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cyn·ic  (sĭn ĭk)

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n.

1. A person who believes all people are motivated by selfishness.
2. A person whose outlook is scornfully and habitually negative.
3. **Cynic** A member of a sect of ancient Greek philosophers who believed virtue to be the only good and self-control to be the only means of achieving virtue.

adj.

1. Cynical.
2. **Cynic** Of or relating to the Cynics or their beliefs.

[Latin *cynicus*, Cynic philosopher, from Greek *kunikos*, from *kuōn*, *kun-*, dog; see **kwon-** [in the Appendix of Indo-European roots](#).]

Word History: The Greek word *kunikos*, from which *cynic* comes, was originally an adjective meaning "doglike," from *kuōn*, "dog." The use of the word *kunikos* to designate the Cynic philosophers may make reference to the *Kynosarges*, an athletic training area where Antisthenes, a pupil of Socrates, is said to have taught the foundations of Cynic philosophy: that virtue, rather than pleasure, is the only good, and that virtue can be attained only through rigorous self-control. Alternatively, the designation *kunikos* may make reference to Antisthenes' most famous student, Diogenes of Sinope, whom the people of Athens nicknamed *ho kuōn*, "the dog." Diogenes himself seems to have accepted this nickname as an apt description of the life he tried to lead, stripped of all elements of civilization and social convention that he considered superfluous and detrimental to virtue. Diogenes lived without shame out of an old wine jar in the public spaces of Athens and went barefoot in the snow to inure himself to cold, all the while reproaching the citizens of Athens for their addiction to worthless pleasures and luxuries. Even Alexander the Great admired Diogenes' determination and powers of self-denial in the pursuit of virtue. Once, when Diogenes was sunning himself outside, Alexander came up and stood over him. "Ask me any favor you wish," Alexander said. "Stand out of the sun," Diogenes replied. According to another anecdote, diners made fun of Diogenes at a banquet by throwing bones at him like a dog, and he responded by urinating on them. Tales like these have undoubtedly influenced the development of the meaning of the word *cynic* in English. When *Cynic* first appeared in English in the 1500s, it referred to the Cynic philosophers, but *cynic* and *cynical* were soon applied to anyone who finds fault in others in a contemptuous or sneering way. Eventually, *cynic* came to mean "one who believes selfishness determines human behavior"—very far from an accurate description of the ancient Cynic philosophers practicing asceticism and poverty and occasionally trying to shock their fellow citizens into virtue.

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Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

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