Our cynical way of being recognizes the distance between our hope and our actions, but continues to act in line with the present social configuration anyway, taking it for granted. Žižek, again commenting on Sloterdijk, puts the matter well: “The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask... one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it.”<sup>38</sup> A gulf emerges between what we think might be the “right thing to do” and what is actually possible or advantageous for us to do, and when push comes to shove, the latter wins out.

Between the encampments of cynical masters and cynical jesters, and between the mythological stories of power and the cold facts of enlightenment, everyday persons develop a cynical attitude as a

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36 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 76-77.

37 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 169.

38 Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. 25, 26.

defense mechanism—that cynicism is a matter of self-preservation is the recurring leitmotif throughout Sloterdijk's analysis of cynical reason. Enlightenment has its casualties, especially when those in power are not willing to simply give up their positions in the light of reason; the unforced force of the better argument is met with the doubly forced force of the stronger authority. A burning heretic or scientist is not the picture of self-preservation that attracts modern persons, and besides, who knows if the victim is really a martyr or a would-be strategist in a game of power? At the same time, however, when enlightenment appears to be on the offensive and winning side, namely during revolutions or more subtle cultural victories, the instinct of self-preservation requires one to switch sides. Cynics are opportunists, ready to join the side of whoever appears to be winning (Sloterdijk himself devotes a section of *Critique of Cynical Reason* to a theory of the “double agent”<sup>39</sup>). They know that whatever ideology is calling the shots, the mobilizing ideas are irrelevant provided one ends up on the right side of the line, manifesting the disillusionment of cynicism in the denotative sense. To return to a quote above, “[Cynicism] is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice,” writes Sloterdijk.<sup>40</sup> Enlightenment succeeds in making sure cynics know not to trust the ruling authority, but because those ruling authorities still exist enlightenment fails to produce any actual, material change.

Hence on Sloterdijk's narrative, cynicism emerges in Western culture as a form of split consciousness, a “schizoid” phenomenon where one is unfortunately stuck between two poles. Everyday persons were unable to accept the radical, embodied critique of Diogenes, which sparked the cynical politics of those “above.” And everyday persons were equally unable to fully participate in Enlightenment's procedures of unveiling the illusory structures and patterns of thinking used for the advantage of master cynics. Cynicism is the result of a long and arduous process of criticizing our

39 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 113-115.

40 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

deeply held beliefs, a process not yet over and never fully accomplished. We are left with one foot in the dimming gray of old morals and the other foot in the bright light of enlightenment. Straddling this fence is difficult, for we want to know the truth about things but there is no final discernible truth to be had.

Cynicism's split consciousness does not simply affect individuals in the middle, however, but appears on all sides, eroding our social solidarity. Among ruling elites and moralists, one says one thing but reserves the right to do another, thus upholding the guiding fictions of society. Average persons know that this is going on, that the stories told by those in power or on the road to power are illusions, but social conditions are so deeply embedded that this knowledge does not allow one to change those conditions. Self-preservation becomes the watchword, and that means being willing to give up a moral position or hope for a better world if one is offered a paying job. All this leads to a profound feeling of disappointment, produced by the exacerbating tension between knowing what is wrong but being unable to change it, resigning ourselves to participating in a world we would rather reject, revealing cynicism's disillusionment in the connotative sense.

*DEFEATED, DISAPPOINTED, DESPAIRING*

Emerging out of the drama of Western consciousness as an odd narrative of political gains, critiques, and retreats, cynicism appears as a way to survive the shaky ground of society and history. Cynicism, as Sloterdijk presents it, is a form of self-preservation, one that realizes that if you are unwilling to get your hands dirty once in a while you will find yourself out of a job. Self-preservation depends on participation in the structures of society that exist, simply because, let's face it, that's the way things are, like it or not, and that means one has to find a way to survive without losing oneself in wishful thinking. "It is what it is" is tied on cynical hands and worn on cynical foreheads as a reminder not to be lulled into a false hope. Importantly, however, most cynics *do not* like the way things are, but feel like there is no other option. Sloterdijk describes them (or again should I say us?) as "borderline

melancholics, who can keep their symptoms of depression under control and can remain more or less able to work.”<sup>41</sup> Cynics are able to exercise the freedom of the powerful by willfully suspending the moral frame that is allegedly normative, yet this ability really only adds insult to injury, since cynics are unable to actually enjoy the fruits of that freedom anyway (average cynics do not have access to wealth or social positions enjoyed by those in power).

Instead, Sloterdijk explains, cynicism “is afflicted with the compulsion to put up with preestablished relations that it finds dubious, to accommodate itself to them, and finally even to carry out their business.”<sup>42</sup> Lest one think the form of cynicism found among those of us “below” is qualitatively different than the one found among those “above,” in positions of power, Sloterdijk notes that even those above who exercise a cynical suspension of inhibitions often do so with the full understanding that things could not be otherwise, and that they sully their moral selves by legitimating such suspensions (as we will see later on, this kind of dynamic is expressed especially well by Dostoevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor, which Sloterdijk takes as a prime example of master cynicism). Regardless of where it is found, cynicism remains a false consciousness because there is a fundamental disconnect between what it says or knows and what it does, a split personality resulting in a series of psychological confusions and inwardly taxing compromises. This is the result of the disillusionment of Enlightenment in the connotative sense, disillusioned because, for the cynic, all hope really only leads to despair. “Behind the capable, collaborative, hard façade, [cynicism] covers up a mass of offensive unhappiness and the need to cry,”<sup>43</sup> observes Sloterdijk in a characteristic moment of sympathy—enlightenment is irreversible no matter how much the cynic might long, secretly, for simpler times, and this loss of innocence carries a grief that comes back to us in waves.

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41 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

42 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 6.

43 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, cynics are qualified by taking themselves to be realists. One might wish for something else, but things are *really* this way. Cynics, Sloterdijk explains, have to sacrifice any wishful thinking, must make themselves victims of a system of advantages, if they are to mitigate the effects of competing interests. Cynical realism rejects any strong “good and evil” dualism as frankly useless in navigating the complexities of a situation in which all knowledge is strategy, or in which all knowledge serves as a cover for some hidden feeling or motive. “Instinctively,” writes Sloterdijk, “[cynics] no longer understand their way of existing as something that has to do with being evil, but as participation in a collective, realistically attuned way of seeing things.”<sup>44</sup> What good will the good do you? Even those who do manage to hold on to some strong morality in theory are ultimately overwhelmed by the power of society itself to ignore that morality. While cynics pride themselves on being realistic and refusing to settle for the illusions of optimism, the way things really are is recognizably awful, and it means individuals must compromise what vestigial parts of moral or orienting systems they might have had in order to survive. When cynicism is universal and diffuse, to be a realist means to be disappointed.

The disappointment of cynics is extended by the active role cynics must take in perpetuating the conditions of a society that is psychologically burdensome. As Sloterdijk explains:

[Cynics] know what they are doing, but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so.... Thus, the new, integrated cynicism even has the understandable feeling about itself of being a victim and of making sacrifices.<sup>45</sup>

One can understand these kinds of attitudes especially in humanitarian fields like social work or medicine, where a commitment to helping others runs up against red tape and profit margins. In the end one volunteers to take on the position of drafting policy or trying to work with the system, only to be reminded that these fields have a way of doing things, or that this is just how things have to be, and it is

44 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

45 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

best not to upset those habits. One settles in, then, performing a job that hopefully mitigates some disasters without the ability to mitigate all of them, and sees this as a certain calling—at least I *know* this is bad, and perhaps I can find a crack to exploit here or there. Over time, however, these moral hopes are gradually eroded, and cynicism comes into its own, manifesting in a proud assertion of one's ability to sniff out the worst in a situation. “A certain chic bitterness provides an undertone to [cynicism's] activity,” Sloterdijk writes. “For cynics are not dumb, and every now and then they certainly see the nothingness to which everything leads. Their psychic apparatus has become elastic enough to incorporate as a survival factor a permanent doubt about their own activities.”<sup>46</sup> All this flexibility only increases the internal tension of one's split between knowing and doing, which cements one's cynical disposition to expect the worst and ward off the possibility of an alternative. Battered and buffered, cynical consciousness has no choice but to relent in resignation.

Cynical realism therefore removes the possibility of imagining or hoping for an alternative, weighed down as it is by its surroundings and the loss of believable moral coordinates. Old hopes must be set aside to carry out the task at hand. This leaves us adrift without a collaborative means of working toward another vision. “With the passing of defiant hopes, the listlessness of egoisms pervades,” writes Sloterdijk, explaining that individuals are cast adrift without purpose. “In the new cynicism, a detached negativity comes through that scarcely allows itself any hope, at most a little irony and pity.”<sup>47</sup> Though hope is all-too-often another ideological fiction,<sup>48</sup> without it, under the spell of a cynical realism, nothing ever changes and reality itself is unlivable, despite the fact that one still needs to make a living. Cynical consciousness knows only an eternal stasis. The trouble with cynicism is not that it is *wrong*, but that it is hyper-informed, leading Sloterdijk to say cynicism is “almost more melancholy than false; it is a consciousness that, under the compulsions of self-preservation, continues to run itself, though run

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46 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

47 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 6.

48 I intend to explore this further in chapter 3, where I attend to Sloterdijk's recommendation of providing an alternative realism, or an alternative understanding of the present.

down, in a permanent moral self-denial.”<sup>49</sup> Against its will, cynicism must sadly go about its work, perpetuating networks of bad habits and status quos.

While these are psychologically debilitating and damaging effects, exactly how one goes about changing the condition of cynicism is not immediately clear. The cynicism Sloterdijk identifies is so difficult to overcome because it is both effective and realistic; it effectively allows us to navigate a social milieu in such a way that we can survive and even have a modest, if embittered, life, and it premises itself on a realistic view of social conditions that is admittedly often right, structurally, at least. But finding a way to overcome cynicism is necessary if we are to change our present social configuration. Enclosed on itself, cynical consciousness cannot muster the ability to think beyond the present system of injustices and moral compromises it is forced to take part in. As a result, those conditions are reproduced through the participation of disappointed persons who are nonetheless able to go to work on time. “Indeed,” writes Sloterdijk, “this is the essential point in modern cynicism: the ability of its bearers to work—in spite of anything that might happen, and especially, after anything that might happen.”<sup>50</sup> This has led Sloterdijk to call cynicism an ideology, a fiction by which unjust forms of life are capable of continuing by pacifying the consciousness of the masses. But while cynicism is an ideology, “the traditional critique of ideology,” writes Sloterdijk, “stands at a loss before this cynicism. It does not know what button to push in this cynically keen consciousness to get enlightenment going.”<sup>51</sup> In what is perhaps one of the most provocative and equally most important pieces of Sloterdijk's analysis, he suggests that more critique is not the answer, that critical methods of philosophizing, which have made up the dominant way of thinking in Western thought since modernity, have only created and exacerbated the problem of cynicism. Before proceeding to a solution, and a

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49 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 217.

50 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

51 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 3.

therapy for cynicism, which is the ultimate aim of this project, it will be necessary to consider how *not* to proceed.

*WE KNOW ALREADY! THE IMPOTENCE OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE*

Since cynicism hinges on a certain critical and negative consciousness, attempting to motivate cynicism to change by producing more refined critiques of our present situation is ineffective. On the first page of *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk lays out this difficulty:

Modern cynicism presents itself as that state of consciousness that follows after naive ideologies and their enlightenment. In it, the obvious exhaustion of ideology critique has its real ground. This critique has remained more naive than the consciousness it wanted to expose; in its well-mannered rationality, it did not keep up with the twists and turns of modern consciousness to a cunning multiple realism. The formal sequence of false consciousness up to now—lies, errors, ideology—is incomplete; the current mentality requires the addition of a fourth structure: the phenomenon of cynicism. To speak of cynicism means trying to enter the old building of ideology critique through a new entrance.<sup>52</sup>

The early Sloterdijk is no conservative;<sup>53</sup> he praises the revelations of modernity and rejects a simple retrieval of “naive ideologies.” He goes as far as to say there is something healthy in cynicism's realism on this score.<sup>54</sup> But he recognizes that cynicism is itself an ideology, and he spends the rest of his text,

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52 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 3.

53 One must add the qualifier “early” because Sloterdijk's later work is regularly accused of harboring conservative sentiments, at the very least, sentiments that are totally compatible with certain conservative ways of thinking related to neoliberalism. This critique comes especially with respect to Sloterdijk's notorious essay on the welfare state, “The Grasping Hand,” *City Journal* (Winter 2010): 1, accessed September 01, 2015, [http://www.city-journal.org/2010/20\\_1\\_snd-democratic-state.html](http://www.city-journal.org/2010/20_1_snd-democratic-state.html), an extension of his reading of capitalism in *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation*, trans. Mario Wenning (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Axel Honneth and Slavoj Žižek are among the particularly significant critics in this regard. It is beyond the scope of this project to offer a rehearsal or rebuttal of those critiques, and, indeed, I am not convinced they are wholly off the mark. At this point, however, it is important to note that *Critique of Cynical Reason* retains a far more explicitly “radical” sensibility, and it seems there is a certain amount of political discontinuity, at least, between this early, seminal work and Sloterdijk's later career, even if one does not subscribe to the assumption that Sloterdijk ends up a conservative. Moreover, it is important to note that Sloterdijk's politics do not necessarily poison his structural insights, a point showed well by Žižek's own use of Sloterdijk in his work, which regularly notes Sloterdijk's importance in articulating certain descriptions but ultimately rejects his prescriptions. For Sloterdijk's own brief but illuminating retrospective comments on *Critique of Cynical Reason*, see Peter Sloterdijk and Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, *Neither Sun nor Death*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2011), 281. For a good summary of Sloterdijk's leftism that takes some of these issues into account see the work of Sjoerd van Tuinen, specifically “Critique Beyond Resentment: An Introduction to Peter Sloterdijk's Jovial Modernity,” in “Peter Sloterdijk,” special issue, *Cultural Politics* 3, no. 3 (November 2007): 275-306; “A Thymotic Left? Peter Sloterdijk and the Psychopolitics of Ressentiment,” *Symploke* 18, no. 2 (2010): 217-34; and “From Psychopolitics to Cosmopolitics: The Problem of Resentment,” in *Sloterdijk Now*, ed. Stuart Elden (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 37-57.

54 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 5.

as I rehearsed, attempting to trace out a lineage from which that cynicism is formed. It is important to note that, contrary to many of Sloterdijk's detractors (two of which we will examine below), his text does not announce the end of ideology, but the ineffectiveness of proliferating better methods of critique for the sake of creating alternatives, which goes hand in hand with his examination of the ways in which critique actually forms cynical persons. Further, by analyzing cynicism *as ideology*, Sloterdijk tries to reinvigorate the tradition of ideology critique to which he belongs by offering it a new variable to consider.

To understand why Sloterdijk argues that cynicism is impervious to ideology critique, one must recall his genealogical narrative. "Those who speak of cynicism," he writes, "will recall the limits of enlightenment."<sup>55</sup> Enlightenment begins, as discussed above, on the premise of an academic dream of peaceful dialogue. Two parties come to one another with the intention of reaching a common conclusion. Sloterdijk outlines the dream in simple terms: "The procedure of enlightenment accordingly has two aspects: the acceptance of the better position and the discarding of the previous position. This gives rise to an ambivalence of feelings: a gain and a pain."<sup>56</sup> But the pain is discarded because to give up one's point after a rational dialogue means that even the loser is a winner; everyone wins when dialogue produces a commonality.<sup>57</sup> The dream of enlightenment, however, remains just that, a dream. Soon it encounters persons who do not wish to be enlightened, because the old is far more instinctually trustworthy, and it is unclear whether or not the alleged enlightener is really an agent of universal peace. The pain turns out to be too powerful to be sublated into a gain. The failure of enlightenment's dreams of peaceful exchange forces enlighteners to shift strategies, which results in ideology critique. "Ideology critique means the polemical continuation of the miscarried dialogue through other means," says Sloterdijk.<sup>58</sup>

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55 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 10.

56 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 13.

57 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 13.

58 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 15.

By taking one's opponent's consciousness as an object to be discussed rather than a person to be met, ideology critique develops in the direction of precision and calculation. "Cut open the patient with the critical scalpel and operate under impeccably sterile conditions," explains Sloterdijk, intentionally invoking images of medically objectified human bodies. "The opponent is cut open in front of everyone until the mechanism of his error is laid bare."<sup>59</sup> While the enlightener might feel a sense of self-satisfaction, Sloterdijk explains that anyone who needs to be enlightened is driven away by such obviously threatening behavior. "Those who previously did not want to engage in enlightenment will want to do so even less now that they have been dissected and exposed by the opponent," says Sloterdijk.<sup>60</sup> Now the goal is not to make the loser into a winner but to make the loser apologize for being wrong—and to rack up the best forms of knock-down arguments one can get in a game of winning and losing. "Such critics," Sloterdijk writes, "like some medicos corrupted by their profession, are interested in the diseases, not in the patients."<sup>61</sup>

It is easy to see how individuals become cynical in such a climate. First it is clear by the surgical precision of critics that those in power are likely there for the sake of self-interest, so while one might not be a very good critic oneself the atmosphere is such that criticism is taken for granted. This is how cynics are aptly described as "enlightened," though this occurs in a sense through osmosis. But soon one realizes the critic is not necessarily one's friend, because shades of ideology remain in every average person. Exposing oneself to the critic's scalpel does not necessarily make one healthier but rather embarrassed. So we hold on to parts of our old consciousness for fear of being forced to admit we are wrong while simultaneously accepting that there are others out there who are trying to manipulate us for their own gain. It is safer to keep going to work, and to refuse to let all our premises be scrutinized, which is how cynics are also aptly described as having a "false consciousness." We are

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59 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 16. Here as elsewhere one sees shades of Foucault peering through the text.

60 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 17.

61 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 19.

products of a half-way enlightenment, aware enough not to trust anyone but resistant to further enlightenment, further ideology critique, because the critics are objectifying and untrustworthy. Consciousness is raised to know that our social conditions are unjust, and that we are part of them, but the way in which this consciousness comes about allows those conditions to reproduce themselves.

Moreover, it is unclear what gains we would incur by actually accepting this or that criticism. As enlighteners proliferated new ways to criticize knowledge claims, systems, and attitudes, they failed to provide a unified or trustworthy way out from old paradigms. “Metaphysical systems do not ‘fall,’” Sloterdijk explains, “but fade, seep away, stagnate, become boring, old hat, unimportant, and improbable.”<sup>62</sup> Modernity, on Sloterdijk's account, is not one giant, identifiable explosion but a gradual boiling over of a variety of criticisms that all contribute to a large-scale shift, rather than an immediate and radical break. Enlightenment is, as mentioned above, a collection of tendencies, schools of thought, facts, reactions, etc., that all develop alongside one another. Traditional methods of ideology critique are rendered ineffective because they have always already been only partly effective; indeed, their effectiveness is what creates their ineffectiveness, because they only ever succeed up to a point. Tell a cynic that they are being taken advantage of by an employer, and the cynic will simply reply, with a smile or a frown, “tell me something I don't know.” Doubt becomes the only means by which one can at least assure oneself that no wrong move is undertaken, because no move at all is actually made; the skeptic's position is always the stronger position. Cynicism emerges when one can be sure that all codes, moral systems, and sermons are said with fingers crossed, but one also recognizes that this is simply the competitive and normative way things are.

Sloterdijk's comments about traditional ideology critique have not gone unchallenged. Slavoj Žižek, for example, in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, takes Sloterdijk's analysis of cynicism seriously but suggests that Sloterdijk misses the crucial reason for the disconnect between one's

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62 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 356n16.

thoughts and actions, namely the psychoanalytic distinction between “symptom” and “fantasy.”<sup>63</sup> On Žižek's reading, the illusion that guides cynicism is not found in the domain of knowledge, where cynics rightly see through the veneer of authority's knowledge claims, but rather the illusion is found in the social reality itself; the unconscious, for Žižek, is material. To explain, he uses the example of money. In our everyday life, we all know that money is merely a sign that stands in for labor, giving its holder the ability to participate in exchange. But we actually *act* as though money is the wealth itself, not a signifier but the signified. “[Cynics] are fetishists in practice, not in theory,” says Žižek. “What they 'do not know', what they misrecognize, is the fact that in their social reality itself, in their social activity - in the act of commodity exchange - they are guided by the fetishistic illusion.”<sup>64</sup> Whereas Sloterdijk's version of cynicism is presented by Žižek as “they know what they are doing, but still they are doing it,” Žižek proposes the formula “they know that, in their activity, they are following an illusion, but still they are doing it.”<sup>65</sup> The fault lies not in knowing that money is just a signifier for social relations standing behind “things” but in acting as though money is itself the embodiment of those social relations. For Žižek, there remains one more illusion that cynics do not take into account, namely the illusion at the heart of the capitalist system itself, which depends on the accumulation of money and money alone.<sup>66</sup> The unconscious remains the last bastion of ideology, protected by the fact that the cynic is by definition unconscious of its activity, a clever move for a psychoanalyst like Žižek looking to provide a more refined critique of ideology in an allegedly postideological era.

Another prominent contemporary Marxist, Terry Eagleton, also sees Sloterdijk's examination of cynicism as useful and perceptive but ultimately off the mark. Though it is true that cynicism is a part of our social reality, and that many in the ruling elite and even those trying to climb their way there are

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63 Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. 27-30.

64 Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. 28.

65 Žižek. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. 30.

66 For another summary of this dynamic in Žižek, see Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 26-28.

willing to cynically compromise their values for their own advantage, it is not true, says Eagleton, that this phenomenon is as widespread as Sloterdijk suggests (“universal,” in fact). Eagleton summarizes his objection well:

If dominant ideologies very often involve falsity, however, it is partly because most people are not in fact cynics. Imagine a society in which everybody was either a cynic or a masochist, or both. In such a situation there would be no need for ideology, in the sense of a set of discourses concealing or legitimating injustice, because the masochists would not mind their suffering and the cynics would feel no unease about inhabiting an exploitative social order. In fact, the majority of people have a fairly sharp eye to their own rights and interests, and most people feel uncomfortable at the thought of belonging to a seriously unjust form of life. Either, then, they must believe that these injustices are *en route* to being amended, or that they are counterbalanced by greater benefits, or that they are inevitable, or that they are not really injustices at all.<sup>67</sup>

Eagleton suggests Sloterdijk is out of touch, and that his diagnosis of cynicism only accounts for a sliver of our actual social organization. Read with Sloterdijk's genealogy of cynicism, however, both Žižek and Eagleton fail to note the ways in which cynical consciousness is constructed, on Sloterdijk's account, through the halfway success of ideology critique.

It is unclear, for example, how Žižek's psychoanalytic scalpel, which attempts to know the opponent better than the opponent knows herself, would not simply add to the frustrated sense of defeat felt by cynical persons. While Žižek rightfully extends Sloterdijk's analysis of cynicism to the bedrock of capitalist social order, his argument relies on the possibility that by showing cynics that their real problem lies in practice by bringing the unconscious to consciousness and completing their halfway enlightenment, the gulf between thought and practice that resides there would collapse. This assertion seems to ignore Sloterdijk's significant point about the deep malaise felt by cynical persons—it is not the case that cynicism is merely an epistemological problem, but is probably more accurately referred to as a historical or spiritual condition. Eagleton's critique is equally problematic for the same reason; he fails to note the ways in which everyday persons are cynical toward their social environments, even

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67 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 27.

if they refuse to be morally flexible enough to turn their suspicion into a significant advantage, meaning their problem is not the need to simply be shown what is really going on but the need to find a way out of their internally despairing realism. At the top, among the masters, Eagleton also seems to miss one of Sloterdijk's basic points—there is *no need* for ideological discourse, but it exists nonetheless in order to maintain an arbitrary guiding fiction that master cynics themselves utter with a wink. Granted, these points could be challenged if the reader's experience is such that her neighbors are of the kind Eagleton suggests rather than embittered cynics, but at that point Sloterdijk's critique is a matter of degree rather than a matter of fact. In my estimation, it seems cynicism is a much more widespread and colloquial problem than Eagleton is willing to admit, and our consciousness, despite our real desires for rights or justice, has already largely admitted defeat.

Whether one takes these rebuttals as sufficient or not, Sloterdijk, Žižek, and Eagleton all agree that cynicism is still a problem for traditional modes of ideology critique. Eagleton sees it as at least less of a widespread problem, and therefore goes on to sort through other methods that work for unenlightened persons, which accounts, he says, for the majority of persons. Žižek recognizes cynicism as a completely widespread phenomenon, but locates the real issue underneath cynical consciousness, inside a capitalist unconscious. Sloterdijk's point, however, is that overcoming *cynicism* will not come from more refined critiques. Indeed, this accounts for his uncomfortable relationship to the tradition of Critical Theory where he at least partly belongs. Whatever the scale of the problem of cynicism, and wherever one locates the true depth of the problem, Sloterdijk is right to suggest that this problem cannot be addressed by traditional forms of ideology critique.<sup>68</sup> Battering an already battered consciousness by blaming, explaining, or promising new values will only harden the already stone skin of cynical resignation.

Better and more insightful critique is ultimately met by cynics with a yawn. This is the lesson

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<sup>68</sup> Here it bears noting that Žižek at least in part agrees with this, too, which is one of the occasions, he says, for writing *The Sublime Object of Ideology* as an attempt to create a new psychoanalytic critique of ideology. See pxxxii.

Critical Theory was not able to come up with on its own, primarily as a result of its own internalized sense of despair and an expectation of evil from the social order. On Sloterdijk's view, Critical Theory's "basic prejudice is that only evil power against the living can come from this world. That is the reason for the stagnation of Critical Theory. The offensive maneuver of refusing to collaborate has long been ineffective. The masochistic element has outdone the creative element."<sup>69</sup> Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* is an attempt to overcome the masochistic method of critique, which necessarily leads to despair.<sup>70</sup> All is not lost, as we will see, for cynicism does not, contrary to its own beliefs, have the last laugh. At this stage, it is important to know moving forward that responding to cynicism will require foregoing the temptation to provide a better critique of one's social reality, or trying to argue behind the backs of cynics.

*CONCLUSION: WILL THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN?*

In this first chapter, I have tried to elucidate three aspects of cynical consciousness as presented by Sloterdijk. First, its appearance as an internal split between thought and deed, resulting from a long and complicated history of establishment thinking and criticism, ranging from Diogenes' naked witness to the Enlightenment's naked facts. Second, I considered the way in which this internal split creates such a significant tension that individuals feel they have no choice but to resign to the power of things, weighed down by their gravity, making for a widespread cultural discontent that makes for a despair masked by a negative and defensive ego. Third, the combination of these two qualities—an internal split and a despairing disposition—were the result of a history of critique that was successful at the level of knowledge, meaning that any further critique would either exacerbate the problem of cynicism

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69 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. xxxv.

70 Intriguingly, religious commentators on Critical Theory, for example Jürgen Moltmann, Jakob Klapwijk, and Lambert Zuidervaart, regularly criticize the founders of the Frankfurt School for their lack of hope, which they find to be unsustainable. For these commentators, playing up the Messianic seeds in Critical Theory is one way of overcoming this problem, but only if one rejects the infinite deferral that constitutes much of the Frankfurt School's dialogue. See especially (not as a solution to Critical Theory's despair but as an example of the Messianic objection) Jacob Klapwijk, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Critical Theory and the Messianic Light* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

or fail to accomplish anything. What I intended to show was the way in which cynicism appears as an insulated, self-enclosed, and self-referential form of consciousness that makes sense in our social milieu, an inheritance of a diffused and botched enlightenment project, but which also leaves the troubling aspects of our social milieu intact. Cynicism is unable to mobilize, internally, the means to overcome its own consciousness because it emerges as a reaction and an adaptation to a competitive social space of competing bids for survival and self-preservation.

That cynicism is unable to overcome or extricate itself from within is especially important, as it reinforces the social space of competition that produces it. It functions as an internally closed mindset harboring its own critical consciousness while stuck in the institutions and relations it knows are riddled with problems. This is the hallmark of cynical self-understanding—today, we are humans who see ourselves as necessarily bound to a situation that means we act against our better knowledge, accept a general despair, and know the basic contours of criticism enough that we no longer require further critique. Approaching a vision of hope or an alternative is immediately shut down by cynical selves who are always looking for a chink in the argument, which feels like a momentary victory and success despite ultimately accomplishing nothing, save perhaps a momentary assertion of a semblance of dignity. One bets safely on the fact that the future is likely to host more trouble and problems than prosperity and mutuality, an easy conclusion looking back at the history of the last hundred years. “The late twentieth century rides on a wave of negative futurism. 'The worst was already expected,' it just has 'not yet' happened,” writes Sloterdijk, articulating the cynical frame that is only a hair's breadth away from outright pessimism.<sup>71</sup> This forestalls any imaginative action that could lead to an alternative. Cynicism's negative futurism ensures that the future will indeed be negative, as a self-fulfilling prophecy that shows no exit. Sloterdijk offers a summation of this dynamic worth quoting at length:

Cynicism, as *enlightened false consciousness*, has become a hard-boiled, shadowy

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71 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 12.

cleverness that has split courage off from itself, holds anything positive to be fraud, and is intent on somehow getting through life... Cynical consciousness adds up the 'bad experiences' of all times and lets only the prospectless uniformity of hard facts prevail... In the neocynical attitude, world-historical learning processes of bitterness come to fruition. They have stamped the traces of the coldness of exchange, of world wars, and the self-denial of ideals in our consciousness, which have become sick with experience. Hey, we're alive; hey, we're selling ourselves; hey, we're arming; those who die young save social security contributions. In this way cynicism guarantees the expanded reproduction of the past on the newest level of what is currently the worst.<sup>72</sup>

We have reached a psychological, spiritual, social, and ecological tipping point where cynical participation in our social organization is no longer possible. Reproducing the past by taking the current worst for granted has led to the exponential growth of self-destructive tendencies for Western society. Yet challenging the obvious sum of negativity proliferated in the twentieth century is no easy task. How does one show the way out of cynicism without promising new moralisms or theories “from above” that simply set up the latest curtains for master cynicism?

In the next chapter, I will argue that cynicism is a problem of an *encapsulated self-understanding*. Though cynicism presents itself as a realism, and indeed is that to a certain extent, I aim to further elucidate the problem of cynicism as the result of a fundamental misunderstanding of human beings. By seeing ourselves as participants in a system of advantages and self-interest that is presented as unchangeable, we convince ourselves that this is how it must be. On the contrary, however, humans are actually malleable beings always changing as a result of their practices. The practices of modernity, as Sloterdijk shows, lead to a human being that is always at war with its neighbors and always suspicious about its environment. But these practices are just that, practices, and by attending to how humans are formed through practices we might reconsider the possibility of alternative practices funding alternative humans. This is not a matter of critique but explication and creative possibilities. Considering a deeper self-understanding allows for a way out of cynicism not bound by the demand for moralized impositions of self-understanding from on high; the challenge to cynicism comes from

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72 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 546.

recognizing oneself, not an arbitrary authority.

Talking about humans as practicing beings, I will argue, opens up the possibility of talking about religion, aware of the problems of religion's complicity in moralisms and bad authoritarian tendencies. As Sloterdijk's late work shows, religion reveals the means by which human beings relativize their present social conditions and work toward the creation of other ones. Read alongside the phenomenon of cynicism, we can uncover new ways of seeing how religion might respond to the problems and malaise of modernity. At its best (and, to be sure, religion is not always, perhaps not even often, at its best), religion allows human beings an alternative pathway for development that is not the result of further ideology critique, but a profound new orientation and disposition toward a positive, practicing life. As I intend to show in the second and third chapters, religion can thereby release us from our despair over present conditions, not naively but transformatively, and provide a way to re-unify our thought and action such that we might not simply negotiate this world but bear witness to an alternative world.

## CHAPTER II | FROM GIVING UP TO GOING UP: MISTRUST, ANTHROPODICY, AND RELIGION

### INTRODUCTION: DIOGENES IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

When Diogenes emerged in ancient Greece, Athenian society was trying to put itself together in a time of transition. “Diogenes appears in the period of the decay of the Athenian urban community,” observes Sloterdijk, noting that the dissolution of Macedonian rule preceding the great Hellenistic melting pot eroded the possibility of a strict identification with the polis.<sup>73</sup> In this moment of cultural confusion, “all but the blind must recognize that a new ethos and a new anthropology are now needed,” writes Sloterdijk<sup>74</sup>—and Diogenes, who, as the story goes, scoured the countryside at night bearing a lamp in hopes of finding a true human, is not blind. In response to a time of social upheaval and identity negotiation, Diogenes identified himself not with the polis but as a *cosmopolitan*, a citizen of the cosmos itself, a prophet of life and vitality. Diogenes, as Sloterdijk says, speaks “in a dialogue of flesh and blood” and “is not cramped in opposition or fixated on contradiction. His life is marked by a humorous self-certainty characteristic only of great spirits.”<sup>75</sup> When it comes to placing the human, Diogenes' ancient cynicism hardly shrinks into reactions—Diogenes goes on the *offensive*.

Diogenes' offensive strategy, however, appears not as a need or desire to *dominate* the Athenian way of life, but rather a releasement away from it that is not dependent on being defensive, a move which offends the Athenians by finding comfortability in something else, in the cosmos. Diogenes' way of being is not a matter of self-enclosure but an openness to that which is beyond the self and beyond the present organization of human society. Instead of accepting the social norms of Athenian urbanism, Diogenes performs a radical reduction of all unnecessary societal trappings by recovering a spirit that is at home in life itself. One must hear this not as a lapse into a problematic nature/culture distinction, but a distinction between disjointed and unified lives. Kynicism is the unity of a human life with Life,

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73 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 164.

74 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 164.

75 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 104.

refusing the divide foisted onto citizens by society's production of unnecessary desires. Contrasting kynicism and its social alternative, Sloterdijk writes: "Citizens struggle with the chimera of ambition and strive for riches that, in the last analysis, they cannot enjoy any more than what is enjoyed in the elementary pleasures of the kynical philosopher as a daily recurring matter of course: lying in the sun, observing the goings-on in the world, being glad, and having nothing to wait for."<sup>76</sup>

To teach the citizen, contributing to a new ethos and new anthropology, Diogenes embodies that which is excluded by society, reminding the citizen that society is not all there is. This explains Diogenes' animality; *kynicism* derives from the Greek *kynikos*, meaning *dog-like*. As Sloterdijk puts it, "Greek kynicism discovers the animal body in the human and its gestures as arguments; it develops a pantomimic materialism."<sup>77</sup> Kynicism's odd pedagogy aims to show the citizen what is beyond the polis, and that in fact the citizen is not totally removed from this beyond. It is an education that demands *full* attention, and threatens not to tolerate anything half-way. "In the citizen," Sloterdijk writes, "there is a caged wolf who sympathizes with the biting philosopher. But Diogenes sees above all the citizen in his sympathizer, and he bites all the same. Theory and praxis are incalculably interwoven in his philosophy and there is no room for mere theoretical agreement."<sup>78</sup> These radical demands, taking lessons from animality, return in history among such figures as Jesus and St. Francis of Assisi.<sup>79</sup> The kynical impulse is an impulse of emancipation, an attempt to free humans from the confines of their present social lives into new horizons that are excluded by "common sense."

Today, in a cynical milieu and a society that is rapidly globalizing, all but the blind realize the need for a new ethos and a new anthropology. Cynical consciousness is unable to cultivate any imaginative space outside the immediate experience of destructive history and social networks of injustice. Cynicism's internally split personality, locked safely behind the walls of criticism and despair,

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76 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 159.

77 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 103.

78 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 157.

79 Sloterdijk refers to both as examples of the kynical impulse. See *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 161-2, 165.

makes stepping out onto other vistas unthinkable. The cynic is too diffuse to generate the kind of momentum necessary for such a movement. Feeling the disjuncture between our hopes and our practices troubles us at the very cores of our being. Deep down, we ourselves feel guilty for the problems that surround us but can find no way to address them. We continue to pursue our urbanite desires, but fail entirely to procure them without stepping on someone along the way.

In such a context, the only way out is an emancipation through self-understanding. As bearers of enlightened false consciousness, modern cynics are in need of a means of thinking beyond the immediate context of social evil and their necessary participation in it. After passing through the epistemological revolution of the Enlightenment, cynics are lulled into the notion that they already understand the truth about themselves. On the contrary, however, cynics are caught up in a network of forces that claims to be the natural order of things, meaning cynics must be in competition with one another, all the while not knowing the contingency of that network, which continues to reproduce itself as the only possible way things could be—hence, as Sloterdijk says, to speak of cynicism is to enter the door of ideology critique in a new way. Indeed, understanding oneself is, in fact, a downright revolutionary activity, as Sloterdijk articulates in a powerful passage:

[E]nlightenment is broken by the resistance of opposing powers (hegemonic power, tradition, prejudice). Because knowledge is power, every hegemonic power challenged by "another knowledge" must try to stay in the center of knowledge. However, not every power is the right center for every knowledge. Reflective knowledge cannot be separated from its subject. Thus, only one means remains available to hegemonic powers: to separate the subjects of possible oppositional power from the means of their self-reflection. This is the reason for the age-old history of "violence against ideas". It is violence neither against persons nor against things in the trivial sense; it is violence against the self-experience and the self-expression of persons who are in danger of learning what they should not know. The history of censorship can be summarized in this phrase. It is the history of the politics of antireflection. At that moment when people become ripe for experiencing the truth about themselves and their social relations, those in power have always tried to smash the mirrors in which people would recognize who they are and what is happening to them.<sup>80</sup>

In this chapter, I intend to turn this situation around, by constructing something like a mirror in which

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80 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 77.

cynics might see themselves, using the admittedly suspicious domain of religion to do so. By articulating in more detail how a cynical sense of self is produced in modernity, and also offering an alternative self-understanding through the phenomenon of religion, a path opens up to a *politics of reflection*, one that both attempts to ease the internal despair of cynical persons and contribute to an alternative social arrangement.

I will return to Diogenes and Sloterdijk's further thoughts on the possibility of cynicism in a cynical age in the third chapter. In this chapter, I will consider the ways in which cynics are unable to find a trustworthy sense of self capable of responding to injustice or their own internal sense of division, of being torn between wishing for something better and acknowledging the reality of things. Extending my previous examination of Sloterdijk's reading of the Enlightenment, I will argue, following Sloterdijk, that cynicism comes from a deep training in mistrust and a loss of solidarity cultivated in modernity. In response to a state of uncertainty, Sloterdijk explains that a subjectivity of control and violence emerges to secure itself in the world. This results in a significant problem of self-understanding, what I will call, following the work of Russian thinker Nikolai Berdyaev, a problematic lack of an "anthropodicy," that is, a lack of justification for or characterization of the human being. Cynics, unable to justify or characterize themselves, locate themselves as players in a competitive social space that serves only to reproduce that space. Cynics are in need, therefore, of another means of understanding themselves that allows them to imagine the world otherwise. Religion, I suggest, is a way of healing for cynics, not as a retrieval of tradition and premodern worldviews but as a reservoir of what Sloterdijk calls "anthropotechnology," the means by which humans transcend themselves and their given situations. The human being is not fixed and essential but the site of a profoundly creative re-negotiation of boundaries and possibilities. Religion offers a space of withdrawal from the debilitating social experiences that produce cynicism and provides an imaginative opening-up that can help cynics find alternative self-understandings. The answer to the problem of anthropodicy, I suggest,

is not further critique, which, as we saw in the last chapter, is bankrupted by cynical consciousness, but an attention to anthropotechnology, which means attention to the religious dimension in human beings. In this intermediary chapter I aim to articulate a way in which religion might respond to the dilemmas of cynical consciousness, setting up the final chapter as an attempt to do just that.

### *LOSING TRUST, LASHING OUT*

In the previous chapter I examined the ways in which, according to Sloterdijk, cynicism manifests in contemporary society, along with some of its symptoms. Here I aim to zoom in on what one might call the anthropological dimension of Sloterdijk's presentation of cynicism. When one encounters a cynic, one finds a person who is well schooled in the art of criticism and protected by a shell of negativity. As Sloterdijk characterizes it, a cynical self is one that is flexible enough to adapt to a situation if it means compromising one's values, but hardened enough to see when one is being taken advantage of. In both of these cases, cynical consciousness is not confident about *itself* but about the necessity of a situation where one must be alert to suspicious surroundings. To understand how this situation comes about, it is necessary to consider the social atmosphere that produces cynicism. Sloterdijk calls modernity, the crucible in which cynicism is formed, a “collective training in mistrust of epochal proportions,”<sup>81</sup> a proliferation of means of critique and suspicion that cuts to the very core of our self-understanding. When one cannot readily find a place in the cosmos or one's society, as in previous epochs of human history, the only way to guarantee one's unity and safety is by making the right enemies and preparing for the worst.

According to Sloterdijk, Enlightenment epistemology, as we saw in the previous chapter, shifts from an attempt to bring a universalizing peace through reason to an attempt to expose the realities at work behind the power structures that resist its insights. Knowledge becomes a matter of knowing what is *really* going on, as opposed to settling for what fictions master cynicism tells, contributing to a

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81 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 330.

polemic of consciousness. As Enlightenment critique gets going, the momentum of suspicion does not stop with master cynicism, however. Led by the scalpel of doubt, enlighteners soon discover that appearance itself could be an illusion prepared by the enemy, or as Sloterdijk points out in the case of Descartes, our very world could be the product of a *genius malignus*.<sup>82</sup> Thus the epistemological arms race of modernity which produces a variety of tools for resistance is set against this backdrop of feeling threatened and insecure, all the way down to being itself.

To stabilize this mass of confusion and distrust, a new way of being human emerges in modernity that no longer relies solely on the truths of tradition or authority: the rationalist, egoist subject, who utilizes modern ways of discovering and organizing knowledge in order to stay ahead, or at least alive, in the game of power. “In the struggle of hostile and competing subjects and states for self-preservation and hegemony, a new form of realism bursts forth, a form that is driven by the fear of becoming deceived or overpowered,” Sloterdijk explains.<sup>83</sup> This “realism” assumes that appearances are false, threatening, and need to be unmasked. Sloterdijk’s description of the modern subject reveals an individual living in a world surrounded by traps and dangers: “An overpowering concern with certainty and an equally irresistible expectation to be deceived drive modern epistemology on to search at any price for absolute and unshakably secure sources of certainty—as if its primary concern were to overcome a downright world-annihilating doubt.”<sup>84</sup> Motivated by fear, the epistemological consequences of Enlightenment's trajectory lead not to a unified front against the ideology of those in power but to a troubling drive to control the unknown and threatening reality surrounding modern persons.

Reacting to this profound fear, the modern subject holds its place through a hardened ego capable of putting parameters around what it sees as objects. While the notion of the subject is

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82 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 330.

83 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 330.

84 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 330.

presented as a neutral and peaceful examiner of its objects, if one looks deeper, as Sloterdijk does, (and here one sees how enlightenment gives way to ideology critique) one discovers that modernity actually gives rise to a polemical consciousness whose gains in knowledge become additions to “an arsenal, a munitions depot (of intelligent cartridges),” as Sloterdijk puts it.<sup>85</sup> The research means by which subjects examine objects become impositions on the objects themselves, which are made to bend to the will of the subject. Sloterdijk intends to make sure we remember that at the bottom of an allegedly neutral modernity lies a significant fear of the unknown, ontologically and socially, that only knows how to respond with violence. “The 'subject,’” Sloterdijk says, “born of manifold hindering and threatening of itself, can only interfere everywhere as hinderer, combatant, and producer of 'objects.’”<sup>86</sup> Though the development of modern subjectivity was intended to fund the dream of a universal dialogue on a peaceful plane, the actual emergence of combatant subjects renders that dream a nightmare. When society hosts a population of subjects out to control objects, the transition to a cynical age is made obvious.

As Sloterdijk explains, his analysis of cynicism “describes the interactions of subjectivism that cannot unwind, of highly armed centers of private reason, conglomerations of power bristling with weapons and science-supported systems of hyperproduction. None of them would even dream of bending to a communicative reason; rather, under the pretense of communication, they want to subjugate the latter to its private conditions.”<sup>87</sup> Through the regular exercise of subjective reason, making and dominating objects, the “subject” slowly solidifies the illusion that life *must be* this way, an amalgam of deceptions and combat where one must see to it that one remains on the subject side of the

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85 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 359. Intriguingly, Sloterdijk's analysis here does not bear only on modernity but also on his contemporaries in Critical Theory more generally following the pragmatist and linguistic turn, namely in the work of Habermas and Apel. His critique of the dream of peaceful dialogue hints at this already in the beginning of his text, but he eventually makes his fuller critique of the theory of labor and communicative action more explicit. See pps. 357-381.

86 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 379.

87 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 544.

equation. “Only at the peak of modernity,” declares Sloterdijk, “does the identity of subjectivity and *armament* reveal itself to us.... How life could really be becomes more deeply forgotten day by day in the unfolded system of hindrances.”<sup>88</sup> Now a world of illusion, violence, and combat becomes normative, won through the development of sciences, economies, and other allegedly neutral fields of enlightenment.

Because we live in a situation of mistrust, we compensate for it by posturing with strong egos.<sup>89</sup> While in earlier times in history one could take for granted a trust in one's reality or social body as a whole that gave us a place and a position in that society, even if that position was miserable, now the world appears to us as broken apart. The way to unify that world comes through dominating it as a subject. And if one cannot dominate it, one has to accept one's fate as a loser. Writing in 1982, when the Cold War still threatened to heat up and the atomic age made a situation of constant threat felt even in children's classrooms, Sloterdijk's discovery of cynicism as an anthropological problem at the heart of society's proliferation of weaponry is nothing short of an attempt to disarm and de-escalate the violent progeny of modernity. “Those who accommodate themselves to this modern-day society, as it is, accommodate themselves in the last instance to this paranoid realism,”<sup>90</sup> says Sloterdijk, articulating cynicism's disposition in a society of competition. Finding a way out, Sloterdijk argues, will require a renewed way of understanding ourselves in relation to others and our world, a realism not so paranoid. “Cultures that have armed themselves with nuclear weapons are being caught in the feedback of their arming,” he writes. “Those who control the splitting of the atom can no longer afford *not* to control the splitting of humanity, the systematic self-hardening through making enemies.”<sup>91</sup> We can no longer

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88 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 379. Emphasis added.

89 The work of psychotherapist and philosopher James Olthuis shows a similar reading of modernity as a training in mistrust and a production of compensating egos, and goes on to criticize the ways in which certain postmodern thinkers respond to this problem. See his essay “Crossing the Threshold: Sojourning Together in the Wild Spaces of Love” in *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith*, ed. James K. A. Smith and Henry Isaac Venema (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 23-40.

90 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 228.

91 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 325. Emphasis in original.

afford to eschew the task of re-imagining the human being, releasing cynics from their hardened egos that lend themselves to armament.

*ANTHROPODICY: WHO AM I?*

Nikolai Berdyaev, an incendiary Russian philosopher with one foot in the nineteenth century and one foot in the twentieth, wrote these words in 1914, the year the First World War began: “Many have written their justification of God, their theodicy. But the time has come to write a justification of man, an anthropodicy. Perhaps an anthropodicy is the only way to a theodicy, the only way not yet lived and used to the full.”<sup>92</sup> Drawing off of theodicy, the attempt to justify and explain God in the face of evil or experience, an anthropodicy is a justification for or characterization of human beings. What this neologism, “anthropodicy,” reveals is a profound intuition of the loss of a given orientation for human self-understanding. It intuits, too, the loss of religion as a moralist sovereign, provocatively suggesting that only by thinking “from below” will one be able to find a meaningful space for religious questions or pursuits once again. If Sloterdijk is right to suggest contemporary society is marked by cynicism, thereby rendering traditional modes of ideology critique ineffective and debilitating, a solution must work to produce an alternative means of changing the established order other than refining theoretical criticisms. But answering cynicism is not merely political—cynicism affects individuals in their very subjectivity, making a vision of health nearly unthinkable individually as well as socially. In other words, cynicism is intimately bound up with a problematic vision of the self and the human. De-escalating cynical society, more urgent now even than when Sloterdijk embarked on his analysis, means reconsidering the problem of the human in hopes of recovering and creating new ways of being human that lead elsewhere.

We might read cynicism as a crisis of anthropodicy, insofar as it is unable to justify human life beyond basic survival, or beyond subjective reason. Indeed, there is no real creative or justifying work

<sup>92</sup> Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (San Rafael: Semantron Press, 2009), 19. The book was written in 1914, but published in Russia in 1916.

done to discover the human within cynical consciousness at all; cynical consciousness is constituted by being bumped around in a space of illusions, which it is compelled to participate in. Its formula for selfhood, according to Sloterdijk, is: “I am deceived, therefore I am. And: I unmask deceptions, I myself deceive; therefore, I preserve myself.”<sup>93</sup> Cynicism effectively circumvents imagining an alternative because it assumes it has a handle on the bare, naked reality of things rather than settling for the narratives told by those with other interests. Yes, that reality is built up by a sum of illusions, but at least one knows they are all illusions. It takes for granted that humans really are the kind of creatures who are in zero-sum competition with one another. If there is any attempted moment of self-understanding among cynics, it is one that agrees with Hobbes that humans are in a constant state of war, and that their lives are nasty, brutish, and short. Italian thinker Franco Berardi, considering Sloterdijk's examination of cynicism, explains how this assumption might come to be taken as a realism in more recent history:

Contemporary mass cynicism can be linked to two different roots: the failure of 20th century utopian ideologies and the perception that the exploitation of labor, competition, and war are inevitable and irreversible. Mass cynicism results from the dissolution of social solidarity. Globalization and the systemic precariousness of the labor market resulting from neoliberal deregulation have imposed competition as the inescapable, generalized mode of relation among social actors.<sup>94</sup>

Though cynicism is certainly not limited to capitalist and neoliberal societies (a point Žižek, an author formed under communist Slovenia, shows<sup>95</sup>), the collapse of the Berlin Wall (which was still standing at the time of Sloterdijk's observations) made a competitive milieu seem even more normative. As suggested in the first chapter, cynicism recognizes any idealism, even if one really believes in it, as ultimately inoperative given the circumstances. The social phenomena described by Berardi make a healthy sense of self hard to establish.

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93 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 331. Sloterdijk says Descartes's *cogito, ergo sum* amounts to this formula.

94 Franco Berardi, “Irony, Cynicism and the Lunacy of the Italian Media Power,” *Through Europe*, 02/15/2011, accessed August 23, 2015, <http://th-rough.eu/writers/bifo-eng/irony-cynicism-and-lunacy-italian-media-power>.

95 See Kotsko. *Žižek and Theology*. 26.

“Philosophy,” Sloterdijk writes, “demands of life what Thales had described as 'what is difficult': to know thyself.”<sup>96</sup> In the context of ancient philosophy, as Sloterdijk tells it, knowing oneself means realizing the connectedness of the self with the complete and harmonious whole of the cosmos. “With 'know thyself,' classical philosophy promised the individual that, on the way inward, he or she would discover a common denominator of world and self,” writes Sloterdijk, which gave philosophy a significant role as the guide of confused selves looking to find their place in the world.<sup>97</sup> But, following the social upheaval of modernity and, especially, the twentieth century, such a philosophical imperative, to know thyself, is rendered incredibly difficult in an era made cynical, plagued by the problem of anthropodicy. It falls very differently on the ears of ancient Greeks who are capable of imagining themselves as part of a whole, their own souls and societies functioning as microcosms, compared with the ears of modern cynics whose society split an atom, literally splitting the cosmos apart, at the tail end of a decidedly disharmonious conflict between persons and poleis. Even without appealing to the technical insanity of the twentieth century, however, one might simply consider the complication of a philosophical imperative in the wake of the Enlightenment, whose proliferation of new schools, sciences, and disciplines leave little clear direction for philosophy itself, instead, argues Sloterdijk, subverting the functions of philosophy it deems usable and leaving the rest. “In a world full of injustice, exploitation, war, resentment, isolation, and blind suffering,” writes Sloterdijk, “the 'sublation' of philosophy... brings forth also a painful lack of philosophy.”<sup>98</sup>

Sloterdijk reads modernity as a moment of splintering and breaking, where the cosmos is cut up into manageable parts, this discipline here and that discipline there. As a consequence, the link between self and cosmos taken for granted in ancient philosophy is radically severed. “It becomes increasingly clear to us [in modernity],” observes Sloterdijk, “that we are at the point of losing the common

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96 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 536.

97 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 537.

98 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 536.

denominator of self-experience and world experience. Even the most honorable postulate of self-knowledge today is suspected of having been naive, and what once appeared as the summit of reflectedness is today confronted by the suspicion that it was possibly only a chimera that arose through the misuse of metaphors of reflection.”<sup>99</sup> Asking about self-knowledge reveals that one is ignorant of how things really work these days. If a person, today, were to carry out the classical philosophical imperative, “know thyself,” the polis of which that person should be a microform would render one immediately cynical, suspicious, a wanderer without a stable home. As Sloterdijk puts it, modern subjectivity is “a stubborn microchaos... We have focused essentially on subjectivity because we could not believe in the sense and well-meaning of a whole, even if we wanted to. Said drastically, we have subjectivized ourselves as subjects because we have experienced the whole as disunion, nature as the source of horrid shortages, and the social world as world war.”<sup>100</sup> No wonder, given Sloterdijk's description, that cynicism is a crisis of anthropodicy.

Lest it seem as though I am pushing the connection between cynicism and anthropodicy too far, Sloterdijk notes that “[u]nder the pressure of suffering in the most recent crises, members of our civilization see themselves forced, quasi-neoclassically, to repeat the 'know thyself,' and in this they discover their systematic inability to communicate in the way that would guarantee true de-escalation.”<sup>101</sup> It makes all the difference that Sloterdijk notices how self-reflection comes about in times of crisis, when we are looking for a way to orient our lives by connecting with what appears to be fundamentally true. But members of a cynical society soon discover that Thales was not kidding when he described the philosophical imperative as “what is difficult,” even more so now than it was then. If one nevertheless takes on this task, one does not gain the reward of a peaceful integration into a discernible *polis* or *cosmos*. Instead, as Sloterdijk writes, “The subjective that cannot 'mirror' itself in

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99 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 537.

100 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 541.

101 Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 544.

any 'whole' nevertheless encounters itself in countless analogous subjectivities that, similarly worldless and encapsulated, pursue only their 'own' goals and that, where they interact with others, are only bound to each other, precariously and subject to revocation, in 'antagonistic cooperation.'"<sup>102</sup> In a cynical milieu, taking on the task of knowing oneself by appeal to the polis or whole only confirms the cynic's view of reality as necessarily competitive and fragmented. To repeat the ancient "know thyself" in a cynical age is to discover that our world requires self-interested and disconnected adaptations as a matter of survival. "In the analysis of cynicism," says Sloterdijk, "the language of self-experience is again directly synchronized with the language of worldly experience—assuming we wanted to make the self side speak in an extremely honest way, the world side in a ruthlessly clear way."<sup>103</sup> Yet the only award and achievement for getting this far is more disappointment. For a task that is forced to the surface in moments of crisis, trying to know oneself only aggravates the problem. The lack of an acceptable anthropodicy remains, even if cynics try to find one, because cynicism cannot think its way out of the problem from within.

In practice, cynics have no program or positive way of being, because social circumstances are such that concentrating and unifying oneself does not lend well to taking advantage of the tasks at hand. This forces us into divided lives that inevitably compromise and conflict internally, making it unclear exactly which side of ourselves is the one we should really cultivate or overcome. Sloterdijk describes the condition well:

Cynicism proceeds by way of a diffusion of the subject of knowledge, so that the present-day servant of the system can very well do with the right hand what the left hand never allowed. By day, colonizer, at night, colonized; by occupation, valorizer and administrator, during leisure time, valorized and administered; officially a cynical functionary, privately a sensitive soul; at the office a giver of orders, ideologically a discussant; outwardly a follower of the reality principle, inwardly a subject oriented toward pleasure; functionally an agent of capital, intentionally a democrat; with respect to the system a functionary of reification, with respect to the *Lebenswelt* (lifeworld), someone who achieves self-realization; objectively a strategist of destruction, subjectively a pacifist; basically someone

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<sup>102</sup>Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 544.

<sup>103</sup>Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 544.

who triggers catastrophes, in one's own view, innocence personified. With schizoids anything is possible, and enlightenment and reaction do not make much difference. With the enlightened integrated person—in this world of clever, instinctive conformists—the body says no to the compulsions of the head, and the head says no to the way in which the body procures its comfortable self-preservation. This mixture is our moral status quo.<sup>104</sup>

Sloterdijk wrote these reflections three and a half decades ago. But things have hardly gotten much better in the twenty-first century, home to technical developments in entertainment and information technologies that make unifying oneself even more difficult, not to mention the continuation of crises in the previous century and the rise of fundamentalisms and fanatocisms in a variety of ideological garbs. Cynicism, forged in modernity, continues in postmodernity as a form of defeatism and resignation, leaving all these social phenomena intact. As Andreas Huyssen notes in his foreword to *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk's investigations should be “read as an attempt to theorize a central aspect of that culture we have come to call postmodern, as an intervention in the present aimed at opening up a new space for a cultural and political discourse.”<sup>105</sup> Opening up this space depends on naming cynicism as a reaction of consciousness to the present social situation that halts itself from imagining any possible future.

Constituted as a reaction, cynicism is therefore unable to challenge the conditions that make life so frustrating and miserable; cynics are, in a perverse sense, dependent on those very conditions to be selves. Such a situation is reminiscent of those who belong to what Nietzsche and Kierkegaard referred to as “the herd” and “the crowd,” leading Sloterdijk to say Heidegger's figure of “Anyone” is “the most real subject of modern diffuse cynicism.”<sup>106</sup> “This Anyone,” writes Sloterdijk, “can...only be understood as something nonautonomous, which has nothing of itself or solely for itself. What it is is said and given by others; that explains its essential distractedness.”<sup>107</sup> In a cynical milieu, Heidegger's “Anyone” takes on a political quality, for that which is given by others is a series of debilitating power

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104Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 113.

105Huyssen. “Foreword,” in *Critique of Cynical Reason*. x.

106Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 195.

107Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 197.

relations and a feeling of disillusionment. Cynics are schooled in the habits of futility and settling for less. Because it is partially enlightened, however, cynicism does not simply produce members of a vacuous and undifferentiated public; rather, cynicism expresses the inability to collect oneself into a unified person capable of taking a creative-critical stance toward its environment. “We have, in fact, plunged into a twilight of a peculiar existential disorientation,” writes Sloterdijk. “The feeling toward life in the present-day intelligentsia is that of people who cannot grasp the morality of immorality because then everything would be 'far too simple.' For that reason, too, deep down no one knows how things should go from here.”<sup>108</sup> For those of us outside the intelligentsia, the situation is hardly better.

Our cynical times, just as the confusing times of Diogenes, require an anthropodicy, an alternative understanding of and direction for human beings, a new ethos and a new anthropology. It is my suggestion that thinking through an anthropodicy means also thinking through the phenomenon of religion. I will not, however, be advocating a return to precritical or premodern forms of understanding religion or the human, safely embedded in a metaphysical frame that has since become culturally unbelievable and unavailable. “[Cynical] consciousness,” writes Sloterdijk, “cannot become dumb and trust again; innocence cannot be regained. It persists in its belief in the gravitational pull of the relations to which it is bound by its instinct for self-preservation.”<sup>109</sup> Instead, with Sloterdijk, I intend to argue that religion, as a collection of practices, habits, and imaginative experiments, has the ability to continue to help humans understand and, most importantly, transcend themselves into further horizons, to escape the gravitational pull of their surroundings. Doing so would allow us to reconsider, too, the possibility of revivifying religious practices and traditions in a way that is culturally meaningful and personally affective. With Berdyaev, I agree that thinking through an anthropodicy is perhaps the only way that, today, one might reasonably think through a theodicy, a role for God in a world that is enlightened about its own suffering.

<sup>108</sup>Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 98.

<sup>109</sup>Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 7.

In Sloterdijk's view, cynicism takes the present world as its point of departure, as a non-negotiable *outside* that means the *inside* must be constantly negotiated. In other words, it assumes the structural conditions that make up its environment are natural and given, meaning any internal morals or ideals must be flexible enough to adapt accordingly. Sloterdijk's use of "gravity" as a metaphor for this problem, where one is weighed down by what feels like an unavoidable fact of life, is particularly apt—the challenge, for cynics, is to find a way to escape the gravitational pull of history and their surroundings. As Sloterdijk's work progresses beyond *Critique of Cynical Reason*, he begins to consider alternative ways of understanding both our social milieu and how we might transform ourselves beyond it. This is especially true of one of his most sustained treatments of religion, his book *You Must Change Your Life*, the title of which makes this trajectory obvious. The cultural phenomenon of religion, Sloterdijk argues, reveals two fundamentally important but often neglected aspects of the history of human beings: first, that humans are capable of a profound inner change that helps them *withdraw* from their present social construction such that they might create others, and, second, that by moving toward spiritual goals and practicing new habits humans have the ability to intentionally continue the natural and historical process of human *self-transcendence*. I will consider these two aspects in turn.

Influenced by both Heidegger and Nietzsche, Sloterdijk is attentive to the ways in which humans are "thrown" into a pre-given world (Heidegger) and also domesticated into certain forms of life (Nietzsche). We come into a world of habits, institutions, etc., that are developed historically and contingently yet provide our "common sense." In the period following modernity, which revealed that the persons who were doing the domesticating (priests, merchants, politicians) were not necessarily good shepherds,<sup>110</sup> those who take this common sense for granted are in fact cynics; the reason that is

<sup>110</sup>This is the message of Sloterdijk's controversial paper "Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the 'Letter On Humanism,'" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 27, no. 1 (2009): 12-28. There, Sloterdijk argues that

common to us is one of suspicion and survival. Hence, as we saw above, Sloterdijk says Heidegger's notion of "Anyone" represents the diffuse figure of cynicism, one that is unable to fully emerge from or project beyond one's social conditions because their gravitational pull is too strong.

Humans are not, however, condemned to common sense and its regimens but are capable of experimenting with different forms of life, an experimentation which offers the possibility of detaching from the pull of one's immediate circumstances. "All increases of a mental or bodily kind begin with a secession from the ordinary," writes Sloterdijk,<sup>111</sup> and secession from the ordinary is what religions do best, for better *and* worse. Religious movements begin with an act of *withdrawal*, a radical secession from the workaday world marked by an "ethical distinction... made by anyone who dares or is called upon to step out of the river of life and take up residence on the shore."<sup>112</sup> One reflects on one's surroundings and determines these are inadequate, imperfect, and thus starts kicking in search of some space beyond the waves of common experience. That this reflection comes from an *ethical* distinction makes all the difference. "[E]ntering ethical thought," says Sloterdijk, "means making a difference with one's very own existence that no one had previously made. If there were an accompanying speech act,

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Nietzsche's Zarathustra is so pivotal because this wild prophet reveals the priestly gain behind bourgeois society. Zarathustra notices that society is not innocently constructed, and that humans have been shaped to be less than their full potential, thereby also opening the possibility of the *Übermensch*, who would take the courage to shape itself in lieu of institutional pressures or the imitation of a newly-deceased Divine attractor. The paper, which popularized Sloterdijk's notion of "anthropotechnology," set off a significant controversy in Germany, led by Jürgen Habermas, who accused Sloterdijk of being a fascist for advocating an intentional "selection" of superior human traits. Habermas appears to have understood "anthropotechnology" to mean primarily biotechnological and posthuman innovation, and Sloterdijk to be uncritically advocating manifestations of "anthropotechnology" across the board. In fact, though the paper does briefly mention (but not critique or endorse) biotechnology, this was a secondary part of the actual purpose of the paper. "Anthropotechnology" should be read in line with Sloterdijk's use of media theory, where it identifies, descriptively, the ways in which humans transform themselves through media, such as religion, cultural practices, tools, and writing. As Sjoerd van Tuinen explains, "...the subject of the original texts—and this seems to have escaped humanists and transhumanists alike—was first and foremost precisely the question of what it means to write today, after the age of the book and the humanist ideology of its patient reading has come to an end." ("Transgenous Philosophy": Post-humanism, Anthropotechnics and the Poetics of Natal Difference," in *In Medias Res: Peter Sloterdijk's Spherological Poetics of Being*, ed. Willem Schinkel and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 43.) For an excellent summary of Sloterdijk's paper and its relation to a more open view of the human, see Eduardo Mendieta, "A Letter on Überhumanism: Beyond Posthumanism and Transhumanism" in *Sloterdijk Now*, 58-76.

111Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 217.

112Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 217.

it would be: 'I herewith exit ordinary reality,'<sup>113</sup> or "I herewith leave the shared reality', or at least the statement of intent, 'I wish to leave the continuum of the false and harmful.'"<sup>114</sup> This is a clear difference from the way in which cynicism is constituted, a form of consciousness that considers ethical thought to be irrelevant and instead recognizes, passively, the established set of social relations.

Secession, withdrawal, is not necessarily escapist, a point Sloterdijk intentionally drives home: "The concern of the most resolute secessionaries is not simply a fascinated retreat from a reality that no longer invites participation, but rather a complete reversal – a turn away from the superficially manifest, which means a turn towards something that is better, true and real on a higher level."<sup>115</sup> Religious secession, in other words, is not a matter of more or better critique, but of turning toward an alternative trajectory for life. In fact, perhaps it is better to say that, relative to cynicism's gravitational submission, religious secession is not so much anti-gravitational as it is a matter of inverse gravitation, as articulated in Simone Weil's relevantly titled *Gravity and Grace*: "Moral gravity makes us fall towards the heights."<sup>116</sup> The intentional ethical withdrawal of religion leads one to relativize and contextualize one's present circumstances, which, negatively construed, allows one to escape their gravitational pull and, positively construed, offers new attractors. It turns one's world upside-down. Weil's maxim is not only metaphorically relevant here, however; it also articulates another aspect of Sloterdijk's theory of religion: that of self-transcendence.

If there is any kind of historical "essence" to human beings, it is that humans are the kinds of creatures that, by their very practice, continue to change and shape themselves, wittingly or unwittingly. This is Sloterdijk's religious anthropodicy; humans are not cynical competitors but practicing beings with an indeterminate essence. Influenced by media theory, which is attentive to how

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113Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 219.

114Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 409.

115Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 299.

116Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4. Sloterdijk himself references *Gravity and Grace*, though he focuses on her remarks on truth and the impossibility of human life as a matter of anti-gravitation. See *You Must Change Your Life*, 206.

our products and activities shape us just as much as we create them, Sloterdijk suggests that human beings are self-taming and self-domesticating creatures who transcend themselves through basic habits and repeated practices. We may not be aware of these changes, the more dramatic of which occur gradually and even over the course of generations, but, nevertheless, they occur. “Being human,” Sloterdijk says, “means existing in an operatively curved space in which actions return to affect the actor, works the worker, communications the communicator, thoughts the thinker and feelings the feeler.”<sup>117</sup> The reciprocity between person and practice/product, however, does not create a circular equilibrium but a spiral moving forward.<sup>118</sup> Though it could appear that our present social configurations or the kinds of tools we use are static, they in fact change the ways in which we experience ourselves and our world, and alter the course of the development of the human species itself. Though this kind of insight is a little clearer with the advent of information technologies and the immediacy of devices like smart phones that visibly change how we interact in shared spaces, Sloterdijk means to point out that all of our technologies, from language to weapons to writing, in turn shape us into new kinds of humans through repeated use. Sloterdijk calls these processes “anthropotechnologies,” techniques not simply used *by* humans but used, inadvertently and reciprocally, *with* and *on* humans.<sup>119</sup>

Even in our mundane lives, Sloterdijk argues, we are engaged in maintaining certain practices and habits that in turn shape us, anthropotechnics, whether we realize it or not. Yet humans are not totally beholden to our given habits and practices, but continue to creatively take on other forms of

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117Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 110.

118The notion of spiraling forward is familiar in philosophical hermeneutics. For a Christian approach to this dynamic, see James Olthuis, “Otherwise than Violence: Towards a Hermeneutics of Connection,” in *The Arts Community, and Cultural Democracy*, ed. Henry Luttikhuisen and Lambert Zuidervaart (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 137-64. For an extension of this hermeneutical approach to psychotherapy, see James H. Olthuis, *The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006).

119An especially interesting explanation and angle on Sloterdijk's “anthropotechnology” is available in Bruno Latour, “A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk” in *In Medias Res: Peter Sloterdijk's Spherological Poetics of Being*, ed. Willem Schinkel, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011) 151-164.

training allowing us to move intentionally forward, or to use Sloterdijk's spatial metaphor, intentionally *upward*. Playing on psychoanalytic “depth psychology,” Sloterdijk offers a “height psychology” that tries to reckon with the ways in which humans transcend themselves intentionally.<sup>120</sup> Humans are “inescapably subject to vertical tensions,” Sloterdijk observes,<sup>121</sup> tensions that attract individuals up and out from their present horizontal relationships and environments. In Weil's case, for example, this is a moral attraction that inverts the gravity of everyday life into the ether of spiritual ascent. These vertical tensions encourage us to do the impossible, to take on profound exercises of “overtaxing,” says Sloterdijk, who takes the athlete and the acrobat seriously as typological figures of the human drive to self-transcend. “Whoever goes in search of humans will find acrobats,” he writes.<sup>122</sup> Humans are the creatures who can walk across the tightropes of existence, even above the heads of the crowd of fellow humans, reaching new platforms of human existence.

These acrobatic feats arise from the human relation to that which seems out of reach. Impossibility and improbability are met as challenges to be surmounted, challenges that flood life with meaning and purpose. “Acrobatic existence,” Sloterdijk writes, “de-trivializes life by placing repetition in the service of the unrepeatable. It transforms all steps into first steps, because each one could be the last. It knows only one ethical action: the superversion of all circumstances through the conquest of the improbable.”<sup>123</sup> Though all human beings exhibit the reciprocal and spiraling forward motion of self-transcendence found through the use of media, here Sloterdijk calls our attention to those who actively choose to climb upward to new heights. It is here where *religion* in particular becomes especially important. Religion, argues Sloterdijk, houses a wealth of practices by which human beings move

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120Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 111-130. Sloterdijk borrows the phrase from Max Scheler. See p124.

121Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 12.

122Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 13. Here we see Sloterdijk's debt to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who is a constant voice running through the text. See especially page 62, which references Zarathustra's taking an acrobat as his pupil. As a general theme, too, Sloterdijk riffs on Nietzsche's observation that the earth is a planet of ascetics by suggesting earth is a “planet of the practicing,” the title of the first section of the text.

123Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 207.

beyond their present circumstances and refuse to take “impossibility” or “improbability” for an answer. While Sloterdijk is at his most Nietzschean when discussing the human as a self-transcending animal, he departs with Nietzsche specifically on this point. Where Nietzsche famously attacks Jesus' words in Matthew 19:30, “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first,” Sloterdijk suggests “It could be saying that the hierarchy resulting from the conditions of power and ownership should not remain the only permissible view—in fact, not even the central one—of intellectual rankings.”<sup>124</sup> Jesus' words invite his followers to secede from the present circumstances, and to imagine something otherwise, something otherworldly, a reality in which the gravity is switched in the other direction, not in order to get revenge but to ascend to new heights.<sup>125</sup> “Christianity undeniably has a share of the copyright on the word *Übermensch*, incurring royalties even when it is used for anti-Christian purposes,” writes Sloterdijk.<sup>126</sup>

By construing religion as a collection of anthropotechnologies by which humans can withdraw from and transcend their circumstances toward more creative horizons, Sloterdijk offers cynics a tangible way of rejecting their social circumstances and, most importantly, moving in an alternative direction. In other words, religion is not simply world-denying, it is *other-world-affirming*. There can be no doubt that religion funds cynicism just as much as it offers a way out of it. In *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk notes that the “theory of priests' deception”<sup>127</sup> becomes popular in modernity and he goes as far as to say religion serves as the domain for the first movement in master cynicism.<sup>128</sup> But religion is not solely the seed of cynicism. Religions have an “ambiguous role in societies,” says Sloterdijk. “They can be used to legitimate and double oppression.... They can, however, also liberate

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124Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 129.

125That said, Sloterdijk does think that religion, and Christianity in particular, hosts a complex relationship to revenge for better and worse, the topic of his book *Rage and Time*. See especially pps.69-110.

126Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 128.

127Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 28. Curiously, the theory of priests' deception arguably comes to a head in religious discourse itself in Kierkegaard's late work *The Attack Upon Christendom*—whether Kierkegaard is read as a cynic or a realist is, of course, as always, up for debate, which is exactly the point.

128Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 29.

individuals to a greater power of resistance and creativity by helping them to overcome fear.”<sup>129</sup> Overcoming fear is exactly the goal of withdrawal and religious self-transcendence. Contrary to certain reductive tendencies toward religion, Sloterdijk sees it not as the victory of resentful losers but rather a mobilization of vertical tensions confident about something better. Indeed, in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk even challenges Marx's charitable reading of religion as the “opiate of the people,” assuaging their material sufferings, by suggesting it is not charitable enough: “Religion is not primarily the opiate of the people but the reminder that there is more life in us than this life lives. The function of faith is an achievement of devitalized bodies that cannot be completely robbed of the memory that in them much deeper sources of vitality, strength, pleasure, and of the enigma and intoxication of being—there must lie hidden than can be seen in everyday life.”<sup>130</sup> Faith, religion, is a collection of practices that allow us to take hold of certain energetic impulses that are not yet extinguished by our surroundings, intimidating as they might be.<sup>131</sup>

#### *THE NEED FOR NEW ANTHROPOTECHNOLOGIES*

According to Sloterdijk, the history of religion reveals the history of human training for that which is other than our current social condition. Religion is a treasury of alternative exercises for exercising creatures. Or, perhaps more appropriately and more strongly said, Sloterdijk argues that “religion” is not a special phenomenon totally outside the purview of other human practices but is a collection of means by which humans transcend themselves, not unlike other forms of exercise such as sports or schooling. Indeed, Sloterdijk is bold enough to say “no 'religion' or 'religions' exist, only misunderstood spiritual regimens.”<sup>132</sup> Whether this is an accurate reduction of religion is questionable, but for now it is

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129Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 277.

130Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 277.

131Lambert Zuidervaart attempts to articulate the dialectic between this inexhaustible call of faith and the necessity of organizing society according to provisional principles in “Earth’s Lament: Suffering, Hope, and Wisdom,” *The Other Journal* (January 27, 2009), accessed October 13, 2015, <http://theotherjournal.com/2009/01/27/earths-lament-suffering-hope-and-wisdom/>.

132Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 3.

worth noting that the observation that religions are collections of exercises is useful insofar as they offer actual, material ways of changing our lives; one might want “more” out of Sloterdijk's understanding of religion, but his reduction is still significantly illuminating by calling attention to an interior practice otherwise occluded by examinations of beliefs and doctrines. Carrying out this reduction in fact allows Sloterdijk to use religion to reveal the dynamism at the heart of human experience. In place of an anthropology, Sloterdijk offers acrobatics and anthropotechnology; humans are not finally determined but open and malleable, as revealed by the history of religions. Religion reveals a dimension of humanity that creatively strives to be something more than it currently is.

While Sloterdijk examines religion from the “outside,” so to speak, and might come across as reductive, he is not wholly unaware of the narrative, imaginative, and otherwise “textual” aspects of what we traditionally call religion that make its practice possible. Creatively mobilizing these components of spiritual regimens gives humans radically new ways of relating to their world, ways that are capable of helping them cope with changes in material conditions and allowing them the strength to change those conditions. Humans, says Sloterdijk, “exist not only in ‘material conditions,’ but also in symbolic immune systems and ritual shells,”<sup>133</sup> and *You Must Change Your Life* exhibits an erudite and working knowledge of a variety of these symbolic and ritualistic dimensions of human life. To take just one case study, consider Sloterdijk's discussion of St. Francis:

The young Francis was unmistakably seized by the zeitgeist: the Christianity of the early urban period was looking for a superstar. With the role of poverty's troubadour, he had found a position that allowed him to transpose the *imitatio Christi* into an allegory of

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<sup>133</sup>Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 3. See also p. 10. Here, despite their regular disagreements, Sloterdijk and Jürgen Habermas are in fact on common ground. Consider this similar phrase from Habermas: “Normative regulation of interpersonal relations may be seen as a porous shell protecting a vulnerable body, and the person incorporated in this body, from the contingencies they are exposed to.” Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2003), 33. Though *The Future of Human Nature* is arguably a response to Sloterdijk's infamous paper “Rules For the Human Zoo,” Habermas is surprisingly closer to Sloterdijk on anthropological matters than he makes it out to be (though it would be wrong to suggest their anthropologies are exactly the same). For a critical reading of *The Future of Human Nature*, which makes glances at Sloterdijk, see Eduardo Mendieta “Habermas On Human Cloning,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 30, no. 5-6 (September 2004): 721-743. See also Mendieta's reflections on the same book in relation to Derrida's work on anthropology in “We Have Never Been Human Or, How We Lost Our Humanity: Derrida and Habermas On Cloning,” *Philosophy Today* 47, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 168-175.

courtly love. By learning to draw sweetness from bitterness, he gained leeway for the release of mental energy to compensate for the constant depression of the coming centuries: the growing scandal of involuntary poverty in an era that was increasingly devoting itself to wealth. By practising self-denial for the sake of Lady Poverty, he created surplus powers from the weakest point—albeit at a price that already made his contemporaries shudder. He paid this price in the form of a triumphant self-chastisement that would not rest until total imitation, the emulation of the crucified through the duplication of his wounds, had been achieved.<sup>134</sup>

Drawing from the symbolic and ritualistic wells of his cultural context, St. Francis trains himself to be another kind of person, one who eschews the growing tendency toward accumulating private wealth by symbolically and materially raising that which is regarded as lower or undesirable. St. Francis, in making a radical exit through the moral gravity of Lady Poverty, transcends a situation heading in the direction of depression, and offers others the possibility of doing the same. In the example of St. Francis, we encounter the combination of practice and creative appropriations of spiritual symbols that afford humans new possibilities for human life, possibilities that have the potential to overflow the individual into a socially transformative movement. Spiritual withdrawal need not be necessarily individual but might in fact boil over. “Pierre Hadot calmly encapsulates the surplus flowing from radical reversal: 'All education is conversion,'" Sloterdijk notes. “One must add: all conversion is subversion. In the introduction to this movement lies an inexhaustible 'revolutionary' potential, at least as long as it does not content itself with individual reversal.”<sup>135</sup>

Sloterdijk's examination of spiritual regimens offers a means of reconsidering the history of religion in order to uncover latent training programs that could be brought to bear on today's social situation. This uncovering would not be a naive argument for the primacy of a particular tradition, or the simple recovery of previous metaphysical systems. Though Sloterdijk is critical of the way in which the Enlightenment panned out, he is not at all interested in going behind the Enlightenment to a nostalgic view of a pre-differentiated and pre-critical society. Yet neither is he willing to dismiss the

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<sup>134</sup>Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 309. It is worth noting that Sloterdijk's examples are not restricted to the Christian tradition, but regularly borrow from Eastern traditions as well, including yoga and Buddhism specifically.

<sup>135</sup>Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 300.

transformative power of religion. Thus Sloterdijk's notion of anthropotechnologies allows us to mine older texts and traditions for any coals still smoldering. One can revisit alleged heretics, for example, where one regularly discovers vertical tensions pulled to extremes, inviting practices so alien that their trainers are put to death by the establishment.<sup>136</sup> Or one might uncover the pedagogical core of would-be scholastic exercises. In any case, Sloterdijk tries to do with religion what Walter Benjamin does with history, namely, to look at it as an alchemist rather than as a chemist. Where the chemist looks at a fire and describes the reactions that cause a pile of wood to produce a flame, an alchemist looks at the way in which the fire dances and follows the sparks upward, carrying on and reproducing the energy contained therein.<sup>137</sup>

An alchemist of religion, Sloterdijk thereby offers us a way to relate to religion's past without being totally beholden to its traditions. We are capable of appreciating those traditions as potentially emancipatory tools for human development, rather than authoritarian and potentially cynical institutions. If religion has an “authority,” here, it is one more along the lines of “authorization,” giving one the go-ahead to move forward into ever more liberating spheres of life.<sup>138</sup> This means also having the courage to experiment with and potentially produce new anthropotechnological expressions of faith, not unlike St. Francis. Sloterdijk closes *You Must Change Your Life* with exactly this call and benediction:

Now it is time to call to mind anew all those forms of the practising life that continue to release salutogenic energies, even where the over-elevations to metaphysical revolutions in which they were initially bound up have crumbled. Old forms must be tested for reusability and new forms invented. Another cycle of secessions may begin in order to lead humans out once again – if not out of the world, then at least out of dullness, dejection and obsession, but above all out of banality which Isaac Babel termed the counter-revolution.<sup>139</sup>

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136E.g. One might read Marguerite Porete's *The Mirror of Simple Souls* in order to uncover how her extremist view of Love's annihilation of the soul presents a radical training program for beguines, allowing them to take hold of a kind of spiritual *parrhēsia* that gains courage from an incredibly heavy upward gravitational pull. Sloterdijk himself considers Porete in *Bubbles Microspherology: Spheres Volume I*, (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011, 546-550.

137See Anson Rabinbach, “Critique and Commentary / Alchemy and Chemistry: Some Remarks On Walter Benjamin and This Special Issue,” in “Special Walter Benjamin Issue,” special issue, *New German Critique* 17 (Spring, 1979): 3-14.

138I owe this understanding of “authority” as “authorization” to theologian Nik Ansell.

139Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 441. “Salutogenic” indicates an approach to medicine that centers on the health

Examining religion in this way offers us the opportunity to take a more creative relationship to religious traditions, especially as they might be retooled to aid in necessary secession and transcending movements in times of widespread cynicism.

In the next and final chapter, I will explore a few promising trajectories for certain anthropotechnologies housed in religion, ones that allow us to embark on a process of self-finding that constitutes a new politics of reflection. In the first chapter, I highlighted three aspects of cynicism: its split consciousness, despairing resignation, and defense against ideology critique. Using these three features as guideposts, and following the reflections in this second chapter on cynicism's need for a new self-understanding, I aim to explore an alternative form of religious life that affords cynics both a therapy and a way of moving creatively forward. Responding to cynicism, these anthropotechnological means of transcendence will need to find a way to unify themselves, cheer up, and move beyond critique.

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of human bodies rather than variables that cause disease.

### CHAPTER III | OVERCOMING CYNICISM THROUGH SPIRITUAL LIFE

#### INTRODUCTION: ANTHROPOTECHNOLOGY AGAINST THE GRAND INQUISITOR

Before jumping into the final chapter, examining religious anthropotechnologies as a response to cynicism, let us pause briefly for a moment to consider perhaps the most iconic literary stage on which the drama between cynics and religion is carried out: Dostoevsky's parable of the Grand Inquisitor, a parable that earns a full section in *Critique of Cynical Reason*. The parable's author is Ivan Karamazov, a man with a "euclidean mind," a man of Western modernity, and the parable's hearer is his younger brother, Alyosha Karamazov, a monastic novice. In the parable, we find Jesus, apprehended and in the hands of the Spanish Inquisition, face to face with the Grand Inquisitor. He has been rounded up for causing "disruption" by bringing a dead child back to life in public. The Inquisitor meets Jesus in the dungeon, where he tells him he will put him to death. The Inquisitor goes on to explain just what has made him so upset; the Church, he tells Jesus, has taken over the role of making sure the people are taken care of, has assumed the role of politics and now seeks to make life bearable for the masses. He protests the actions and message of Jesus, who, he says, placed a burden far too great on people the first time around—and he worries Jesus is about to do the same again.

The Church has actively stamped out the spiritual freedom inaugurated by Jesus (intriguingly the results of the Inquisition, implying freedom is found in being unacceptable to orthodoxy), such that individuals could now feel they are truly free because they are taken care of. Jesus, on the other hand, calls people to live beyond their moral means. "He has not accepted human beings as they are but has overstrained them with his love,"<sup>140</sup> writes Sloterdijk, paraphrasing the Inquisitor's argument. The Church has accepted humans as they are; Jesus feels the need to offer them the freedom to go beyond themselves. Importantly, Sloterdijk notes that the Inquisitor is internally conflicted (a sure sign of cynicism), for on the one hand he boasts about taking care of the people, but on the other hand he

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140Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 184.

knows he has betrayed the foundational message of the Church. “If the Grand Inquisitor knows what he is doing, then he must be acting for reasons of overpowering moral gravity, reasons that are strong enough to dislodge the religious faith he outwardly represents,” writes Sloterdijk.<sup>141</sup> The Inquisitor appears as a conservative master cynic, defending a guiding fiction, willingly suspending it when necessary, all in the name of realism. That the Inquisitor may not get any joy from this responsibility is beside the point, and really only confirms its outright cynicism.

“To be concise,” writes Sloterdijk, “[the Inquisitor's] speech is the reply of a politician to the founder of religion. Seen somewhat more deeply, it is a settling of accounts of anthropology with theology, of administration with emancipation, of the institution with the individual.”<sup>142</sup> This first pair of accounts, between anthropology and theology, is especially interesting. Modern conservatisms, Sloterdijk observes, “are all based on pessimistic anthropologies according to which the striving for freedom is nothing more than a dangerous illusion, a mere basically insubstantial urge that glosses over the necessary and ineluctable institutional ('bound') character of human life.”<sup>143</sup> A figure like Jesus, on the contrary, the founder of religion, sets up a demand for freedom, one that accepts people for who they are such that they might become something more. All this comes to a head when Jesus, who is silent throughout the entire interrogation, finally responds to his Inquisitor—with nothing but a simple kiss. “For a moment... the church politician must admit defeat; for one second he sees the 'Other,' the infinite affirmation that includes even him and that neither judges nor condemns.”<sup>144</sup> With that Jesus is let go, quietly and secretly, with a warning to just get out. Ivan leaves the ending of the parable open—and, upon finishing it, Alyosha responds by giving him a kiss.

What this scene suggests is a confrontation between cynicism and religion. That it hinges on an anthropological difference is significant. Master cynics must assume that people need them, and that

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141Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 183

142Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 183.

143Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 185.

144Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 188

they are victims of their own tragic circumstance in life. Most people simply cannot handle the freedom some stronger, more resolute individuals might offer. This anthropology is internalized to a lesser degree even among those without hands on the reins of power; for them, humans are, by nature, stuck under someone's thumb or beholden to someone else's interest, meaning one better be on guard. Religion opposes a radical invitation and embodiment of freedom to both. Jesus assumes all people are capable of living a free life, if only they take hold of it. Religion is an anthropotechnology by which humans transcend themselves, not beholden to a conservative anthropology but opening onto ever brighter futures. And, as the parable and Alyosha's response to it illustrate especially well, the movements of religion do not engage in the cynical discourse of masters—they present alternative worlds through acts of radical compassion.

In the previous chapter, I considered the ways in which religion, as a set of anthropotechnologies, reveals how human beings are practicing and self-transcending creatures that are not condemned to their own social circumstances. In this final chapter, I look at the specific religious anthropotechnologies of awareness, saintly life, and creative action as means of shaping undetermined human beings in healthier directions away from cynicism. A qualified spiritual grounding of the human being, I intend to show, can address the constitutive characteristics of cynicism outlined in the first chapter: self-splitting, despair, and the ineffectiveness of ideology critique.

I begin by rehearsing Sloterdijk's critique of modern subjectivity, which ultimately attempts to recover the ancient demand to “know thyself” in a postmodern context through a religious affirmation of life itself, revealing that *Critique of Cynical Reason* amounts to a postmodern retrieval of ancient cynicism that radiates an aura both German and Eastern. By trying to help us understand ourselves more clearly, Sloterdijk's critique aims to release cynics into a joyous experience of the present moment that helps to overcome our internal division. This leads to a consideration of how one might speak to cynics not only theoretically, but existentially as well, which I explore by taking a detour through the

work of ethicist Edith Wyschogrod. In response to Sloterdijk's analysis of cynicism, Wyschogrod offers a vision of "postmodern saintliness." Though Wyschogrod accepts Sloterdijk's articulation of cynicism as being on the mark, she lobbies some significant criticisms. Putting Wyschogrod's Jewish-Christian saintliness and Sloterdijk's German-Buddhist cynicism in dialogue with one another, a unified, embodied religious life of alternative faithfulness emerges, capable of getting through to cynics without the use of ideology critique. While embodied saintliness and awareness are important tools in the repertoire of religious anthropotechnology, with Berdyaev I conclude by suggesting it is only one side of the equation when it comes to envisioning a religious solution to cynicism that can move beyond our current social organization in a creative vein. Alongside the witness of postmodern saints, we need, too, a witness of spiritual creatives who respond to the present social organization by actively creating an alternative. By trading criticism for creativity, a strategy emerges that coaxes cynics out of their hardened negative shells through a *via positiva*.

*FROM SELF-SPLITTING AND DESPAIR TO EMBODIED AWARENESS, OR HOW TO RELAX*

At the beginning of chapter two, I considered how Diogenes, the ur-kynic, relativizes the confusion of an ancient society in transition. By embodying that which is excluded by, or that which is outside, Athenian society, Diogenes presents a *parrhēsiastic* critique of social norms that says the truth of life itself, encouraging his fellow humans to come to terms with themselves beyond the scope of mere citizens of Athens. I suggested cynicism is a mode of emancipation, one that confronts those trapped in society with the possibility of something outside, something bigger and more encompassing, so large that if one is to remain a citizen it could only be as a *cosmopolitan*. The source of this courage comes, however, not from an armed subject like that found in modernity, but from a premodern trust in the cosmos itself. Knowing that one cannot simply return to premodern cosmology, but appreciating the position and intuitions of Diogenes, Sloterdijk filters the feral philosopher through the insights of German Critical Theory *à la* Adorno and Horkheimer, Heidegger's phenomenology, and Eastern

mysticism. The result is a radically religious and passive mode of existence that intuits itself as part of a broader horizon of existence, not split within oneself but unified beyond oneself. Released from the pressure of survivalist actions, Sloterdijk's postmodern cynicism aims to help cynics relax into a reality undetermined by violence such that they might escape the clutches of despair. This section, then, will rehearse Sloterdijk's critique of "subjective reason," along with his recovery of Diogenes as a means of overcoming modern subjectivity, in order to move past a cynical split in consciousness and its accompanying despair.

As we noted earlier, Sloterdijk explains that modernity "begins with splits, inconsistencies, and ironies."<sup>145</sup> It comes on the scene with the breaking apart of the previous social fabric and ends with the splitting of the atom. Modernity is an epochal training in mistrust, resulting in violent subjects who can only feel a sense of security through the use of force. But mistrust is never discarded, and it results in a permanent self-doubt about one's own actions and the actions of others—the consequences of modernity lead to a situation of universal and diffuse cynicism. Cynicism and modernity fit together hand-in-glove. The *Critique of Cynical Reason* is therefore also a critique of modernity, and since modernity is where humans start behaving like subjects, a critique of cynical reason is also a critique of *subjective reason*, as outlined in chapter two.

Subjective reason is a distinct way of thinking and being in the world that emerges from an environment of distrust. It results from the loss of the ability to answer the classical philosophical imperative, to "know thyself," by looking for concentric circles of harmony radiating from one's soul to the polis to the cosmos. Without the reliable connection between self and world, the self, which is now conceived of as a subject, "cast[s] its nets over the 'object' worlds," Sloterdijk explains, thereby transforming "the world's wildness into what we make and think through."<sup>146</sup> Subjective reason then proliferates a variety of strategies for the management of a world that is no longer our sign of

145Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 169.

146Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 538.

recognition but a field of alien potentiality, available for taming and mastering. It is a way of being human characterized by reaching out and groping at something controllable, only half-informed but acting anyway. “In the theory of subjective reason,” Sloterdijk explains, “the world is paraphrased as the content of *our doings*. Subjectivity has been turned fully into praxis.”<sup>147</sup> Subjective reason emerges as a mode of being human bent on relating to the world as a field to be controlled, through outbursts of actions and reactions, a situation in which one must always be *doing* and never resting so as to keep pace with all the other subjects.

In such a context, Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* is an attempt to de-escalate tensions and raise the spirits of weary and weaponized subjects. We have now reached the point in the analysis where we might change from diagnosis to therapy, an overcoming of subjective and cynical reason. Sloterdijk's therapy will not, however, constantly bemoan our situation or ratchet up the stakes of how bad things really are; in other words, his therapy will not, like so many other cultural observers and critics, be content to merely elaborate the problem. “Where enlightenment appears as a 'melancholy science',” writes Sloterdijk, “it unintentionally furthers melancholic stagnation. Thus, the critique of cynical reason hopes to achieve more from a work that cheers us up, whereby it is understood from the beginning that it is not so much a matter of work but rather of relaxation.”<sup>148</sup> In his critique, Sloterdijk examines the phenomenon and history of cynical consciousness, which includes elaborating the dangerous structure of subjective reason. In the end, however, we are left not with critique alone but a means of rest. “Ironically,” Sloterdijk says, “the aim of the most critical effort is the most ingenuous release.”<sup>149</sup>

To begin in simple terms, getting over subjective reason means pulling up one's nets and

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147Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 539.

148Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. xxxvii. Here we see where Sloterdijk's complicated relationship to Critical Theory emerges, given that the “melancholy science” Sloterdijk rejects is a clear reference to Adorno, and on the same page Sloterdijk goes on to say that he is not trying to rescue or salvage Critical Theory.

149Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. xxxvii.

allowing the object world its own space. The point is to abandon one's subjectivity, to renounce one's projects and strivings in an effort of sublime passivity. It is an almost deceptively simple solution: if being a subject is stressing you out, give it up! But how does one give up something so deeply constitutive of our identities, our survival strategy? The key, says Sloterdijk, to overcoming subjectivity is to realize you were never simply a subject anyway. "In the twilight of late enlightenment," says Sloterdijk, "the insight gains shape that our 'praxis,' which we always held to be the most legitimate child of reason, in fact, represents the central myth of modernity."<sup>150</sup> Praxis, our doings, is what make up our subjective relationship to the world, but praxis is based not in a realism but a modern myth. Here the critique of cynical reason amounts to the critique of one more illusion, the illusion of subjectivity.

Sloterdijk aims to repeat the anthropological move of Diogenes by locating the human being in a context broader than immediate social relations. This is not a lapse into a falsely harmonious whole, nor a reification of consciousness in a cosmic illusion, but an alternative and deeper realism than that of cynical despair. Cynicism is "simultaneously realistic *and* absolutely paranoid; realistic because it is adapted to the interaction of paranoid systems; paranoid because in the long run and essentially, it is completely unrealistic."<sup>151</sup> By taking the paranoia of competitive society as normative, cynicism manifests as a false consciousness in its final acceptance of the ideology of a modern society premised against omnipresent illusions. The only way to break the spell of disenchantment is to notice the way in which reality lies beyond both the master cynics, responsible for reality's initial enchanting, and

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<sup>150</sup>Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 539. This critique of Western modernity is also found in certain Eastern philosophers, with whom, as we will see later on, Sloterdijk shares a great deal. In Japan, for example, thinkers associated with "The Kyoto School," such as Nishida Kitaro, Nishitani Keiji, and a host of others also sought to undermine the modern rationalist subject, which they thought was responsible for the encroaching alienation of Japanese persons following the Second World War. Buddhism, filtered through existentialist lenses (Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and especially Heidegger), naturally provided a means of overcoming the subject and its desire for control. See James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay On the Kyoto School*, Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2001), which introduces these thinkers. See also Heisig's own reflections on the Kyoto School and how it might speak to current, immediate problems created by Western subjectivity, found in his book *Nothingness and Desire: An East-West Philosophical Antiphony*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013).

<sup>151</sup>Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 228.

colloquial cynicism, which results from reality's disenchanting. "We must first *flee into reality* out of the systematized paranoia of our everyday world," says Sloterdijk.<sup>152</sup> Reality is larger than our subjective reasoning of it.

It is a strategy that draws from the wells of premodernity, yet it is not naive; Sloterdijk does not assume we can, nor does he want to, return to a premodern cosmology and microcosmic humanity in specifics, and he is well aware of what happened in modernity to render such a project impossible. But a change in cosmology does not necessarily obliterate the fundamental spiritual insight at work in the joyful affirmative life of Diogenes or the Buddha. "In its legitimate disassembly of the great world images of objective reason," says Sloterdijk, "enlightenment runs the danger of destroying not only the ideological pretenses of the fraud of sacrifice but also the inheritance of a passivistic consciousness without which practical reason cannot really be called reason."<sup>153</sup> Recovering this passivistic consciousness, *through* rather than *behind* modernity and postmodernity, is necessary to stem the disappointment that results from a loss of orienting illusions and guiding fictions.

The anthropotechnology to overcome cynical despair, which is also a certain alternative anthropodicy, comes in the form of a deep awareness of life; it is not really even fully a "strategy," like a modern means of manipulating oneself, but a recognition of what already occurs to us from time to time. Though we regularly forget, Sloterdijk tells us these experiences happen upon us on their own accord:

It is a matter of experiences for which I can find no other word than the exuberant experience of a well-spent life. In our best moments, when, overcome with success, even the most energetic activity gives way to passivity and the rhythmic of the living carry us spontaneously, courage can suddenly make itself felt as a euphoric clarity or a seriousness that is wonderfully tranquil within itself. It awakens the present within us. In the present, awareness climbs all at once to the heights of being. Cool and bright, every moment enters

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152Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 228. One might read the rest of Sloterdijk's work as further attempts to elucidate an alternative realism for modern persons. His magnum opus trilogy *Spheres*, for example, is attentive to the ways in which humans come into the world via measures of care, safety, and love, despite what inevitably goes wrong in the future.

153Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 542.

its space; you are no different from its brightness, its coolness, its jubilation. Bad experiences give way to new opportunities.<sup>154</sup>

Our cynical assumption that reality must be the sum of its worst parts is a falsely metaphysical assumption that leads us down dark and desperate paths. The critique of cynical reason encourages us to wake up, to be released into the moments of life itself that cannot be stifled by what we make of it. As Huyssen notes, Sloterdijk rejects the heritage of Critical Theory which posits a “masochism of refusal or the melancholy about an irrevocable loss of happiness”<sup>155</sup> that result from its reasonable but ultimately overstated suspicion toward the whole.<sup>156</sup> “Sloterdijk is right in reminding us that the domination through instrumental or cynical reason can never be total,” writes Huyssen, and in the conclusion to Sloterdijk's text we see in fact a resolute rehabilitation of a warm whole, a whole that exceeds what humans try to make of it.<sup>157</sup>

Overcoming our despair through attention to its limited perspective allows us to freely relax and find more peaceful ways of living. Attention to the whole, Sloterdijk argues, recovers the classical “know thyself” for postmodern citizens: “It leads us in a quasi-neoclassical movement of thought to the point where we can see how the producing, reflecting, active self is inlaid in a passive self that cannot

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154Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 547.

155Huyssen. “Foreword” to *Critique of Cynical Reason*. xvii.

156This is the primary lesson of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*, summarized by Adorno's maxim “the whole is the false.”

Rhetorically powerful and persuasive, the maxim basically guarantees a cynical despairing consciousness and motivates Sloterdijk's attempt to rehabilitate a Nietzschean “gay science” in contradistinction to Adorno's “melancholy science.” Lambert Zuidervaart offers a similar and useful commentary on the density of this maxim: “What Adorno articulates more eloquently than his successors is that ‘the whole is the false’. In the long run, we cannot resist the repression of desire and the destruction of nature unless we dismantle economic exploitation. What he needed to say more vigorously, however, and with greater nuance, is that the whole is not wholly false. This is the valid point to Habermas's otherwise overwrought critique.” *Social Philosophy After Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131. It is the valid point, too, of Sloterdijk's non-Habermasian rehabilitation of an ontological whole, filtered through Heidegger.

157Huyssen. “Foreword” to *Critique of Cynical Reason*. xvii. In this we can see shades of Sloterdijk's double inheritance from Heidegger and Adorno. Heidegger appeals to a broader context in which humans are thrown and rejects anthropocentric views that treat the modern subject as a user of objects. Adorno privileges the object, which can never be totally encapsulated by the subject. Though Heidegger and Adorno are traditional arch-enemies, by taking them together Sloterdijk manages to posit a realism that gives primacy to a context beyond human reason (Adorno) and that is never fully corrupted by those human beings, therefore enabling it to host new openings for human possibility (Heidegger). For a similar approach, see the work of Lambert Zuidervaart, who attempts to think through Critical Theory and Heideggerian ontology with respect to the problem of truth. Though Zuidervaart has published widely on this topic, his forthcoming book *Critical Retrieval: Truth in Husserl, Heidegger, and the Frankfurt School* contains a variety of essays allowing phenomenology and Critical Theory to dialogue through problems related to their respective theories of truth.

be manipulated by any deed. All subjectivities, competences, activisms, and illusions of doers are still borne by this deeper layer. And no matter how much activity belongs to our essence, it nevertheless has basically the structure of 'letting-oneself-do.'<sup>158</sup> Now we are not bound to lashing out but can proceed by giving ourselves permission, authorized and autonomized, this time appropriately so. Before jumping to a renewed sense of activity in the world, one must consider the laughter of the ancient examples of this spiritual practice of attentive meditation, Diogenes and Buddha, who open up the possibility of helping others to laugh as well, the result of feeling, as Sloterdijk says, that they are no different from the brightness of the present.

In the expression of some laughing Buddhas... there is something of [an] animal and, at the same time, ecstatic and realistic belly laughter that frolics about so unselfconsciously in its springs and thrusts that no ego is left in the laughing, only a serene energy that celebrates itself. [...] The devil's energy is the energy that laughs until the others fall silent. In the laughter of Diogenes and Buddha, the ego itself, which had taken things so seriously, laughs itself to death. Of course, that takes a big mouth that can be opened wide without hindrance, not for fine phrases but for a strong vitality in which there is more astonishment than pretentiousness. The kind of big' mouthedness that interests the philosopher is not an active but a passive one, the saying of aaah when we watch fireworks or look at a mountain, or in flashes of genius in which Aha! passes through us. With great insights we want to shout, and what are great insights other than a release from false complicatedness?<sup>159</sup>

In case it must be said, none of this disqualifies Sloterdijk from understanding the true complicatedness of society and social problems, or the general difficulties of life itself. This is not a spirituality of escapism, but a radical withdrawal, an anthropotechnological means of overcoming a violent subjectivity. It is, to borrow from Arendt, an *amor mundi*, the affirmation of the world, a world that moves beyond what we make of the world.

Through these spiritual practices, we overcome *subjective reason* with *objective reason*, understood not as a hubristic dream of scientific detachment, but a detachment nonetheless, a detachment from one's feelings of control such that the "objects" of the world are permitted their own

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158Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 540.

159Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 144-5.

autonomy. Objective reason is not uncritical but comes after, in the wake of, a period of too much criticism. Sloterdijk's reconsideration of Diogenes with the help of thinkers like Adorno is especially clarifying.

Sapere aude! remains the motto of an enlightenment that, even in the twilight of the most recent dangers, resists intimidation by catastrophe. Only out of its courage can a future still unfold that would be more than the expanded reproduction of the worst of the past. Such courage nourishes itself from the now faint currents of recollection of a spontaneous ability of life to be-in-order, an order not constructed by anybody. Where the old doctrines tried to speak of "objective reason," they also wanted, with therapeutic intent, to remind us that in a world that has become thoroughly 'alienated' since the beginning of the era of high culture, things can perhaps again flow and order themselves if we disarm as subjects and step back from respectably camouflaged, destructive activism into letting things be.<sup>160</sup>

Objective reason reaches all the way back to Diogenes' trust in nature over law and the Buddha's tranquil smile, extending through to Sloterdijk's immediate German forebears in the Frankfurt School and phenomenology. It is to Sloterdijk's credit to have detected the intimate connections between such vastly different figures and schools as early Critical Theory, with its precedence of the object, phenomenology, which allows things to disclose themselves, ancient kynicism, channeling *physis* over *nomos*, and Eastern mysticism, where overcoming the ego ends in compassion. By treating each thinker and life as a contemporary, not discarded by time or history,<sup>161</sup> Sloterdijk manages to weave together schools of thought that reveal an ancient wisdom that is not nostalgic, and one that allows for a postcritical feeling of being at ease once again, such that despair and resignation give way to courage, hope, and solidarity. "Only through the individuals becoming consciously passive and tranquil does the universal prevail against the particular, the objective against the subjective, experience against mere imagination,"<sup>162</sup> writes Sloterdijk.

Those with a critical consciousness will find much of the foregoing to be a pill much too hard to

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160Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 546-547.

161E.g.: "I treat Diogenes, as well as the other kynical and cynical figures, in the present tense, not historically, from a distance. The present tense creates the possibility of a general *typification* of kynical and cynical themes." Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 132.

162Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 543.

swallow. In a time of extreme injustice, the last thing one should do is become passive. Is passivity not exactly the problem? Are not too many people too passive to make the radical structural changes necessary for our society to become equitable and peaceful? Such concerns open us onto the question of action afforded by Sloterdijk's religious withdrawal. It is here where one might examine the activities of religiously withdrawn persons, traditionally called saints, who belong to an alternative order beyond the goings-on of everyday life. By exploring a postmodern saintliness, we will uncover not only further means to destabilize the inwardly closed consciousness of cynicism, but also how Sloterdijk's passivity is not a mere quietism about political problems, nor an idealistic retreat into a lazy and self-satisfied acceptance of one's own luxury and privilege. "Secession produces *real spaces*," says Sloterdijk in *You Must Change Your Life*. "It sets up borders behind which a genuinely different mode of being dictates its will."<sup>163</sup> Along with the early Sloterdijk, we might add that *cessation*, too, produces real spaces.

#### *POSTMODERN SAINTS, EAST AND WEST*

As we saw in the first chapter, cynics are immune to ideology critique. Any further criticism of their social conditions only adds to the problem of an already overinformed cynical consciousness. Hence Sloterdijk's "critique of cynical reason" makes an effort to criticize exactly that, cynical reason, in order to show how that very defense mechanism is not necessary or given. However it is not enough simply to criticize cynical reason, and Sloterdijk himself notes this by offering the further spiritual practice of meditative awareness of the present. To break through cynical shells, it will take not a better critique of ideology, but something else, some other kind of communication. Following Sloterdijk and the work of Edith Wyschogrod, in this section I intend to introduce the possibility of an existential argument against cynicism, one that critiques through life itself, rather than through better knowledge.

In her book *Saints and Postmodernism*, Wyschogrod tries to address the problem of cynicism by

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<sup>163</sup>Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 221. Emphasis added.

carefully examining the features of saintliness and compassion. She recognizes that she has her work cut out for her, opening the book by asking “A postmodern ethics? Is this not a contradiction in terms?”<sup>164</sup> Yet this contradiction is exactly what interests her investigations. By calling our attention to the normalization of suffering and the ubiquity of tragedies in the twentieth century, culminating in what she calls a “death event,” Wyschogrod argues we simply cannot ignore the need to craft a workable ethical subjectivity, an issue she says *is* problematically ignored by postmodern philosophy. Filling in this aporia, Wyschogrod turns to religion. “The world's religious traditions,” she writes, “have in the past addressed the problems of the wretched of the earth in the person of saints, those who put themselves totally at the disposal of the Other.”<sup>165</sup> Wyschogrod's postmodern saintliness is not, however, a regressive or conservative retrieval of high church feast days. Instead, by arguing for a radical altruistic mode of subjectivity as expressed in the lives of the saints, Wyschogrod aims to creatively draw out the features of the saintly tradition that work against a cynical and postmodern society unable to conceive of an Other-oriented way of being.

Drawing on Sloterdijk's work,<sup>166</sup> Wyschogrod looks for a way to cut through the moral ambivalence that constitutes cynical consciousness. An ethical understanding in cynical society, she argues, will not be the result of a moral syllogism as found in Aristotle, or as updated in contemporaries like Thomas Nagel.<sup>167</sup> “The aporia between belief and action... cannot be dissolved by providing a mediating link between moral and epistemic argument chains,” writes Wyschogrod, noting that the problem is not that cynics cannot complete an ethical syllogism, the problem is that they have already reasoned beyond the ethical syllogism by realizing that its conclusions are rendered ineffective by a context of competition.<sup>168</sup> She puts her finger on the fundamental question: how does one “convince” a

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164Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), xiii.

165Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. xiv.

166Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. See 41-48, 103.

167Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 41.

168Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 41.

cynic that a moral life is not only necessary but even possible?

Here Wyschogrod invokes the actions and hagiographies of saintly lives, who exhibit a curious kind of influence on those around them. Contrasting the wisdom of cynics and saints, she notices that while saints might understand they are being taken advantage of, they willingly seek ways to enact a generosity and grace anyway, whereas cynics are unable to understand the actions of saintly individuals. The life of the saint, who exists to alleviate the sufferings of others and draw out their joys, bears witness to an alternative ethic and a sense of possibility through an embodied narrative of self-sacrificial love. The life of the cynic, whose existential purpose is always unclear, is unable to perform the counter-intuitive logic of a competitive milieu embodied by saints. This is not to say that cynics are incapable of moral or just acts now and then, but the radicality of a saintly life is off the table.

Coming into contact with saints and their narratives, however, does not necessarily leave cynics unphased. Saints radiate a “nonverbal pedagogy”<sup>169</sup> that manifests through their “authorized action,”<sup>170</sup> allowing saints to *show* rather than *tell* the contours of another world in a way that compels cynics to re-evaluate the possibility of other social relations.<sup>171</sup> This is a mode of communication akin to what Kierkegaard observes as “indirect communication,” the kind of communication Jesus engages in through parables and action.<sup>172</sup> Cynics will rightly bristle at the assumption that saintly action is “authorized,” trained as they are to expect authorizations of action to be self-interested bids for power. According to Wyschogrod, however, the authorization of saintly action comes specifically from the *renunciation* of power,<sup>173</sup> assuming the legitimate risk to one's life and status that comes with radical altruism, the emptying of the self that makes action for the Other possible. If cynicism is a reaction of

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169Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 49.

170Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 60.

171The contrast of “showing” and “telling” is famously made by Wittgenstein, who peers through the lines of Wyschogrod's text. See *Saints and Postmodernism*. 47, 156.

172This also makes Jesus a prime candidate for kynical existence, corroborated by Sloterdijk. See *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 40, 43, 161-2, 232, 282-3, and also his discussion of Jesus in the context of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor parable, 182-194.

173Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 57-60.

self-preservation, as Sloterdijk argues, Wyschogrod's embodied saints are compassionate agents of self-abnegation. Saints do not complete moral syllogisms but embody a radical and unified existential commitment to responding to suffering.

Saints do not require a confidence in their own negative and critical reason. Rather, saints mobilize a radical inner stability that takes the alleviation of suffering as their very form of life (which, Wyschogrod notes, means that one's belief or nonbelief in God is ultimately irrelevant to the designation of saintly life, so construed<sup>174</sup>). Is this, however, simply a battle of fideisms, one on the side of saintly hope and the other on the side of cynical despair? It would seem so, were it not for Wyschogrod's attention to alterity, modeling a similar strategy to Sloterdijk by attempting to “out-realize” cynical consciousness. Cynics can only ever consider the Other as an object to be dominated, or a competing subject, at best another poor sap who would probably take your seat if you got up. Saints, on the other hand, can only ever consider the Other as a person whose suffering needs to be alleviated, and also whose very existence needs to be elevated.<sup>175</sup> The Other is not a black hole that sucks up all the saint's existential energy, but is instead the bearer of a “supra-ontological” being, in Wyschogrod's terms;<sup>176</sup> the saint sees the Other as the source of an ethical demand that can never be fulfilled, a demand that is infinite, provoking in the saint an excessive desire to lay down any will to self-preservation.

Viewed in terms of Sloterdijk's anthropotechnology, the saints themselves, by virtue of their non-verbal pedagogy that aims to open up new possibilities in the world, are media by which cynics might transcend their subjective reason. In *You Must Change Your Life*, Sloterdijk essentially says as much: “Ordinary existence came into contact with [the] pull from above through the ubiquitous

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174Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 34.

175Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 255. The saint desires “not only the welfare of the Other, the cessation of another's suffering, but also the Other's beatitude; not only to sit at the right hand of God oneself but to desire the elevation of the Other.”

176Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 255. By the “supra-ontological” being of the Other, Wyschogrod invokes Levinas's critique of ontology, suggesting the Other exceeds our horizons and comes to us as alterity.

example of the saints, who, owing to efforts that people liked to term superhuman, were occasionally permitted to approach the impossible.”<sup>177</sup> One might look, too, to institutionalized religions, which also have a significant role to play in offering cynics the possibility of self-transcendence, insofar as they represent the lives of the saints over and over so that others might see them. “Each telling of the saint's story,” writes Wyschogrod, “so long as the tradition in which the narrative is embedded remains vital, is an ever-renewed soliciting of the narrative's addressees. To those situated within this tradition, hagiography hammers home its own mode of temporalization, the time-before-it-is-too-late.”<sup>178</sup> And, indeed, even to those outside the tradition, as evidenced in the recent “return to religion” popular among non-confessing continental philosophers.

Though Wyschogrod uses Sloterdijk to diagnose cynicism, she is not without criticism. Associating Sloterdijk with an “antinomian” trend in postmodernism in general, Wyschogrod suggests his therapy for cynicism, a rehabilitation of kynicism ends in a problematic notion of pure joy and energy that makes for a troubling ambiguity.<sup>179</sup> On her telling, Sloterdijk's text is a “manifestation of the will to ecstasy”<sup>180</sup> in postmodernism, the result of his Nietzschean sympathies, which does not account for the important lessons of alterity and the primacy of the Other found in twentieth century thinkers of dialogue.<sup>181</sup> Sloterdijk's general orientation toward kynicism in general, too, is something Wyschogrod is uncomfortable with, though her reasons for this are never totally spelled out.<sup>182</sup> Finally, she suggests

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177Sloterdijk. *You Must Change Your Life*. 64.

178Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 255.

179Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 245-246.

180Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 244.

181Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 246. She notes, specifically, Buber, Rosenstock-Huessy, and Marcel, as well as the work of Michael Theunissen. Though she is right that these thinkers do not appear in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, they do show up throughout Sloterdijk's later corpus. Rosenstock-Huessy in particular is mentioned often in Sloterdijk's work, and *Bubbles* mentions the primacy of face-to-face interactions in a way that clearly takes alterity discourses in postmodernism seriously. Whether this suggests a continuity or break between Sloterdijk's early and late work is hard to discern, but given Sloterdijk's critique of modern subjectivity one wonders if Wyschogrod's criticism is at least a little too strong.

182Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. On page 42, Wyschogrod says she will come back to Sloterdijk's distinction between cynicism and kynicism later on in the text, but the only other time it appears is on page 246, where she says “Ecstatic postmodernism's ambiguities arise in part from its failure to go deep enough and in part from its wresting from the ruins a metaphysics that will allow for the return of an all-encompassing unity not, of course, without first paying homage to topographical difference (Deleuze) or the 'kynical' absurd (Sloterdijk).”

that Sloterdijk's position ends in an amnesiac privileging of presence, over and against historical memory. The immediate context of *Critique of Cynical Reason* is Nazi Germany, and Wyschogrod notes the text is explicitly and resolutely opposed to Nazism.<sup>183</sup> But this immediate context, Wyschogrod argues, offers the risk that Sloterdijk's proximity to the events of German fascism might have resulted in accidentally internalizing fascist metaphors and arguments, and that, in the end, Sloterdijk's solution to live in the present moment problematically sees no way to move beyond history's tragedies other than to forget them.<sup>184</sup> “[W]ho in the century of man-made mass death could attain ecstasy without amnesia?” she writes,<sup>185</sup> commenting on one of Sloterdijk's final lines in *Critique of Cynical Reason*, which reads “No history makes you old.”<sup>186</sup> Interacting with these criticisms will help us bring out the nuances, and especially the religious hues, of Sloterdijk's suggested therapy for modern cynicism, which we might describe as a postmodern kynicism.

Wyschogrod's concerns about Sloterdijk's position are understandable. She suggests his “ecstatic postmodernism,” as she calls it, results in a problematic and fundamental ethical ambiguity that has the inability to make a real move of compassion, resulting in particular from a lack of attention to alterity. As a Jewish philosopher specifically responding to the difficulty of thinking ethically in the wake of the twentieth century, Wyschogrod has concrete reasons to reject anything that simply revels in ecstasy. However, like many others, Wyschogrod overlooks Sloterdijk's nuanced reading of Diogenes, filtered especially through Martin Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit*, which reveals a way of being in the world that gives reality the space to be itself, not in order to indulge in a burst of narcissistic insanity but to bring about a way for humans to be at home once again in reality. “The great thinking of antiquity,” Sloterdijk writes, “is rooted in the experience of enthusiastic tranquility when, on the summit of having-thought, the thinker steps aside and lets himself be permeated by the 'self-revelation'

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183Sloterdijk himself says that the text is meant to provide a deeper analysis of fascism. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 7-8.

184Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 245-246.

185Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 252.

186Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 547.

of truth.”<sup>187</sup> Diogenes exemplifies this ancient thinking by resting in the cosmic knowledge of the whole, such that his confidence is found not in Athenian society but the cosmos itself, which, if one remains open to it, will reveal the truth of Being. “This culminates in the classical temerities of world reason or the logos that, to use Heidegger's words, lets itself 'be given to think' what is thinkable by being itself,”<sup>188</sup> Sloterdijk writes, and the temerities of the logos are thereby reflected as termerities in the thinker, not via subjective reason but a radical boldness that results from being in touch with reality.

To be sure, Sloterdijk does cite Diogenes' “antinomian” activities (for what *nomos* is greater than a *cosmonomos*?) and even a certain ecstatic character positively, but Wyschogrod presents his position (briefly, anyway) as though self-assertion and its frenzied gesturing is Sloterdijk's solution. On the contrary, Sloterdijk's Diogenes is much closer to a “postmodern saint” than it may seem, and Sloterdijk explicitly criticizes the “activist ethos of self-assertion” that characterizes modernity.<sup>189</sup> Granted, Sloterdijk's Diogenes, as we will see, is not primarily characterized by a care for the Other, but neither is he, ultimately, reducible to an arbitrary brazenness. Sloterdijk does try to rehabilitate a kind of existential courage and resolve, but this comes through letting oneself be taken along by Being; it would not be saying it too strongly to say Sloterdijk's entire project is the disarming of subjective reason and modern self-assertion in the interest of connecting with a feeling of peace.

One might characterize the difference between Sloterdijk and Wyschogrod as the difference between Buddhist saintliness and Jewish-Christian saintliness, respectively, a difference that is lost on Wyschogrod's critical reading. Sloterdijk's kynicism invokes self-emptying and a Buddhist form of compassion, indeed, it has an “Asiatic component,” as Sloterdijk himself calls it.<sup>190</sup> The “ecstasy” and

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187Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 541. For a thorough examination of truth as disclosure in Heidegger's early work *Being and Time*, see Lambert Zuidervaart, “If I Had a Hammer: Truth in Heidegger's *Being and Time*,” in *The Hermeneutics of Charity*. 73-97.

188Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 541.

189Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 540.

190Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 542. By characterizing Sloterdijk's kynicism as having a Buddhist hue, I do not intend to lump Sloterdijk in with certain tendencies in postmodern thought that seek total salvation in a purified and reified Eastern tradition. Sloterdijk does not advocate a mass conversion of cynics to Buddhism, but rather notes how Buddhist and Greek kynical notions have significant rebukes for Western subjectivity, and might be creatively engaged

“joy” that qualify Sloterdijk's gay science are the results of a renunciation of power (recall Diogenes' interaction with Alexander the Great) that open onto a moment of profound inner peace, a laughing joy that celebrates its positive energy.<sup>191</sup> Sloterdijk himself makes a distinction between two kinds of ecstatic and energetic laughter, that of the devil and that of Diogenes and Buddha: “The Devil's laughter has the energy of destruction within it, with crashing crockery and collapsing walls, an evil laughter above the debris. In positive ecstatic laughter, by contrast, the energy of a perplexed affirmation is at play; in spite of its wildness, it sounds contemplative, celebratory.”<sup>192</sup> The affirmation of such a laugh is not the affirmation of whatsoever happens, but rather the natural reaction one has to the simple recognition that one *is*, the laughter that catches us in moments of awe and wonder, of surprise and delight, feelings that are certainly just as real as their all-too-real counterparts in moments of tragedy and suffering. Where Wyschogrod worries that Sloterdijk laughs with the devil, he recommends, instead, that cynics learn to laugh with Diogenes.

This brings us to Sloterdijk's positive social role for kynicism in particular. Like Wyschogrod, Sloterdijk wants an indirect, “nonverbal pedagogy,” one that shows the possibility of alternative ways of living. Sloterdijk's pedagogy, however, is contingent on, first and foremost, taking a vision of peace and disarmament for granted. Where Wyschogrod's saints wrestle possibility from nonbeing, Sloterdijk's saints allow the possibility of being to unfold, illustrated well in the conclusion to *Critique of Cynical Reason*: “Those who can 'let themselves go' in a cosmic structure as if at home aim not at their self-mutilation in favor of a Moloch totality but at a creative flowing into what is possible and an unaffected self-preservation and self-elevation of existence.”<sup>193</sup> All this depends on considering and

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with in contemporary times.

191This is clearly influenced by Sloterdijk's reading of Nietzsche, for example found in his essay *Nietzsche Apostle*, trans. Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013) E.g. “Will is only an idiom. There is only a multiplicity of forces, speech, gestures, and their being composed under the direction of an ego, which gets affirmed, lost and transformed” (82). Consider also his lyrically charged characterization of Nietzsche as the purveyor of the doctrine of “*imitatio solis*”--“Only the sun has a giving virtue as first nature; only suns care nothing for the symmetry between giving and taking; only suns shine sovereignly over proponents and opponents; and only suns read no critiques” (78).

192Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 144-5.

193Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 542.

relaxing into a “world that is no longer colored by animosity,”<sup>194</sup> says Sloterdijk. At the close of *Critique of Cynical Reason*, it would be hard to maintain Wyschogrod's claim that Sloterdijk is bound to a totally excessive and antinomian logic of ecstasy in a *negative sense*, even if these are in fact accurate descriptors of his postmodern Eastern faith, and while his writing is indeed a pastiche of style and argument, there is little ambiguity about his desire to provide a space for ethical concentration. As Andreas Huyssen notes, “Sloterdijk is not a renegade of the Enlightenment, and he does not simply advocate carnival on the volcano.”<sup>195</sup>

Bringing out the Eastern influences and hues of Sloterdijk's postmodern saintliness helps to better situate Sloterdijk with respect to Wyschogrod's critique that he looks for an amnesiac solution to cynicism and history's pile of wreckage (to invoke Walter Benjamin). It is not the case that Sloterdijk means to have us *forget* the past, a conclusion that seems admittedly hard to sustain given that *Critique of Cynical Reason* devotes over a quarter of the book to an examination of the Weimar Republic. Rather, Sloterdijk wishes to perform and encourage a constitutively religious move, namely that of withdrawal and rebirth. It is worth remembering, here, the qualities of cynicism identified in chapter one, its self-enclosed and ideological aspects in particular. As he closes his book, Sloterdijk tells us that cynicism, which is our default, universal, and diffuse consciousness, is characterized by the inability to think beyond the past. “Cynical consciousness,” Sloterdijk writes, “adds up the 'bad experiences' of all times and lets only the prospectless uniformity of hard facts prevail.”<sup>196</sup> These hard facts are the hard facts of history, which “have stamped the traces of the coldness of exchange, of world wars, and the self-denial of ideals in our consciousnesses, which have become sick with experience.”<sup>197</sup> Unable to think beyond these hard facts, Sloterdijk tells us “cynicism guarantees the expanded reproduction of the

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194Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 542.

195Huyssen. “Foreword” to *Critique of Cynical Reason*. xxiv.

196Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 546.

197Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 546.

past on the newest level of what is currently the worst.”<sup>198</sup> The point of reference for cynical consciousness is the closed circle of violence and tragedy that make up the twentieth century.

The only way to escape this gravitational pull, argues Sloterdijk, is through a courageous recognition of the presence of life beyond human competition. One repeats Diogenes' identification as a cosmopolitan, relativizing our present social structures. By withdrawing from cynical history and being attentive to the present, Sloterdijk suggests “things can perhaps again flow and order themselves if we disarm as subjects and step back from respectably camouflaged, destructive activism into letting things be.”<sup>199</sup> What Sloterdijk is aiming for is not the forgetting of history but the subordination of history to an ontology beyond human violence, a present that is not therefore necessarily good nor evil, but simply a clearing (to invoke Heidegger) in which one might choose otherwise.<sup>200</sup> It is nothing short of the strategically religious move to inaugurate new beginnings. It is a moment of great absolution and liberation from one's generational sins. “The unkindnesses of yesterday compel you to nothing,” Sloterdijk proclaims. “In the light of such a presence of spirit, the spell of reenactments is broken. Every *conscious* second eradicates what is hopelessly past and becomes the first second of an Other History.”<sup>201</sup> Conscious seconds allow one to gain a more comprehensive perspective on one's surroundings, no longer beholden to what they deem necessary. Conscious seconds are not seconds of amnesia, but, quite to the contrary, seconds of a more profound awareness.<sup>202</sup> Conscious seconds give one the reflective space to think of and embark on alternative futures, futures that do not erase the past but are not completely determined by it either.

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198Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 546.

199Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 547.

200Associating this attention to the present with Heidegger's clearing helps to also address Wyschogrod's discomfort with Sloterdijk's comment about the “amoralism of the real” in *Saints and Postmodernism*. 244. She wrongly identifies this comment in the context of Deleuze and Guattari, who she thinks harbor a closet logic of sameness that threatens to lend itself to violence in the quest for ecstatic experience. Sloterdijk is indeed influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, but his significant debt to Heidegger lends itself to an alternative way of reading his “antinomian” streak.

201Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 547. Emphasis added.

202Indeed, Andreas Huyssen suggests memory and anamnesis keep Sloterdijk's cynical subject from “going blind,” though he, like Wyschogrod, problematically ascribes to Sloterdijk a position of self-assertion and subjective reason. See his Foreword to *Critique of Cynical Reason*. xv-xvi.

In defending Sloterdijk, I do not intend to suggest his vision of a postmodern saintliness derived from cynicism is the better of the two models presented by him and Wyschogrod. Instead, I intend to draw the two more closely together than Wyschogrod allows. Both suggest that embodied and unified lives of spiritual intensity can bear witness to and break through the hard shells of cynicism. For Wyschogrod's Jewish-Christian saintliness, this means living out an alternative ethic that puts the Other first, an action she suggests opens up the possibility of new worlds. For Sloterdijk's Greek-Eastern saintliness, this means living a life free from the chains of history and attentive to the present moment. At bottom one need not pit one over the other but must merge the two together; Sloterdijk's position provides the possibility of transforming oneself by recognizing the present is not exhausted by the past or by human social relations, while Wyschogrod's brings to mind an irreducible responsibility for the Other that must accompany this awareness of an alternative present. Sloterdijk brings us into a clearing, Wyschogrod allows us to enact a repetition. The real differences between them are a matter of emphasis rather than kind, insofar as both seek a religious answer to the split self of cynical consciousness. Arguably, too, both need and depend on one another, for Wyschogrod's saints run the Levinasian risk of being held "hostage" by the Other, unable to relax and set on the course for exhaustion and resentment, while Sloterdijk's kynics must see the present moment in the face of the Other as well, a face that calls one to action beyond the aaahs and Aha! moments that remind one of the joy of life *qua* life. Postmodern saintliness, colored by either the East or West, is an attempt to muster the existential resolve to be free from violent history and subjectivity and to therefore create and participate in an alternative world apart from cynical self-preservation.

*FROM SAINTLY COMPASSION TO SPIRITUAL CREATIVITY*

Throughout both Wyschogrod's and Sloterdijk's analysis of saintly life, we find references to creativity, to the ability saints and kynics have to enact new possibilities by taking their starting point outside of one's immediate reality. For Wyschogrod, "action in human life is an effort to bring something about

which does not yet exist and hagiographic fiction narrates the way in which such actions come into being...”<sup>203</sup> and for Sloterdijk “[u]nder the sign of a critique of cynical reason,” which we know ends in releasement, “enlightenment can gain a new lease on life and remain true to its most intimate project: the transformation of being through consciousness.”<sup>204</sup> Both require the presence of something that is not the self to spark the creative engine. The energy for such creative activity, however, comes about differently in both cases. Wyschogrod's saints see the suffering in the Other, which comes as a well of nonbeing from which saints must wrestle possibility, which they then nullify in order to produce a new, concrete result. Sloterdijk's saints, or kynics, see the excess of reality itself which lends to a passivity where one can allow oneself to act. We might summarize their approaches, respectively, as one inspired by creative other-affirmation and the other inspired by creative self-affirmation. This is why I suggested, above, that the two must be brought together. This final section attempts to do that more explicitly, bringing postmodern saintliness and postmodern kynicism under a spirituality of creativity.

In *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, Nikolai Berdyaev presents a radical rethinking of the Christian tradition along the lines of creativity, newness, and liberation. With a complicated background in Russian Orthodoxy, Berdyaev is attentive to the importance of saints and asceticism, where he discovers, not unlike Sloterdijk, a way of understanding ascetic religion as an anthropotechnology, a tool, for the transcending of the self. “Asceticism is only a technique of religious experience, only its formal methodology... The ascetic way is negative in its technique, but by its positive content it is return to the bosom of God.”<sup>205</sup> Thus Berdyaev notes that asceticism is not *merely* withdrawal, but also ascent, premised on a positive upward climb, pulled by another moral gravity. Yet while noting the importance of asceticism and its utilization of vertical tensions, Berdyaev is not content to consider it the sum of religious expression. He writes: “[W]e are faced with the question: is

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203Wyschogrod. *Saints and Postmodernism*. 53.

204Sloterdijk. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. 82.

205Berdyaev. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. 161.

there some other religious way, some other religious experience of creative ecstasy? By itself, the way of asceticism is not a creative way, and the ascetic ecstasy of saints and mystics is an ecstasy of return to God, the vision of divine light, rather than the creation of a new world, of life hither to unseen.”<sup>206</sup> The task, here, is to see if Wyschogrod's and Sloterdijk's saints and kynics are not mere ascetics, but channel a kind of creative ecstasy. Berdyaev's renewed spirituality helps to draw out these contours more distinctly than Wyschogrod or Sloterdijk themselves.<sup>207</sup>

Berdyaev's work comes at the tail end of the nineteenth century and the birth of the twentieth. He appears on the scene of a society in transition, where it is unclear if the rumblings are birth pangs or death rattles. Like Diogenes, instead of seeking solace in a social collective or intimidation by catastrophe, Berdyaev finds a position of confidence beyond his immediate circumstance. Yet his confidence is premised on a necessary creative act, one which follows from an ascetic withdrawal not into the bosom of God, nor *physis*, but into a clearing for a new world waiting to be realized, the Kingdom of God. Announcing his entrance into ethical thought, Berdyaev calls to mind the themes explored above in Sloterdijk's *You Must Change Your Life*: “The creative act is always an exit from this world, from this life. In its essence creativeness is an unshackling, a bursting of chains. In the creative ecstasy all the heaviness of the world is overcome, sin is burned away; another, a higher nature, shines through.”<sup>208</sup> If Sloterdijk reduces religion to anthropotechnology, Berdyaev reduces it to creativity, saying “Creativeness is neither permitted nor justified by religion—creativity is itself religion.”<sup>209</sup> If one were to bring the two more closely together, one could say Berdyaev's religious philosophy, based

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206Berdyaev. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. 161.

207Here I must note that, while I think Berdyaev is an incredibly unique and significant voice often overlooked in the history of philosophy, and intend to rectify that by putting him to use here, I do not think one can adopt Berdyaev's thought uncritically. A true reckoning with Berdyaev would need to question his deep metaphysical convictions that regularly return us to a premodern view of the Whole and a problematic and anthropocentric view premised on subjective reason. Still, Berdyaev is not unlike one of his favorite authors, Nietzsche, in that his intuitions often lead to exciting places both because and in spite of his other commitments. One must take Berdyaev piecemeal, and this is in the spirit of Berdyaev himself, who regularly notes his philosophy is meandering and “inconsistent.”

208Berdyaev. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. 163.

209Berdyaev. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. 110.

wholly around the notion that religious life is creative life, is in fact a call for the proliferation of new anthropotechnologies, such that we might transcend our present situation. “Creativeness,” writes Berdyaev, “is not an adaptation to this world, to the necessities of this world—creativity is transition beyond the limits of this world and the overcoming of its necessity.”<sup>210</sup>

In this new religion of creativity, Berdyaev calls for attention to both saints and to geniuses. “The cult of saintliness should be complemented by the cult of genius, for the way of genius involves sacrificial heroism and the creative ecstasy of genius is no less religious than the ecstasy of sainthood.”<sup>211</sup> True, the concepts of genius and heroism are dated, accountable to the way in which Berdyaev is channeling his Nietzschean impulses. But the fundamental intuition, namely that the unique place occupied by saints (including cynics) should be complemented by a unique recognition of spiritual creatives, is of special importance. What Berdyaev means to open up is the possibility of religion beyond cynicism, a religion not simply concerned to secure its salvation or to remain locked away in the monastery, but a religion that aims to transform an unjust reality in the light of love. For Berdyaev, change will come not simply from re-reading the saints, nor from remaining only in the awareness of the present, but from a fearless creative act, fearless because love drives out all fear, such that other-affirming saintliness and self-affirming awareness might be put to work

Paying attention to spiritual creativity, making it explicit, draws religion into a more proactive and alternative role in an unjust society. It resists and breaks through cynicism not by further critique but through bearing witness to, and creating, an alternative reality. Criticism is not left behind, however. Rather, as Kierkegaard writes, “everything creative is latently polemical, since it has to make room for the new which it is bringing into the world...”<sup>212</sup> The point is that the polemic that results is a byproduct of the positive move. When a creative act occurs, the established order is called into

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210Berdyaev. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. 162-163.

211Berdyaev. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. 176.

212Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age: On the Death of Rebellion*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 50.

question, but in such a way that one does not end up in the endless circle of botched and cynical dialogue; there might still be a cynical response from that which already exists, but it will have to be a *response*, it will have to explain why the new never should have come into existence and the first place—and deal with the fact that it is already here. One overcomes critique, and its debilitating side-effects, not by leaving critique behind but by bringing the new into being such that a critique naturally arises.

Both Wyschogrod and Sloterdijk attempt to discover ways in which the new comes into being, a difficult task, since, as media theorist Boris Groys notes, “In our postmodern times, as they are called, no subject seems as untimely as newness... The future no longer seems to promise anything fundamentally new; instead, we imagine endless variations on what already exists.”<sup>213</sup> The “negative futurism” Sloterdijk notes in relation to cynicism means finding a way to bring the new into being is doubly difficult. Recovering a bodily, existential tradition of saints and kynics, however, which function as vehicles for the new, allows for some kind of breakthrough in cynical consciousness. Everything creative destabilizes the cynic, forces a negative futurism to come to terms with a positive present—the new is indeed untimely. In compassionate deference to the Other, Wyschogrod's saints open up the new possibility of alleviating suffering. By tapping into the natural joy of reality beyond one's society, Sloterdijk's kynics open up the new possibility of relaxation and of becoming a conduit for vital energies. These two approaches need not be at odds, however, but enjoined under the rubric of creativity, called for by Berdyaev, who wishes to trade in an epochal training in mistrust for an epochal training in creative courage. “The new consciousness of the creative epoch must recognize in the psychological sphere the equal value of genius and saintliness,” writes Berdyaev.<sup>214</sup>

Privileging spiritual creativity means pushing postmodern saints and kynics into a more “active” role (bearing in mind the modern trap of activity Sloterdijk criticizes), and also aims to release them from certain trappings. The saint is no longer bogged down by the infinite debt owed to the Other,

<sup>213</sup>Boris Groys, *On the New*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014), 1.

<sup>214</sup>Berdyaev. *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. 178.

but can joyously engage in creative activities alongside and with the Other, and can view the act of alleviating suffering to be in the service of a creative activity. The kynic is not an immobile, smiling admirer of scenery but attempts to channel the possibilities opened up by reality into actual, tangible events and products. Both approaches would likely assume this ruins the whole thing. Saints are qualified by attention to the Other *qua* Other, and no more. Kynics are qualified by the renunciation of projects. But, it seems to me, the first runs the risk of a psychological overtaxing that is potentially even worse than cynicism, and the second runs the risk of a quietism or peace only enjoyable through significant social privilege. Taken together and into a spirituality of creativity, they are capable of combining their best features in such a way that makes a clear mark on reality itself, in the joyous ecstasy and loving care of pious creation.

## CONCLUSION: NOBODY KNOWS

Everybody knows that things are severely wrong with our society, a society that is at present unsustainable and unabashedly wrong, even in the face of public knowledge. It seems as though nothing will change, as though our habits are too entrenched and our histories too awful. We *know* that this is how things are, that “it is what it is,” that our only response can be to shake our head and shrug our shoulders. But we know, too, that this is not only not enough, it is not even possible to maintain in the light of social and environmental crises that continue to overwhelm us. It may be that it is not so much, as Socrates suggested, that the unexamined life is not worth living, but that the unexamined life is no longer *capable* of living. How things could be otherwise remains a frustrating question mark, for after centuries of being battered between those in power, those in resistance, and those simply researching, we have become numb to the possibility of anything other than having to look over our shoulders. In this thesis, I have tried to argue that the ideology of cynicism premises itself on a realistic attitude toward the conditions of society and human nature.

But as it turns out, cynicism is not a realism; it is only a halfway realism, one blind to its own capacities and its own limitations. It is not the case that everybody knows what will happen, it is not the case that the negative futurism of cynical consciousness is any more realistic than naive hopes for the best, and it is not the case that humans *must* be in a state of competition as a result of their nature. The truth is: nobody knows. Nobody knows what will happen tomorrow, nobody knows if the future harbors negative or positive energies, nobody knows what humans will be called in three hundred years. If there is any realism possible about our social conditions, it is that they are contingent and need not reproduce themselves, and that we, too, are contingent, meaning our feelings need not overwhelm our capacities to change ourselves or our world.

In a time of transition, and the last few hundred years have been radical times of transition, we must repeat the insight of Diogenes—to embody a new anthropology, a new way of being human,

which means considering the means by which we might transcend our current ways of being human. The need for an alternative anthropodicy is clear. Problematic as they are, religious traditions have always housed a wealth of anthropotechnologies by which we might find a new way of expressing, transcending, and shaping our humanity. Mining these traditions means not hoarding them away underground, content to conserve them as they are, but bringing them up into new light, seeing how their surfaces might radiate differently for us today. In my final chapter, I have considered the ways in which the saintly and kynical traditions might remain viable and useful, and also how, under the direction of a commitment to creativity, they might offer us a new way forward in constructing a better world. They might even offer means of rediscovering anew a workable theodicy, a feeling of the Divine, of love and liberation.

*Supere aude! Dare to be wise!* And dare to be wise about thyself! Repeating such a dictum, we might enter a new space allowing for a politics of reflection and a life of mutuality and creativity. It will not be a space that allows itself to be intimidated by the crises of the present or the possibilities of the future. Free and light, it will be a space that aims to experiment in the name of love, to bring the new into existence, to produce a better world rather than argue against an old one. It falls to us, humans who are always un(der)determined, always capable of more than we know, to imagine ourselves otherwise, as creative blessings in a present beyond what we make of it.

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