

ALGORITHMIC MANIPULATION AND CYNICAL COMPROMISE: AN ETHICAL CRITIQUE OF THE INTELLIGENT SOCIETY – FROM DIOGENES TO THE DIGITAL AGE OF CYNICISM TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract: *In contemporary society, intelligent algorithms increasingly manipulate human behavior and perceptions, accompanied by a gradually emerging cynical mindset of compromise—where individuals remain acutely aware of technological power yet choose silent adaptation. This phenomenon sparks profound ethical and philosophical reflection: Why has the critical spirit of philosophy been tamed, even dissolved, in an intelligent age dominated by technological rationality? This paper attempts to trace the historical trajectory of the Cynic school of ancient philosophy, drawing from classical critical thought. It examines how this practical critical philosophy evolved into a survival strategy within modern society, and further explores how the critical spirit might be reshaped in the digital age. Through this philosophical reflection that contrasts ancient and modern perspectives, this study seeks to establish a trans-temporal dialogue. On one hand, it examines the rationality and power structures of contemporary algorithmic governance from the standpoint of ancient Greek critical philosophy. On the other, it re-evaluates the practical critical methods of classical Cynicism within the specific context of the digital age, thereby offering new avenues for self-reflection in the age of intelligence.*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54521/ijita33-01-p03>

Introduction

Nowadays, as intelligent technology fully intervenes in human life, algorithm has been promoted from a tool to a power with certain control over life. For this phenomenon, academics have been paying great attention to it, including the

Frankfurt School's critique of technical rationality, Foucault's "Self-Technology" to fight against discipline, and HanBingzhe's "burnout society" theory to expose the subject's "self-oppression" and so on. Since the birth of science and technology, the tension between humanism and science and technology has been present. In recently years, with the rapid development of intelligent technology, new challenges have been posed to the reflective activities of human beings. In the past, scholars' studies on such issues were mostly directed at intelligent technology itself through the ethical perspective, ignoring the role of the subject in it. Thus, attention has not been paid to the question: why has the critique of practice in the digital age often backfired by intensifying the controls of the system? Cynicism offers a unique analytical perspective for this.

Cynicism in the digital age has shifted from a negative practical critique in ancient Greece to a survival strategy in an intelligent environment. This shift in attitude indirectly makes cynicism a "complicity" of algorithmic systems. Why do critical forces become ultimately complicit in algorithmic systems? Does this shift mean that the algorithms themselves possess some new type of manipulative logic? And do we have the ability to step outside of this logic of manipulation? This is the core question of this paper. By sorting out the evolutionary genealogy of cynicism from the classical period to the digital age, this paper attempts to reveal how algorithms transform the critical force with skepticism into an attitude of compromise towards a system, and explore possible paths to rebuild the critical force of classical philosophy in the digital age.

The article has three major theoretical anchors: Foucault's historical analytical framework of the "technology of the self" ; Han Byung-chul's theory of the "burnout society" ; and Sloterdijk's diagnosis of cynical rationality in modernity. In the first part of the article, the critical function of cynicism is re-explored from a contemporary perspective by tracing the historical dimension of ancient Greek cynicism. Within the framework of Foucault's theory of "technology of the self", Diogenes' "wooden barrel" is compared functionally with the intelligent technology of the cell phone. In the second part of the article, the change of

cynicism in Ancient Greece and the digital age is used to point this out, that cynical defense in the digital age is in essence only a survival strategy under the control of intelligence. The third part of the article analyses the “information cocoon” created by platform algorithms and the ironic behavior of cynicism. It proposes that algorithms dissolve the practical critique of cynicism and implicitly enable cynicism to become a co-builder of the cognitive cocoon. The fourth part of the article, reveals the new logic of control of the algorithm, which is no longer to suppress critique, but to take cynicism into the system by domesticating and dissolving it. The article concluded by proposing a new “ascetic critique” . This critique is neither a rejection of technology nor a technical improvement, but rather advocates the construction of a new “Diogenes' barrel” in the age of algorithms.

1、 Ancient Greece: The Practical Critique of Classical Cynicism

The Cynic school of ancient Western philosophy emerged during the late period of the Greek city-state system, spanning the 5th to 4th centuries BCE. As a reflection of the ancient Greek spirit, the rise of Cynicism was essentially a protest against the dire social conditions arising from the crisis of the city-state system and the overall disorder in the Greek world following the Peloponnesian War. The golden age of Greece had passed irrevocably. Faced with the collapse of their original way of life, people developed anxieties that led to reflections on personal destiny. The disintegration of city-state life stripped individuals of communal protection, forcing them to confront the question of where to go after their living environment underwent massive changes and grand narratives dissipated. Individual destiny became detached from the meaning of the city-state. People no longer viewed themselves as integral parts of the polis when contemplating life's purpose, but instead began to ask, “How should I conduct myself?” Concern for individual fate became the defining spiritual theme of this era in ancient Greece, giving rise to various schools of thought, large and small. Ancient Cynicism emerged as one such movement. Appearing as the Lesser Socratic School, they inherited and adapted Socrates' teachings to advocate an ascetic way of life. Their eccentric behavior earned

the school the epithet "Cynic," a term widely used in ancient Greece from the 5th to the 4th century BCE to describe this ancient Cynicism.

Ancient Cynicism is commonly regarded as one of the minor Socratic schools, representing a practical development of Socrates' doctrine that "virtue is knowledge." They placed little emphasis on theoretical study, expressing their fundamental principles almost exclusively through conduct. They viewed their behavioral principles as an ascetic art of living. They advocated that people should renounce fame, fortune, and pleasure, returning to humanity's natural state. As its founder, Antisthenes emphasized that humans should suppress desires and abandon the pursuit of wealth and pleasure. Precisely for this reason, he took pride in his ragged clothes and frugal lifestyle, viewing them as fulfillment of his commitment to consistency between words and deeds. The renowned philosopher of the school, Diogenes, was an active practitioner of this doctrine. Diogenes believed that human and societal development should follow nature. He saw material progress as the root of moral decay. Not only did he emphasize humanity's natural essence, advocating the rejection of all "civilization," but he slept in a wooden barrel and refused allegiance to the powerful. Diogenes advised people to confront reality through an animalistic lifestyle of unrestrained, eccentric behavior. When Alexander the Great visited him in Corinth, Diogenes told the king: Step aside, you're blocking my sun." Alexander was so impressed that he declared, "If I were not Alexander, I would wish to be Diogenes." [1] Diogenes' contempt for "civilization" was inherited by his disciple Crates. Crates donated all his possessions to the city-state and took to begging on the streets with his family.

In a certain sense, ancient Cynicism adhered to an ascetic form of criticism. Through an unconventional lifestyle, it sought to correct society's mainstream values that deviated from human nature. By pitting naturalness against worldliness, its aim was to liberate people from the bondage of material desires and fame, enabling them to find authenticity in a natural state. Their eccentric, unrestrained behavior was not merely an expression of discontent with social realities; it was also an attempt to convey, through "dog-like" conduct, the proposition that humanity should return to its natural state. They sought to capture the public's attention, prompting reflection on the meaning of individual

existence and thereby salvaging society's corrupted moral climate. Through their unrefined, “spoken” actions, they denounced society's weak and compliant tendencies, using ascetic lifestyles to awaken humanity's vitality to overcome hardship. Though cynical and unrestrained, they “adhered to certain beliefs, upheld certain principles, and held certain ideals” [2], courageously and loyally pursuing their own “utopia.” Little written work survives from early Cynicism, especially from the renowned Diogenes, who left no literary legacy. Like many ancient schools, early Cynicism relied on oral tradition. More crucially, it was embraced as a way of life. Though lacking traditional philosophical characteristics like codified principles, the Cynics possessed distinct traits setting them apart: rebellious impulses, situational wit, and meaningful improvisation. [3] By the Hellenistic period, ancient Cynicism had reached its late phase. Compared to the self-restraint and asceticism of its earlier form, late Cynicism had evolved into a milder version. Due to the lack of a coherent theoretical system and limitations in practical application, ancient Cynicism gradually faded from history with the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Their advocacy for conforming to human nature, asceticism, and virtue was absorbed by Stoicism. Stoicism developed these ideas into a comprehensive theoretical system, while also influencing Christianity to some extent. In his *History of Western Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell wrote that the finest elements of ancient Cynicism were transmitted to Stoicism, which itself represented a more complete and coherent philosophy. [4]

2 、 The Digital Age: A New Compromise for Modern Cynicism

In the 19th century, as the Enlightenment rooted in the West deepened and the flaws of industrial civilization became increasingly apparent, a widespread political apathy among Western intellectuals permeated all social strata. “A tendency toward cynicism and world-weariness emerged—a retreat into solitude and introspection, abandoning political convictions on the grounds of a perceived lack of authenticity.” [5] The gap between ideals and reality led to disillusionment, causing individuals to retreat into self-preservation and disengage from external societal conditions. “If the human world has declined and human thought is nearing death, then as long as people cannot actively

discover ideas suited to themselves within this world, they will forever obscure their own humanity.” [6] Specifically, modern Western cynicism manifests as widespread disillusionment with political systems and cultural structures, viewing Enlightenment modernity as deceptive discourse and reason as mere survival tools. Radical shifts in the *Zeitgeist* render ideologies ineffective, leading modern cynics to exhibit political apathy and self-preservation. In *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk observes: “It is a consciousness of modernity's misfortune, in which the Enlightenment's endeavors are both successful and unsuccessful. It has learned lessons from the Enlightenment but has not, and perhaps cannot, put them into practice. Triumphant yet wretched, this consciousness is no longer subject to ideological critique; its falsity has been reflexively preserved.” [7] In other words, reason no longer serves as a sharp tool for reflecting on reality but has degenerated into an instrument for rationalizing it. Those educated individuals who see through ideological illusions do not rise in opposition but instead choose to collaborate with it, seeking self-interest in the process. This rational cynicism has become part of the *zeitgeist*. Thus Sloterdijk describes modern cynicism as an “enlightened false consciousness”—a passive expression born of political discontent and anxiety. Those who gained self-awareness through enlightenment refuse to engage in any practical action; they are fully aware of their false consciousness yet embrace it unabashedly. Pre-modern ignorance stemmed from lack of knowledge, whereas modern cynicism employs knowledge to defend illusions. As a spiritual form, modern cynicism functions both as a reaction to the disillusionment of historical ideals and as a “survival strategy” against real-world pressures. It presents itself as shrewd and lucid: the cynic claims to see through everything. Yet this supposed insight fails to translate into constructive critical action, instead degenerating into cynical self-mockery and withdrawal. The critical spirit here becomes an empty intellectual game, losing its direction toward changing reality. Both the core of the critical spirit—hope and action—are thwarted, leaving only the posture of criticism without its soul.

In the digital age, human society has entered an era of intelligence driven by artificial intelligence and big data. Algorithms, acting as an invisible hand, permeate every facet of social operations: from information access, public

discourse, and consumer behavior to governance. They play an unprecedentedly vital role, operating with technical rationality focused on maximizing efficiency and precision while carrying the value biases of their designers and data providers. A new power mechanism known as “algorithmic governance” has thus emerged: by analyzing and making decisions based on massive datasets, algorithms partially replace or influence human decision-making processes, shaping new behavioral norms and social order. Unlike traditional bureaucratic power structures, algorithmic governance is often devoid of a central authority, operating invisibly behind the scenes and manifesting through processes and probabilities. Precisely because this power lacks a human face, it becomes more difficult to oversee and critique through conventional means. Its recommendation algorithms continuously push content users “want to see” based on past preferences, maximizing user engagement time. This is widely termed “algorithmic manipulation”—not by commanding actions, but by designing information environments to steer choices. The news, product ads, and friend updates you encounter are all meticulously calculated by algorithms. Prolonged exposure to such an environment inevitably shapes human perception and judgment through subtle influence: narrowing horizons, stirring emotions, and guiding behavior. Modern attitudes toward technology often oscillate between digital cynicism and digitalism: either excessive skepticism or excessive optimism. Most ordinary people adopt the former—so-called “algorithmic cynicism” means maintaining vigilance or even complaining about algorithms, yet not truly withdrawing or resisting them. Instead, they allow algorithms to deeply integrate into their lives. This “cynical usage” is precisely the manifestation of cynical compromise in the digital realm.

Algorithms not only influence individual choices but also profoundly shape the public discourse ecosystem. Different groups become immersed in information silos that reinforce their biases, tearing apart social consensus. False information and conspiracy theories intertwine within the torrent of data. As the boundaries between fact and fiction continually blur, people sink into a state of “believing everything yet trusting nothing.” They lose their capacity for judgment and conviction, left only with a cynical sense of nihilism. People increasingly adopt a detached, cynical spectator stance. Byung-Chul Han describes our era

as a “performance society,” noting that the old “ought-to-be” society with clear disciplinarians has given way to a “can-do” society where individuals self-impose pressure: in the disciplinary society, people obey superiors' commands; in the performance society, they ask “What more can I achieve?” and autonomously squeeze their own potential. Superficially, this appears proactive, but in reality, each person becomes their own oppressor, internalizing external demands. Cynicism follows: when effort yields no meaning beyond hollow performance metrics, ideals crumble, leaving individuals focused solely on self-preservation. Thus, the cynicism of the digital age manifests as follows: regarding technological power, individuals knowingly compromise despite recognizing its flaws; concerning public affairs, the populace falls into a vicious cycle, trusting certain political maneuvers more than truth; and psychologically, the widespread pursuit of performance leads to pervasive indifference.

The independence of character, simplicity of life, and outspokenness emphasized by classical Cynicism are precisely the qualities lacking yet urgently needed by citizens in the digital age. Modern people have become passive and compliant due to excessive reliance on technology, while the classical Cynic school shows us a way to question any rule that seeks to enslave humanity. As modern individuals are swept away by the torrent of consumerism and data, classical Cynicism reminds us to curb our desires and confront our true needs. When faced with social injustice, modern individuals often choose silence. The spirit of Cynicism encourages us to speak out critically and courageously take risks. Undeniably, Cynicism has its limitations. Lacking a systematic doctrine and characterized by overly detached practices, it is often viewed as pure cynicism, incapable of bringing about substantial change to societal conditions. Just as the Cynics failed to bring institutional reform in Athens, their influence remained largely confined to moral exhortations at the individual level. We cannot directly replicate the ancient Cynics' critical approach, but we can creatively combine their world-weariness with critical theory. We draw courage and sharpness from the Cynic spirit while avoiding descent into pure negation.

Drawing from the Cynics' tradition of moderating material desires and pursuing simplicity, we cannot entirely reject the widespread use of technology—nor can

we bear the consequences of abandoning it. Yet we cannot ignore the profound human crisis stemming from technological domination. Merely refining algorithms, strengthening regulation, or developing new technologies as solutions addresses symptoms rather than root causes. We must acknowledge technology's irreversibility and value, without advocating a simplistic return to the pre-digital era. We must also recognize the power dynamics inherent within technology and oppose placing human liberation solely on the foundation of technological improvement. Therefore, the core of the new critical approach proposed in this study lies in transforming people's attitudes toward and methods of using technology. It centers on altering human attitudes by exposing the power tendencies embedded within technology, liberating people from their state of technological ignorance, and thereby enabling them to clearly see the manipulative side behind technological convenience. This aspect tends to employ a modernity-critical approach. Critique through usage primarily involves combining the ancient Cynic philosopher Diogenes' concept of the wooden barrel with the lived conditions of modern digital society to propose a new approach to technological use. Thus, the new critical approach proposed in this study can be described as a fusion of ancient Cynicism and modernity critique.

Diogenes' barrel served not only as his mobile dwelling but also as a tool and weapon for critique. Its significance lay in creating a portable space isolated from external civilization, thereby preserving one's natural essence. We can attempt to craft our own personal barrels. Inspired by this barrel, we can spontaneously carve out a “barrel space” within the torrent of digital information, allowing individuals to return to life itself within it. This requires individuals to cultivate restraint and self-discipline in their digital lives. This includes controlling the time and frequency spent on social media and maintaining proactive control over information intake. Through digital restraint, individuals can partially disengage from platforms' constant manipulation of emotions and attention, carving out space for rational thought.

Conclusion

Algorithm-based governance mechanisms underpinned by big data and artificial intelligence enhance efficiency and convenience while simultaneously

reshaping societal values and power dynamics. By precisely capturing and guiding user behavior, algorithms exert profound influence—and even indirect manipulation—over individual preferences, consumption patterns, and values. This algorithmic manipulation has spawned a new form of cynical psychology. Even when the public senses algorithmic intervention, they often passively accept it or resort to self-deprecating, cynical humor as a form of compromise. People are acutely aware that their data is being harvested and their privacy violated, yet they resist making substantive changes due to habitual dependence or fear of losing convenience, expressing dissatisfaction only through sarcasm. Moreover, the performance-driven and self-quantification logic of the algorithmic era is further propelling society toward cynicism. Genuine critical spirit is gradually eroded, and public discourse descends into cynical nihilism. Confronting this ethical dilemma, this paper attempts theoretical innovation by tracing the historical trajectory of cynicism. It seeks to integrate the critical spirit of classical cynicism with algorithmic governance mechanisms in the digital age. Drawing on the practical wisdom of ancient Greek critical thought, it offers new perspectives for individual reflection in the intelligent era.

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