

Want the shortest path to the good life? Try cynicism

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UC's Susan Prince will present her research on [Antisthenes and the Short Route to Happiness](#) at the Unisa Classics Colloquium.

(Phys.org)—Research by a University of Cincinnati classics professor sheds new light on the philosophy of the ancient Cynics. They actually held values they viewed as a shortcut to happiness.

Are cynics and happiness mutually exclusive? For modern cynics, perhaps. But for the ancient Cynics, not necessarily.

Research by the University of Cincinnati's Susan Prince shows that despite the historical perception of the ancient Cynics as harsh, street-corner prophets relentlessly condemning all passersby and decrying

society's lack of virtue, these Greek philosophers, indirectly descended from Socratic teaching, weren't all doom and gloom. They actually might have espoused a shortcut to happiness.

"We don't have good scholarship on the Cynics. They're seen as misanthropes and as sloppy and dirty people who want to cut down the elite," says Prince, UC assistant professor of classics, adding, "But there's a positive strand that needs to be recovered, and I'm really going to punch that hard with my research."

Prince was invited to present her new [research paper](#), "Antisthenes and the Short Route to Happiness," during the 13th annual Unisa Classics Colloquium hosted by the University of South Africa's Department of Classics and World Languages from Oct. 25-27 in Pretoria. More than a dozen presentations from international scholars will address the conference theme of "Ancient Routes to Happiness."

Much of Prince's work focuses on the individual believed to be the primary influence on the Cynic movement, Antisthenes.

Antisthenes was a pupil of Socrates and occasional rival of Plato. In fact, while history occasionally paints Plato as a philosopher of unequaled wisdom, UC's Prince says that through study of his texts, it's more plausible that he developed his ideas through tight intellectual debates with his contemporaries, and Antisthenes was among them.

ANCIENT CYNICS' RECIPE FOR HAPPINESS: AVOID AN EMPHASIS ON MATERIAL GOODS

Plato and Antisthenes shared many beliefs in common with all philosophers – rejection of wealth and luxury, and embracing the pursuit of wisdom and virtue. But Antisthenes' methods set him apart from

Plato. Whereas Plato founded his Academy for philosophical teaching and lengthy study, Antisthenes advocated a short but rigorous path toward virtue and happiness.

Antisthenes' way was short in that he endorsed an abbreviated curriculum when compared to those of other schools of philosophy, which contended that the quick route was a road to nowhere. Antisthenes' teachings skipped over the technical aspects of logic in order to concentrate on ethical literature, such as reading Homer.

And Antisthenes' way was rigorous in that it required a drastic attitude change. To follow the path of the Cynic was to abandon many societal conventions and to live in accord with nature – no more fancy clothes, no more exquisite feasts and even no more roof over your head.

ANCIENT CYNICS' LACK OF EMPHASIS ON MATERIAL GOODS LED TO MORE LEISURE TIME

Through this shortcut, Prince says Cynics were able to gain leisure time which could be put toward living the good life or what Antisthenes called "seeing the things worth seeing and hearing the things worth hearing." And that's how an ancient Cynic could exist in ethical bliss until the end of his days.

"You get to your happiness quickly and then you practice your happiness for the rest of your life," Prince says.

In a modern context, there's some irony in the notion of a cynic devoted to the pursuit of happiness, and Prince hopes her research can clear the air on Antisthenes, et al. In addition to her paper for the Unisa conference, she has a 600-page manuscript on Antisthenes scheduled to

be published through the University of Michigan Press in 2013 or 2014. She wants to show that the negative connotation associated with "cynic" might be historically inaccurate and to provide a little redemption for centuries of misjudgment.

"I'm resisting the modern sense of 'cynic,'" Prince says. "That just hits the mission on the head: To recover the ancient Cynics and show that you can't just project straight backward. There's a whole history there that has led us to our modern sense of the term 'cynic,' and that comes from the negative tradition."

MORE BACKGROUND ON ANTISTHENES AND ANCIENT CYNICS

"Plato didn't become great by himself," says UC's Prince. "Antisthenes was very important as one of the interlocutors who wasn't always Plato's enemy. Their relationship was more like a sibling rivalry."

Rivalry or not, when looking into history's rearview it seems as if Plato's shadow has grown larger than it appeared, diminishing the contributions of others. Peter van Minnen, head of the Department of Classics in UC's McMicken College of Arts & Sciences, thinks the Cynics have been under represented in the scope of Greek philosophers.

"Susan's revised Greek text is explained in more detail than ever before," van Minnen says. "Once it is published, all classicists will turn to it for Antisthenes. The Cynics are kind of neglected but 'good to think with' so we don't take [Plato](#) and Aristotle as the only gospel in Greek philosophy."

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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