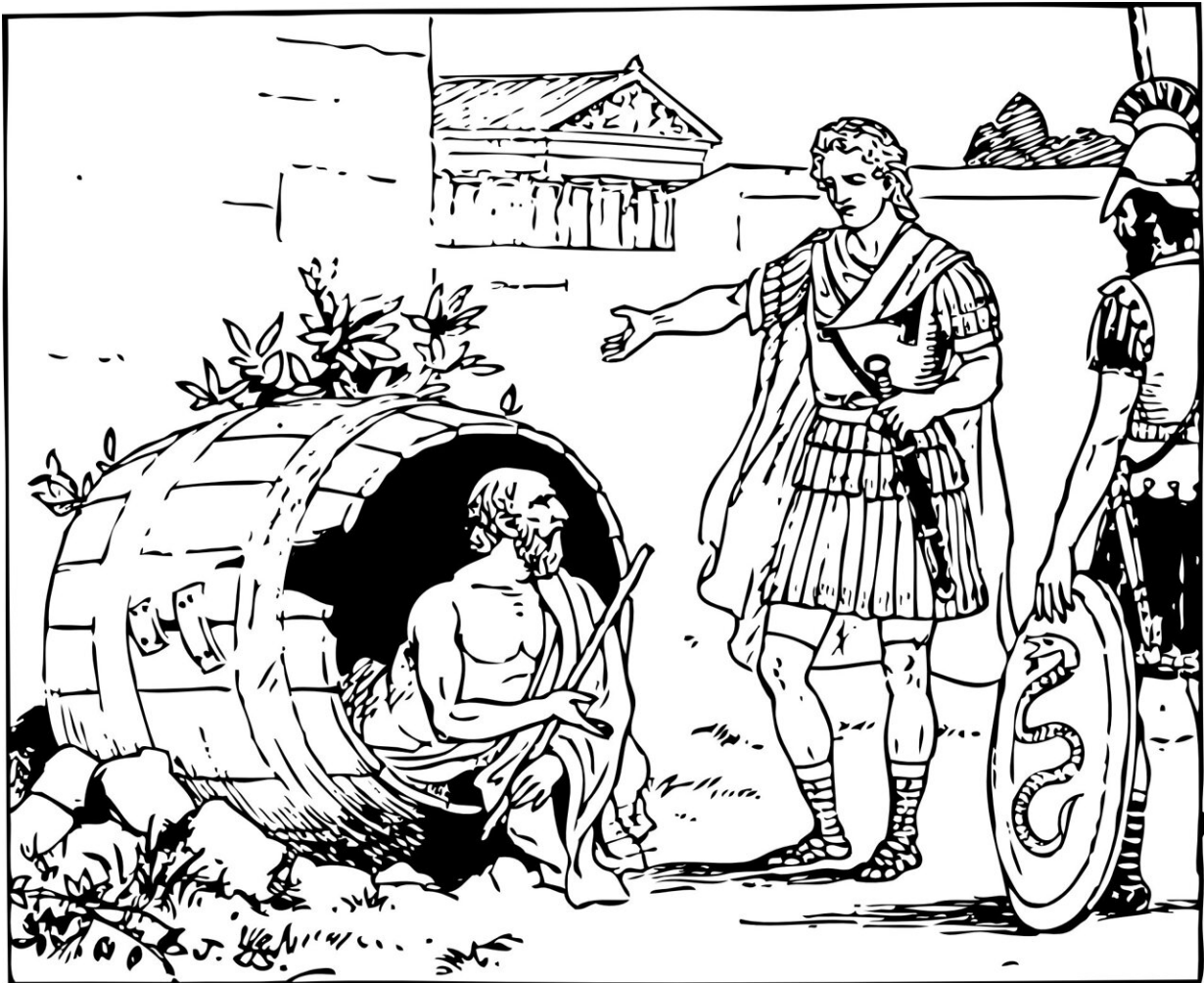


Americans' distrust in institutions and one another is fueling cynicism. Is it all bad?

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Poll after poll shows Americans' trust in government and one another is historically low. Faith in institutions is abysmal and interpersonal confidence has worsened. Ratings of scientists have now fallen below where they were before the pandemic, according to the Pew Research Center. Confidence in Congress, the Supreme Court, newspapers and the criminal justice system has sunk to its lowest levels in decades, according to Gallup. The majority of Americans rate the nation's moral values as fair or poor.

Many people are feeling cynical, succumbing to a diminished view of humanity.

"Cynicism is the belief that people will exploit one another, and use and abuse one another, because in essence, at their core, people are, we say 'morally bankrupt,' meaning people are just essentially looking out for themselves," says Kathleen Vohs, a psychologist and behavioral economist at the University of Minnesota. "It's this underlying idea about [human nature](#), and for a person who's a hardcore cynic, human nature is selfish."

Ansgar Allen, who explores ancient [cynicism](#) and the function of contemporary cynicism in his book "Cynicism," says there are assessments of the state of the world that might be identified as cynical, even if people aren't using the word.

"We might understand cynicism as a loss of faith in politics, for instance, or in society, in particular, the idea that people are driven by self-interest before all else, and that corruption—institutional, political, moral, personal—is widespread," he says. "Here cynicism can perform a conservative function, as an excuse for inaction, as a reason not to bother to improve things. But it can also perform a disruptive function, tearing down the veil on false promises and conceits."

Modern cynicism, he says, gets a bad rap, but cynicism is a complex concept that has evolved to include multiple meanings and utilities. Experts say certain forms and doses of cynicism can be detrimental, while others may be productive.

Cynicism: A form of 'despair' or a way to 'stir things up'?

The term "cynic" is extremely old, Allen says, dating back to ancient Athens.

"It was not a cultural condition, a social malaise or shared affliction, but a deliberate, bold, and scandalous philosophy, a philosophy that was also a way of life," he says.

The most famous cynic was Diogenes of Sinope, who as Allen wrote in "Cynicism," "was known for his low opinion of his ancient Greek contemporaries, but was committed to changing the conditions by which they lived." The ancient form of cynicism was viewed as a radical and positive action, while the modern form is viewed as a pejorative.

"When we think of cynicism now, it is just another word, like pessimism, that is used to describe the psychological or cultural condition of individuals and societies that have, at times, lost hope and given way to despair, or at least act that way in moments of weakness, operating without scruple or principle," he says.

Allen says it's important to caution against certain types of cynicism, as surrender or as an excuse to manipulate others, while also seeing its potential to "stir things up."

What causes cynicism?

In her research, Vohs identified causes of cynicism, which can include feeling disrespected and as though other people are not acknowledging you as a person. Feeling as though people don't see you as intelligent or competent.

"They may ignore your complaints. They may stifle your voice, your ability, your willingness to be heard," she says.

In her study, "Victims, Perpetrators, or Both? The Vicious Cycle of Disrespect and Cynical Beliefs about Human Nature," Vohs and her co-authors found that cynical people tended to treat other people with disrespect, which then predicted more disrespectful treatment in return, "reinforcing the worldview that caused these negative reactions in the first place."

Vohs says it's also possible that cynicism is driven by constant access to information that wasn't available a half-century ago, including greater information about political actors, which can expose their self-interested behavior.

"I can see why, for example, investigative reporting or [social media](#) that shows us what goes on behind the scenes in politics can lead to more cynicism, because it probably does reveal some of the more self-motivated aspects of political movements," she says.

Research has shown that feeling cynical doesn't always permanently alter your worldview. Hugh Stoddard, a professor in the Department of Medicine at Emory University co-authored the paper, "A Scoping Review of Research into the Origins of Cynicism Among Medical Trainees" which looked at the transition among medical students from idealistic to cynical. Cynicism did not destroy students' ideals, only temporarily challenged them.

"Cynicism can take over because they have this idealistic picture of what the world is going to be, and as they get into medical education, they discover it is not ideal, there are compromises, there are ethical dilemmas," he says. "But once they work through those and transition to a professional, the cynicism dissipates because they realize where they do find hope, that they help most of their patients, that the vast majority of their patients are better off because of what they have done for them."

Is cynicism ever healthy?

Vohs says that some cynicism may be useful, because failing to recognize that people are driven by [self-interest](#) is naive. But she warns that cynicism in very large doses is "corrosive."

Individuals who are highly cynical have trouble with relationships, with intimacy, even with work, she says. They are not as successful as their less cynical counterparts.

"If you're a cynical person and you distrust other people and society and institutions, then that is really eating away at the underpinnings of what Western society is built on," she says.

But it's also true that many of the most marginalized people in American society, those most likely to feel disrespected, stifled or misheard, are among the most active in trying to usher in a better world. Vohs says they may feel cynical about those mistreating them, while feeling positive about the behaviors of those who share their identity or values.

Allen discourages people from suspending all cynical views.

"I don't think that cynicism is necessarily bad or unproductive, though it can be both," he says. "It is worth staying with our cynicisms a little longer, in order to see what we can discover of the world."

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