Unpacking Cynicism (transcript)

Kenny

If I asked someone to describe cynicism, the synonyms they're likely to conjure up probably include distrust, doubt, skepticism, and even pessimism. Cynicism has repeatedly popped up throughout various political discussions south of our borders and here in the North to describe the general despair so many of us receive every time we turn on the screens and get the news. Cynicism is a popular word to describe that feeling. But what if I told you that cynicism hasn't always been associated with these negative labels? I'm gonna' show you the history of cynicism and how people's perceptions of what it is has changed.

We're gonna' go back a little. Precisely, 5 BCE, Ancient Greece. There was a group of philosophers called The Cynics. The name itself derived from a word meaning "doglike". Likely an insult towards these philosophers who lived on the streets, criticizing society. Diogenes, a prominent cynic philosopher lived in a bathtub in Athens. Now, what did this group called the Cynics teach? To live in virtue with nature. To be completely happy. And what got in the way of living in virtue? If you asked a Cynic: desiring wealth, sex, power, and fame. If you could leave all that behind and also get some good exercise everyday, you were well on your way to being a Cynic. Society and its values, though, always got in the way. This made Cynics angry. It made them really critique society, something that would become perhaps their most well remembered trait.

So, achieving happiness, living with nature, and getting some good exercise. Does that sound cynical to you? No? Well, just hold on a little longer. We're going to get real cynical, soon. From the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, philosophers and theologians in Europe looked to the ancient Greek philosophers for the basis of their philosophical arguments, for the

creation of their own history, as well as their politics. But as historians quickly realize, we never have a complete record of the past. There are always gaps. There is always room for speculation or distortion. To this day, we still have sparse written details of ancient Greek philosophers that were produced during *their lifetime.* We know a lot through transcripts, but they have their limitations.

What fragments people had of the philosophy of the Cynics focused particularly on the criticisms of society; however, people still held onto the aspects that stressed living with nature. When people from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century started describing people as being *Cynical,* it could have meant a couple things: Either you were someone who emphasised a life that wasn't spent chasing power, or you were someone who became highly critical of society. It's important to realize that being cynical in this historical context, while emphasising didn't mean being pessimistic about circumstance or events. That would come later. Are you feeling cynical yet? Are you feeling that contemporary dread? Well, we're almost there.

In the nineteenth century, intellectuals in Europe completely stressed the part of cynicism that taught people to critique society. The nineteenth century witnessed the country of France descend into a state of terror following the French Revolution, which was initially an event that triggered hope. Watching events unfold in France over the years, however, made many people fearful of radical change. Multiple countries underwent drastic changes throughout the industrial revolution. Whole families went to work; hardly any age restrictions were put in place on employees; mortality rates were high, and many people lived in poverty. In the mid nineteenth

century, a slew of failed revolutions took place in Europe. Colonialism's violent interactions

with the indigenous populations of various areas around the world.

The vast inequalities that resulted in these periods and former hopes of various political

groups that diminished encouraged people to bring out the critical part of cynicism, the one that

involved people criticizing society. When people started using the word, "cynical", they meant

that that person was someone filled with distrust towards society. It even extended onto a

disbelief in the actions of humans. Despair, distrust, doubt, and intense pessimism came to

dominate discourses around what cynicism meant, and these criticisms only got more intense

following the wake of Two World Wars and the Holocaust.

Cynicism took on the popular understanding we have of it today thanks to these historical

processes. Does it inspire you with fear? Are you filled with despair? Or are you hopeful? For

me, seeing how our very concept of cynicism and what makes someone cynical change

throughout the centuries makes me curious to see what the future holds for it. Will we see

cynicism as being once again connected to happiness? Probably not, but any desire to return to

things as they were seems to almost always be rooted in some sort of romanticism of the past.

As my partners, Derek and Shelby will show, our ideas of what being cynical is continues to

change and develop new meanings

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I think in order to understand the implications of cynicism we need to look at the

philosophical ideas relating to it. In particular I will look at Friedrich Nietzsche, a mid-late 19th

century thinker who realized the issue of cynicism early on even though he understood it under a

different name. In order to really understand Nietzsche's ideas it would help to understand the complex era in which he lived and the developments taking place. In order to do this I'll have Kenny explain the environment that Nietzsche lived in.

- Kennys part "Industrial revolution, scientific revolution, failed revolutions, loss of hope, less place for religion" are ideas that were thrown around -

This environment inspired Nietzsche to write about one of his most famous ideas, "God is dead". This line was used by Nietzsche to describe the growing disillusionment with religion and God that led many down the dangerous road of Nihilism. Nietzsche defines nihilism as the view that we have no meaning or purpose, that the world as it ought to be exists in no capacity. This I believe to be closely related to cynicism as it defines a person who has no faith in the world, one who cannot see what the world has to offer and simply thinks that the world fails to be anything of value and we should give up on it.

While this definition is not quite what we would consider cynicism today, I believe it marks a prevalent behaviour of cynics and their attitudes, especially at that time. This nihilistic behaviour is very much in line with our common definition of cynicism today, the refusal to accept truth and stubbornly sticking to one belief.

Nietzsche believed this nihilistic attitude to be one of the greatest crises man has ever faced. Were one to succumb to nihilism, he would succumb to meaningless and the rejection of humanity as a whole. Nietzsche believes strongly that one must act as a human, a mortal being

with goals and a purpose in life. This nihilistic behaviour is contrary to human nature itself and even a nihilist cannot truly abandon all hope in the world for it is illogical.

While Nietzsche believes nihilism to be one of the greatest threats to mankind, he also believes it to be one of the greatest challenges man can face. He states "I praise, I do not reproach nihilisms arrival". He refers to the belief that if humanity is strong enough to overcome this massive crisis then we can truly strive as a culture and we can only advance through this trial.

I believe Nietzsche ideas to be incredibly on point, if we are to abandon hope in the world, if we are to abandon truth, we are truly abandoning our humanity. How can we honestly continue to contribute to society and make it a better place if we truly don't believe improvements can happen? Cynicism leads to us abandoning our very humanity and is truly devastating towards culture. If no one were to care what is ethical for instance, what would become of our laws? Would our communities crumble if no one were to believe in the effectiveness of them? Cynicism truly is a devastating force that has the potential to completely tear apart our society and our communities, what I believe to be the most important pieces of what it means to be human. I am not as optimistic as Nietzsche is that Cynicism can be entirely overcome, there will always be cynicism in the world, but we need to control it and make sure our society does not crumble from this apathetic view towards the world. Preventing cynicism from becoming widespread is integral towards our continued living as human beings.

Both the etymology and the way we experience "cynicism" morphs as it is filtered through the contexts of any given period in time. Today, contemporary psychology and neuroscience allows us to explore the psychosocial impact of cynicism in the present day, its evolutionary neurological origins, and how we can retool our brains to counter it.

Observing the victims of political brainwashing, Arendt articulated cynicism as "the *refusal* to believe in the truth of anything." Examined under a psychological lens, cynicism can be understood as the deployment of denial as a psychological *defence mechanism*. Peering deeper still, we can see this defence mechanism as a reaction to a general psychological vulnerability present in various emotional and anxiety disorders: Intolerance of Uncertainty. Intolerance of uncertainty is defined as "a dispositional characteristic that results from a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and its implications, and involves the tendency to react negatively on an emotional, cognitive, and behavioral level to uncertain situations and events". So how does this relate back to Arendt?

To believe in anything is to assert the truth of a claim, and to therefore invite the possibility of being disproved. Of being wrong.To believe and to assert truth's existence in the world is to open up to the experience of uncertainty. And for as long as modern homo sapiens have existed upon this earth, there is nothing our brains hate more than uncertainty, and the profound anxiety that it generates.

This is because our brains are prediction machines that actively infer the consequences of various actions, and selects the one with the least uncertain outcome. In short, human brains are evolved to eliminate uncertainty. Every behaviour we perform is done to achieve this, and is based upon a history of assumptions. The very creation of perception is the construction of

meaning from meaningless stimuli by creating assumptions about the stimuli, like for instance, that the floor below will not collapse under us when stepped on. These different perceptions accumulate and are naturally selected for over time, resulting in us inheriting complicated systems of assumptions from our ancestors. These unfortunately also include the assumptions, biases, and perceptions that lead us to draw divides among people, and to ostracize others. Our brains convince us that holding onto the beliefs we are familiar with, even if they are false and unfavourable, is safer than to step into the unknown. So when we take a stance of cynicism, we still ultimately fall victim to this desperate drive for certainty. We impose the *assumption* of a guaranteed absence of truth onto any possible scenario, because it feels less uncomfortable to concede to predictable despair, than to hold out for hopes that may ultimately remain unfulfilled. The constraints that our prehistoric neural architecture places upon us today, and the existential stakes it jeopardizes, is no more visible than in the echo chambers of modern politics.

Our current polarized political climate reflects a slightly less severe manifestation of cynicism than that which Arendt described. Politics today is characterized by the assertion of our in-group's truth, and the denial of the validity of any opposing out-group views, regardless of reason. In such charged situations, information is no longer engaged with as mere data, but instead becomes a marker of identity. Groups develop what is called "particularized trust" - a trust in one's own group that obliterates trust in the general population, inclining an individual to more readily believe in-group member claims. As our political climate escalates to the point that our self-concepts seem acutely endangered, no amount of fact-checking, availability of knowledge, and level of intelligence is enough to offset this tribalism.

When we experience the discomfort that arises from holding conflicting information, such as facts that run contrary to our views, we experience what is called *cognitive dissonance.* This discomfort is most extreme when the conflict involves our self-image. To relieve this discomfort, we can either: justify our behaviour by adding to our own cognitions, alter the conflicting cognitions, or actually modify our behaviour. Because defending our pre-existing values facilitates psychological stability and personal validation, we often choose to feed into our confirmation biases instead of seeking accurate appraisals of reality. We engage in what is called *motivated reasoning* - the selective exposure to agreeable information while avoiding, denying, or dismissing contrary evidence.

If this wasn't upsetting enough, our brains are also incapable of making genuinely large leaps in ideas. Thinking only occurs in incremental progressions from the first most likely possible outcome to the next within a mind's set of assumptions, called it's "*space of possibility.*" One cannot think or do just anything - what is deemed possible is based on our histories.

Our evolutionary and experiential pasts make cynicism appear reasonable, inevitable, and at the least, safe. So why should one do battle against cynicism, and expose themselves to anxiety, threats to self-image, and uncertainty? And how can one stand a chance?

We must contend against these mental inclinations because to give up this struggle is to surrender Arendt's natality, and the possibility of truly thinking and acting differently from the past. Our brains, while being evolved to eliminate uncertainty, are also evolved to change. The process of creativity occurs by identifying assumptions, questioning them, and making oneself

vulnerable to uncertainty. While the metaphorical distance one can travel within their space of possibility is fixed, the possible directions they can take within it, which defines creativity, is determined by the complexity and richness of the space of possibility. So how do we enrich our spaces of possibility, and find the nerve to embrace uncertainty?

Enter mindfulness. Mindfulness is the bringing of awareness to the thoughts, emotions, and direct physical sensations of the present moment with an attitude of acceptance and non-judgement. Over time, mindfulness can accumulate into long-term structural changes in the brain. Trained through formal meditation or informal practices, mindfulness is linked to greater creativity, concentration, stress reduction, and compassion. By encouraging present moment thoughtfulness, mindfulness reduces the automatic processing based on previous associations that leads to prejudicial behaviour, and implicit bias. It facilitates the representative thinking of Arendt's "enlarged mentality." Mindfulness allows us to cognitively defuse our thoughts from our identity and realize that our whole existence entails more than them. Moreover, mindfulness serves as a psychological vaccination to cynicism by fostering a construct known as *psychological flexibility*.

Psychological flexibility is defined as the ability to adapt to change easily and tolerate discomfort. It is the capacity to make room for unpleasant thoughts, emotions, and sensations by meeting them with a sense of curiosity and mindfulness. It is the willingness to experience one's experiences, in full and as they are. Psychological flexibility allows one to recognize the difference between actions taken to avoid discomfort, and those done to actually move towards one's values. Found to reduce the impact of stress and low-social support, psychological flexibility thus allows us to tolerate uncertainty, reduce our reactivity to negative emotions, and

stand outside of our in-group parochialism with a reduced rigidity in thinking. It is the bridge

that leads away from cynicism -a paralyzing intolerance of the uncertain- and towards action.