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The Greek Praise of Poverty: Origins of Ancient Cynicism

William D Desmond

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William Desmond, taking issue with typical assessments of the ancient Cynics, contends that figures such as Antisthenes and Diogenes were not cultural outcasts or marginal voices in the classical culture of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Rather, the Cynic movement had deep and significant roots in what Desmond calls "the Greek praise of poverty." Desmond demonstrates that classical attitudes toward wealth were complex and ambivalent, and allowed for an implicit praise of poverty and the virtues it could inspire. From an economic and political point of view, the poor majority at Athens and elsewhere were natural democrats who distrusted great concentrations of wealth as potentially oligarchical or tyrannical. Hence, the poor could be praised in contemporary literature for their industry, honesty, frugality, and temperance. The rich, on the other hand, were often criticized as idle, unjust, arrogant, and profligate. These perspectives were reinforced by typical Greek experiences of war, and the belief that poverty fostered the virtues of courage and endurance. Finally, from an early date, Greek philosophers associated wisdom with the transcendence of sense experience and of such worldly values as wealth and honor. The Cynics, Desmond asserts, assimilated all of these ideas in creating their distinctive and radical brand of asceticism. Theirs was a startling and paradoxical outlook, but it had broad appeal and would pe

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