



L'Abri Papers #WB01



# Beneath the Land of Beetles: Going Beyond Cynicism

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## What is Beneath the Garden?

In the 1986 film *Blue Velvet* by David Lynch, the first two minutes are a series of slow motion images of 1950s American suburbia: matronly crossing guards and waving firemen; white picket fences and perfectly trimmed lawns of uniformly green grass; violence and crime were distant and only flickered on the television screen. Lynch picks this time because, for the majority of Americans, it was an age of safety and the anticipation of a gleaming prosperity. But Lynch's camera pauses at a stout man watering one of the lawns; he struggles with a garden hose kinked around a branch; and as he pulls, he suffers a spasm of some kind and falls to the ground. His small terrier snaps at the water still spurting from the hose in his hand, and for a moment we are tempted to laugh at the absurd image. But the picture is slowed down again until we sense in the snapping jaws something dangerous and forbidding. The camera descends, going past the man and into the luscious grass, down into a darkness just inches beneath the visible neighborhood. The descent continues until it reaches a realm never exposed to the sun, and here we see and hear a world of turmoil, a place of beetles forever devouring and being devoured.

If asked how prevalent cynicism is today, an audience may give mixed signals and different answers. Many people still do not want to own the title of 'cynic' themselves nor assign it to their neighbors. Perhaps a better question to get at the heart of the issue is to ask instead, what people and institutions do we admire and trust today? In my experience here our answers become more uniform, because there is a popular recognition of a widespread distrust of the system, *any system* – whether it be political or economic, social or religious. For beneath any system lie people, and it is presumed that people are driven by a pragmatic and rational self-interest. Good things may still exist in the world, but increasingly we see these as the operation of a fortunate and mutual advantage. And this, in many ways, is the very definition of cynicism.

The opening to the film well captures this definition. To be cynical is not to be in a perpetual bad mood or hard to get along with. Cynicism does not refuse to see what is good and light around us. Instead, cynicism is the conviction that beneath everything, regardless of its appearance as good, is the more fundamental reality of darkness and evil and selfishness. Cynicism is thoroughly suspicious of a hidden agenda behind every obvious and one public one. Marriage to the cynic seems the mutual exploitation of men and women

for their own ends. Religion appears as a system designed to protect us and the interests of our families from harsh psychological realities. Capitalism reveals itself to the cynic as institutionalized and sanctioned selfishness. And democracy is the power of the few to buy or coerce the cooperation of the many. David Harvey in his 1989 book *The Condition of Postmodernity* cited *Blue Velvet* as the archetypal film of a new way of looking at the world. Christians, as well as others, can be very confused at this point: we begin to believe that there is no concern for truth in our postmodern society – and many of our books on social analysis proclaim this to us. The fact is otherwise however; cynicism has a strong view of truth; it sees through everything to the land of beetles and insists on saying so. It is an important point to get straight. When the Church encounters the cynical mind it hardly recognizes its favorite institutions and cherished beliefs as they are being described, and it is too easy for the Church to complain and dismiss the cynic as having a low view of truth. The situation is instead that we are hearing a powerful and persuasive new story that is making a claim against the Christian message. The cynic says there is no ultimate meaning or purpose or good – and that this is the truth. And most discomfiting and confusing of all for Christians is that this is not a matter external to the Church; we are people of our day, and many within the Church are suspicious that the cynics are right.

### **The First Cynics:**

Before thinking more about the origins of our own cynicism, it may be useful to look at its ancient, classical form. This new story we encounter has a heritage also. The Cynics of Greece in the Fourth Century B.C. were a group of ‘wandering doctors of the soul’. Diogenes of Sinope, a contemporary of Aristotle, was the first Cynic, and his teachings were more about a way of life than a system of philosophy. This is crucial to note, because as a way of life it was free to influence all other schools of thought. The chief doctrine, shared by this group of diverse individuals, was that virtue – or the life according to nature – was all that mattered. This life according to nature was to live with only the barest essentials and necessities. (Baloo the Bear, in the Disney film version of *The Jungle Book*, I assume would have met with the approval of Diogenes.) The Cynics considered all beyond the necessities to be *tuphos*, a word combining the notions of mist and fog, illusion and arrogance. Their simple life was lived as a conscious attempt to find tranquility through detachment; it was a means to protect oneself from the changes and disappointments of fortune. At a time in Greece when the individual identified with the *polis*, the Cynics lived detached, refusing to be citizens of any city except the universe. They were fiercely critical of social conventions whenever these complicated the natural life and would point out the hypocrisies in sarcastic diatribes. They were advocates of the utmost freedom of speech and behavior. And for this reason they were called ‘cynics’ – or ‘dog-men’ – for, like dogs, they performed shameful acts in public and violated accepted standards with their natural lifestyle. The conventions of society were seen as threats to an honest life. Accepted behavior and traditional institutions were lies we agreed to believe so that we did not have to face the truth.

But the Cynics were at times also appreciated. Crates, the teacher of Zeno, was a wandering Cynic; and, as he went from house to house begging his food, he would reconcile family disputes. In this way, his life was seen as more practical and approachable than the philosophies of the Academy or the Lyceum.

### **The Engines of Cynicism:**

By my observation, there are at least three factors driving our cynicism at the beginning of the Twenty-first Century: The Suspicion of Meaninglessness The Experience of Disappointment The Infection of Apathy

As long as we had trust in a system, whatever it might be, our greatest fear was to disobey its rules and thereby to reap its condemnation. We were, however, quite willing to risk punishment and a sense of guilt because the system gave us meaning and boundaries, and we trusted in the system's story. Guilt, uncomfortable as it may be, hinted that we were significant. Some of the systems in which previously we found a sense of purpose were religious belief, national traditions, science, the myth of eventual progress, or even Western culture. But when our world changed and each of these was tested, we lost our trust in systems. We stopped believing that the system would fulfill its promises, and guilt therefore ceased to be our chief fear. We exchanged the problem of guilt for the problem of meaninglessness. Charles Taylor, in his 1989 book *Sources of the Self*, compares our day with that of the Reformation:

To see the contrast think of Luther, in his intense anguish and distress before his liberating moment of insight about salvation ... However one might want to describe this, it was not a crisis of meaning. This term would have made no sense to Luther in its modern sense. The meaning of life was all too unquestionable to this Augustinian monk, as it was for his whole age. The existential predicament in which one fears condemnation is quite different from the one where one fears, above all, meaninglessness. The dominance of the latter perhaps defines our age.

Our suspicion that life is meaningless comes from our loss of trust in any system from which we might gain a purpose for our existence. And, of course, popular notions of biology and astronomy tell us that we are not different in our components from any other organisms and that we are very small and at the center of nothing. The technological community reports that design of machines with artificial intelligence may come as early as 2030, and at that point humanity will no longer be differentiated by its abilities. The Postmodern philosopher Richard Rorty has said that it may take a thousand years before humanity finally erases from its consciousness the myth that we have a special divine spark within us, but the Bible's anthropology is already under serious strain.

The Christian Gospel is unchanging, but it is proclaimed to an ever-changing culture. One reason that people so often seem immune to the message of the churches today is that we preach Luther's Gospel of the forgiveness of our guilt before God to a culture which frequently does not sense its guilt but only its meaninglessness. It is not that Luther's Gospel is untrue or flawed. And it is not that we must change Luther's Gospel in order to seem relevant to our culture. But the problems of meaninglessness are different from those of guilt. Many people today wish they could feel guilty, because a sense of guilt would at least lisp that there must be a meaning to life and that there is a chance of redemption. Luther's Gospel remains true – and our need; but there are contemporary reasons for why people do not even recognize it as good news. God's impending judgment upon the uses to which we put our consciousness, the divine examination and pronouncement upon our lives is one source of our significance. Every secret will come to light; all wrongs shall be righted. But this source of purpose is closing to a generation that is increasingly uncomfortable with any notion of God's judgment upon anyone's guilt.

A second engine for our cynicism is the deep experience so many have of disappointment. There has been a huge breakdown in our relationships: within the family, with our political and religious leaders. We feel that we can see through our every hero to their self-serving motivations. The family and a stable community were never meant to be the absolute source of hope for us, because people have always been weak and imperfect and wrongly motivated; but these relationships, imperfect as they were, were meant to be trustworthy enough as an environment that we could learn to handle their disappointments and go on to

a trust in the Creator God. Living in England, one might argue that dogs are given too much love and attention, but I compare a happy pet, used to fair and humane treatment, to the stray dogs I watched slinking through the streets of Kathmandu. These were fearful and nervous, never sure from where the next blow would fall. Some of the people I have met and spoken to – though they are educated and affluent – have a look in their eyes which reminds me of the dogs in Kathmandu. No one can be trusted; everyone will disappoint you; watch out for yourself because no one else will. Certainly some cynics carry themselves with great confidence; I do not want to overstate my case, but quite frequently, beneath the confidence, is the firm resolve never to be disappointed again by believing someone or hoping for something.

We have grown up in a culture of consumerism. From our first memories, people have been trying to sell us things, making us promises that were never intended to be fulfilled. Once, when new to our village in England, my wife was feeling lonely and wondering how to begin the process of making friendships in our new neighborhood. Then one afternoon, a mother at the school came and introduced herself. It was a thrilling moment of promise; perhaps this was the beginning of knowing another family. Imagine the disappointment, when the friendly woman manipulated the conversation around to an invitation to a sales party in her home. Suddenly, my wife realized that the promise of friendship had been in reality only a new, potential business contact. The greatest tragedy, however, is not that such things happen, but that we experience them often enough that we have grown to expect them, even to suspect that every friendly overture is such. We assume in all forms of media and communication an emphasis on image rather than reality, and we suspect that every conversation contains a hidden agenda of self-profit. Stopped at a traffic light for a left turn once I watched the bells of a La Quinta hotel swing fitfully in a mild breeze. The bells were there to cause a traveler to think in terms of homey Mexican hospitality and to persuade them to come in for the night off the dusty trail. I am so used to things not being what they appear that it took me a moment to realize that big, bronze bells do not swing about that way – except perhaps in a hurricane. Then it occurred to me how gigantic an effect it must have upon us to live in a culture where so many things are just that way. And into this milieu the churches proclaim the love of Jesus, but the audience hears one more sales pitch of a product too good to be true.

The last engine of cynicism is what I refer to as the infection of apathy. As in ancient Greece, cynicism is a way of life that can infect any other philosophy or worldview with which it makes contact. Cynicism claims to occupy the high moral ground and to proclaim the ugly truth about our world. In Psalm 1, we hear that those who do not walk in the counsel of scoffers are blessed; but the cynicism which sees through everything to the land of beetles is found in the Christian Churches, too. We are all aware of congregations where one must dress a certain way to feel accepted, places where people are expected to be happy and successful – or at least to appear so. No one is allowed to suffer or doubt. This is the old form of dishonesty in the Church. In reaction to this one falseness, however, there is another, newer one becoming visible. I know of congregations where any manifestations of joy or happiness are assumed to be fake and unreal. In this new situation, depression and cynicism are the hallmarks of a real spirituality.

I watch the spread of apathy through a group of students; it works its way in a population like any other epidemic. People who have been disappointed learn to cope with this sense of pain by different strategies. One strategy, like that of the ancient Cynics, is to cultivate indifference so that we cannot be disappointed again. Children who have a hard time understanding physics may claim not to care and proclaim physics boring. In this way, a

poor physics grade is laughable and does not matter to them. And then they begin telling their friends that physics is really a very irrelevant pursuit. They have seen through it all; the tedious effort of working through the equations and bending one's mind around the concepts is not fun or useful for everyday life. Plus, of course, it is never cool to be too keen about anything. Much this same dynamic runs through a Sunday School class until the drama of God redeeming humanity – the story of stories – becomes drab and uninteresting and the whole group learns to consider it boring. To stand against a wave of apathy, in physics lab or Sunday School or around the coffee pot at the office is to be called names behind your back and to be considered unsociable.

The goal of our cynicism today, like that of the Greeks, is to protect ourselves from dashed expectations. Without an ideology, a system, lasting relationships or trustworthy institutions only pragmatism is left to us.

### **A Land Beneath the Land of Beetles**

There is a very real sense in which the cynics have the story right. In a world subjected to futility through the rebellion of humanity against its Creator, there are beetles beneath all the lawns. Christians, however, are not to be cynics. In Romans 15: 13, the Apostle declares “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”

The Living God is Himself the God of hope. Deeper and more fundamental than our sense of meaninglessness and disappointment is a love and judgement and reconciliation that can bring us through the darkness and back into the real light. God's is a love that shall not in the end desert us. There is a joy not dependent upon circumstances, but its source is supernatural. Christians do not pretend that all things are good, or that evil things are actually only ‘hidden goods’ in order to be happy and to escape the infection of cynicism. Optimism is unfounded and ungrounded to truth, but Christian hope has deep roots growing into a conviction about the real nature of our Creator, His universe, and its ultimate fate. In the power of the Spirit of God, in spite of our disappointments and the culture of self-protection around us, we may have a hope like His own.

Such hope is almost subversive given the nature of our culture and the pervasiveness of the cynical mind. When people meet hope embodied in a person, they find it both attractive and repelling. Hope repels because it seems glib, shallow and naïve. It also opens us to the danger of once more being disappointed. Hope does not seem honest to us; it appears to be only a change of perspective, choosing to think optimistically in spite of the evidence, merely a mental game. Hope attracts because we do long for purpose and meaning in the face of reality. Hope is a new thought life, a choosing, a habit that can be cultivated – but it is not only a mental game. In this way it is akin to faith; in fact in Hebrews the two are related: ‘faith is the assurance of things hoped for.’ The cynical mind is pragmatic and not impressed in the slightest with a faith that remains abstract mental assent and does not manifest itself in some real, tangible, embodied manner. Both hope and faith have their mental aspects, but the Bible is quite appallingly clear, both are expected to be visible in our lives as we go through this world. The Church is quite right to protect itself from the notion that we are saved by our works, that we ingratiate ourselves to God by our obedient, religious actions. But the cynical mind is not impressed when our insistence on this good doctrine causes us to suppress the equally Biblical teaching that real faith always manifests itself. The cynic believes that Christianity is merely a convention, a mental fabrication, and makes no real difference in our situation. Too often, the Gospel as expressed has left them unchallenged in their misconception.

As Crates showed a good side to Greek Cynicism going from door to door solving problems in people's homes, there are aspects of contemporary cynicism which belong as a birth-right to those who know the God of hope. Although the Church is a community, it is also a place where individualism may flourish. Each disciple of Jesus is to manifest the Master's image, but a disciple is also meant to manifest their own, particular and unique glory, to become fully that for which they were created. Likewise, Christians are to be critical of social norms and traditions – to the extent to which these do not conform to God's love and will. But this criticism of our culture by the Church is not aloof; it contains also its commitment to involvement. Too many authors today seem to stop at diagnosing problems inside and outside of the Church; a godly criticism goes further and offers involvement and a prescription for resolution. We, as believers in Christ, should be known for being practical. The Gospel is not like the Academy and the Lyceum; it is not just a game of mental assent but goes door to door reconciling families. We are able to stare at the deep truths and tragedies of life, but even deeper than the beetles is a protection which comes from God and not from self. We can be honest and transparent before Him because He knows our failures and the evil in our hearts.

### **The Strange Example of Modesty**

I can think of no Christian virtue more susceptible, as a test case, to the powers of cynicism than modesty. Beneath our clothes we are all naked. Why not, like Diogenes, be natural and openly expose this? Modesty seems unwilling to face the truth about us. And modesty would seem to forbid the 'utmost freedom of speech'. Wouldn't it show greater integrity to be like the 'dog-people', able to say anything publicly? And, because these things vary from culture to culture, modesty seems to be a mere convention. At first blush, modesty appears execrable as untrue, unfree and conformed to culture.

Modesty does act as a form of protection. It serves to give special, honor and attention; preserving us from the corrosiveness of 'a natural life'. Its protection provides a context for meaning. It is easy to lust and to claim this as natural; whereas cherishing the value of other people and restricting our appetite to consume others is so difficult that it does feel unnatural. In a day characterized by cynicism and the suspicion of meaninglessness, modesty is another form of nonconformity and subversion. I will never forget my delight when *The Economist* cited the results of a huge study of female sexuality in America. When it came to the delicate matter of the frequency with which women experienced orgasm, the authors thought it a strange, comical and wholly incomprehensible quirk in the data that the category of women referred to as 'Fundamentalist Christians' (and by this I gather they meant much the same as I would by 'Bible-believing') claimed to enjoy climactic sex with significantly greater frequency. For many reasons, I find this completely comprehensible. The natural voice of cynicism should not always be allowed to have the last word.

Modesty provides boundaries for the sake of enhancing fulfillment. We do, in fact, want things besides absolute, autonomous freedom. Modesty does vary between cultures; to affirm forms of Christian modesty is not to agree with everything done through history and around the globe in its name. There are many ways to build the environment of love and self-control that is the goal. Sexuality can – and one might argue teeters on the brink today – of losing both its purpose and meaning for the cynic.

The Christian in sexuality, as elsewhere, is meant to see beyond the land of beetles and to the land of hope.

As Christians we are told always to be ready to give an account for the hope that is within us – and always to do this with gentleness and reverence. This, of course, assumes that we

possess such a hope and that it is observable to the people amongst whom we live. It is a dreadful symptom to find our culture's cynicism within our churches. We have reason to find life purposeful rather than meaningless; we have new means of coping with our very real experience of disappointment. However, once we are infected with apathy the road becomes long indeed out of the land of the beetles; the only way out is to find the land of hope beneath.