CHAPTER TWO

SELF-DEFINITION AMONG THE CYNICS*

The Cynics and the Cynicism of the first century AD are known to us for the most part through Stoic interpreters, and the temptation is great, on the basis of Seneca’s account of Demetrius, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Dio Chrysostom, to draw a picture of Cynicism that obscures the differences between Stoicism and Cynicism and among the Cynics themselves. In the second century, the diversity among the Cynics emerges more clearly as such personalities as Oenomaus of Gadara, Demonax, and Peregrinus Proteus appear on the scene. Unfortunately, only fragments of Oenomaus’s writings have been preserved, and only a few comments, mostly negative, are made about him by Julian. We are largely but not wholly dependent on Lucian’s interpretations of Demonax and Peregrinus for information about them. It is therefore fortunate that in the Cynic epistles we do have primary sources for the sect in the Empire. These neglected writings are more than the school exercises they have been thought to be, and enable us to determine the points at issue among the Cynics themselves.1

THE DEFINITION OF CYNICISM

Diogenes Laertius already experienced difficulty in describing common Cynic doctrine, and records that some considered it, not a philosophical school (αἵρεσις), but a way of life (Diogenes Laertius 6.103).2 He seems to

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2 See also Diogenes Laertius 1.19–20 for Hippobotus’s refusal to list the Cynics as a philosophical school. For αἵρεσις as a school of thought, see John Glucker, Antiochus...
incline to the view that it is a philosophical school, but notes that Cynics dispensed with logic and physics, and confined themselves to ethics. Cynics have generally been perceived as having an aversion to encyclopedic learning and placing no premium on education in the pursuit of virtue. As a distinctively antisocial sect, they attached greatest importance to a way of life that gives chief emphasis to personal decision. Yet this generalization holds only partly. While it is true that in the Hellenistic period Cynicism did not require adherence to an organized system of doctrine, the major figures known to us, in contrast to the charlatans Lucian describes, were by no means anti-intellectual. Oenomaus reflects a knowledge of philosophical arguments about free will and providence, Demoxes is said to have been eclectic although in dress he was a Cynic, Peregrinus is thought to have been influenced by Neopythagoreanism, and the Socratic epistles betray at least an openness to philosophy and its possible contribution to one's progress toward virtue.

Cynics differed among themselves in their philosophical eclecticism as they did in other matters, but a personal preference for or use in debate of one system does not appear to have been a major issue in determining who was a Cynic. What made a Cynic was his dress and conduct, self-sufficiency, harsh behavior toward what appeared as excesses, and a practical ethical idealism, but not a detailed arrangement of a system resting on Socratic-Antisthenic principles. The result was that Cynicism


Ps.-Socrates, *Ep. 25*. In *Ep. 18.2* and *Ep. 20* there is a positive evaluation of Socrates's λόγοι, in contrast to Lucian, *Vit. auct. 11*, where education and doctrine are regarded as superfluous. Cf. Julian, *Or. 6.189AB*: “For Diogenes deeds sufficed.”