

In Praise of Cynicism

Description

by Emmet Sweeney

The herd instinct is as much a characteristic of people as of animals. There is an inherent desire to blend in with the crowd, to not stand out, to not be seen as odd. According to evolutionary psychologists we inherited this from pre-human ancestors, where sticking with the crowd, looking and acting like all the others, helped ensure survival. Whatever one feels about evolutionary psychology, there is no question that the herd instinct is also found among people, where it manifests itself in following the latest trend – whatever trend one's nature is drawn to; the latest fashion in clothes, or (for the more high-brow) art, literature, music, or even science. In short, moving with the times. But, whilst following the herd undoubtedly helps animals stay alive, among humans it's just as likely to get you killed (notwithstanding the short-lived social benefits). One obvious example that springs to mind is the hordes of young men who rushed to "join up" at the beginning of World War 1. No doubt they believed, on some level at least, that they were doing a great service to their country, or perhaps the world in general, as they marched against the Germans, whom the mass media of the time had convinced them were barbarians or "Huns." But the Germans were not barbarians, and millions of young men throughout Europe were butchered in a needless and pointless war that should never have happened in the first place.

The herd instinct also played a major part in the COVID affair of the past two-and-a-half years.

The perplexing question as to why some people saw through the COVID scam from the beginning whilst others – the great majority – fell for it hook, line, and sinker, is one that has exercised the minds of many since March 2020. Whilst it was possible to delineate broad categories of those who were liable to be believers and those liable to be skeptics, there were always almost as many exceptions as there were those who fitted the categories. In general, for example, religious people tended to be more skeptical; yet some of the most fanatical followers of the COVID-cult were also religious – including the vast majority of clergymen. Again, it was noted that the working class, especially manual workers, tended to be skeptical, but here too, many of the blue-collar class were fanatical believers – including the great majority of trade union representatives.

One very useful analysis of the problem was provided by Belgian clinical psychologist Professor Mattias Desmet. Observing how so many people accepted the COVID fear narrative uncritically, Desmet concluded that such persons were suffering from what he termed "mass formation psychosis," a condition similar in many ways to hypnosis. The ground for this condition had been prepared beforehand, said Desmet, by the dissolution of families and communities, ongoing in Western societies for several decades. Huge numbers of people found themselves socially isolated, suffering anxiety, and living without purpose. When the COVID "crisis" was announced, the isolated masses suddenly found a new purpose – the "defeat" of COVID – as well as an object of fear (the virus). All that was needed was for everyone to abide by the measures media and governments deemed necessary for defeating the virus – masks, vaccination, and social distancing. This battle fulfilled the need for

meaningfulness and connection. However, one result was that those who did not participate in the battle, and who questioned government measures and strategies, came to be viewed almost as much an enemy as the virus itself. Not only did they undermine the community's efforts in the "war" against the virus, but they posed a threat to the continuity of the new social bond.

There is much to be said for Desmet's analysis, and he undoubtedly accurately described a substantial segment of the modern population in the urbanized West. However, his thesis could perhaps be criticized for a few omissions. First and foremost, it really should come as no surprise that most people came to believe there was a deadly virus at large, given the unrelenting fearmongering on the part of the media and the government who, it should be remembered, effectively and completely suppressed any counter-narrative. The great majority of the public, in short, were completely unaware that a counter-narrative existed. To them, every scientist and expert agreed that COVID was a lethal disease and that the only way to stop it was by adhering to the (ever changing) government measures. In short, many of the believers weren't suffering from a psychosis; they just accepted the stuff the media was shovelling at them in an unrelenting stream. Secondly, the herd instinct was undoubtedly involved. "Everyone" agreed that COVID was dangerous and needed to be defeated. Since most people will go with the trend, the pressure to conform was considerable. And thirdly, huge numbers of people did quite well out of the lockdowns. Government employees, in particular, received extremely generous furlough payments for sitting at home twiddling their thumbs. If you could make a lot of money, whilst simultaneously patting yourself on the back for helping to stop a deadly plague, what's not to like about that?

So, it wasn't so much that believers were hypnotized or suffering mass psychosis; they just trusted the media, the government and the "general consensus." Which brings me onto the far more interesting question of why so many did not believe the media, the government, or their friends/work-mates. The psychology of the skeptics has never been seriously considered. Sure, the media and government branded us variously as "conspiracy theorists," "fascists," or just "nut-cases," but these were nothing more than terms of abuse – epithets hurled at us in an effort to cow us and make us conform. One epithet they did not to my knowledge hurl – and one which might more reasonably have described us – was "cynics."

Cynicism and cynics have had a bad press in modern times, and one can readily see why: It is not in the interests of the great and the good (as our rulers like to style themselves) to be called out for their empty posturing and rampant hypocrisy. This, after all, is an age that has replaced all real virtue with virtue-signalling. This is an age where Jeffrey Epstein can be described, in an online dictionary, as a "philanthropist." But cynicism is not, as the powerful would have it, a noxious mental attitude which leads one to view the world through a jaundiced eye. Nor are cynics joyless curmudgeons, as many imagine. Cynics can be personable, friendly, and good company. The one and only thing that separates the cynic from the non-cynic is that he/she sees through your motives almost immediately. As such, cynicism, rather than a character flaw is, in my opinion, a very useful survival tool, and perhaps even more. The ancient cynics – who, by the way, were highly respected philosophers – saw right through the posturing of the great men of their time. Recall the famous story of Diogenes who, when approached by Alexander "the Great" with an offer of any favour the king could bestow, asked Alexander to stop blocking his sunlight. But the cynics also saw through their own posturing. Indeed, the primary goal of the ancient cynic was to identify and uproot his own hypocrisy and egotism. When a man knows himself, they argued, he will learn the truth about his own ignoble motives; he will see the serpent of jealousy and envy lurking at the root of even his closest friendships. As movie reviewer

Barry Norman put it some years ago: "This week is Oscar Week, and the air is full of the wailing and cries of anguish of actors who have been passed over for an Oscar, and of the laughter of their friends." When a man understands this about himself, said the cynics, he will be able to identify it in others, and society at large. And it was for that reason that the cynics scorned convention. They scorned to run with the herd and drift with the current trend.

As might be imagined, the cynics viewed human nature as essentially selfish, which in fact accorded well with the Christian doctrine of Original Sin, but which is diametrically opposed to the current – and trendy – notion of the inherent goodness of humanity. And it should be noted that this poisonous idea (man's default goodness), attributed with some justification to Rousseau, has caused havoc in virtually every area of modern life.

Having searched long and hard for the common denominator among rejecters of COVID-ism, I am now fairly certain that cynicism is it. An outlook which scorns popular conventions and which automatically looks for the catch in everything, was far more likely to see through the COVID-deception. Because for the cynic, everyone has an angle, everyone has an agenda; and usually it's not for the benefit of others. The cynic asks, first and foremost, *cui bono*? Cynics of course are found in all walks of life and in all professions. They're also found in all religions and in no religions at all. And yet there were indeed certain patterns; certain areas where the cynics seemed to be concentrated. Many religious people, it has been noted, saw through the COVID-scram, but many did not. And here's the interesting thing: As a rule, it was what we might call the unconventionally religious who saw through it; among Catholics, followers of tradition and attenders of the Latin Mass; among Protestants, traditionalist evangelicals. The "mainstream" (how aptly named) joined the COVID-cult enthusiastically. Skeptics and cynics too were heavily concentrated among the working class – especially amongst manual workers and those employed in difficult and dangerous occupations. Living in a harsh reality, the blue-collar worker, if he is not a cynic at the start, tends to become one quite quickly. Blue-collar workers vote less frequently in elections than do professionals. Many do not vote at all. I am reminded of a classic statement of the cynic's philosophy by a coal-miner colleague of my father's in Scotland several decades ago. During a break, some of the men got to discussing politics: What was the best system, was it socialism, communism, capitalism, or some other ism? Will Rhodes (for that was the philosopher's name) said nothing during all of this, and eventually one of the men asked his opinion (Will was quite old and was respected for his age and experience; he had travelled the world with the British Army). As my dad told the story, Will spat a large tobacco spittle into the dirt and answered; "There's only one f..ing ism, and that's me-ism."

Such a person, one might imagine, would not be easily convinced that politicians, newspaper editors, or pharmaceutical CEO's had his best interests at heart.

What then makes a cynic? In my opinion, a cynic can be born or made. Repeated betrayals, dashed hopes and dashed dreams, can certainly go a long way towards the finished product. When Saint Paul said, "Put not your trust in men, for all men are liars," he expressed an admirable cynic sentiment, as did Jesus when He addressed those around him as "You, who are evil." But it seems to me that the true cynic is not just the product of others' betrayals; the true cynic is the man or woman who has suffered some deep wound that has threatened his/her very existence or sanity and as a result of which has come to properly know himself/herself. Finding the shadow lurking there, he recoils in horror at himself and recoils even more when he realizes that the same shadow lurks in all other people. Almost nothing that we do does not involve a large element of self-interest. Realizing the truth about

himself, the cynic philosopher sought to act, at least a little, from genuinely non-selfish motives. And that should be the goal of all us modern cynics.

Emmet Sweeney is the author of several works dealing with problems in the history of the ancient Near East.