



The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism

Sharon A. Stanley

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Sharon A. Stanley analyzes cynicism from a political-theoretical perspective, arguing that cynicism isn't unique to our time. Instead, she posits that cynicism emerged in the works of French Enlightenment philosophers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot. She explains how eighteenth-century theories of epistemology, nature, sociability and commerce converged to form a recognizably modern form of cynicism, foreshadowing postmodernism. While recent scholarship and popular commentary have depicted cynicism as threatening to healthy democracies and political practices, Stanley argues instead that the French philosophes reveal the possibility of a democratically hospitable form of cynicism.

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