

Toward a Digital Cynicism

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Abstract

Smartphone technology is ubiquitous and subject to frequent complaints, both by reformers and the recalcitrant. The ubiquity of smartphone technology has led to many negative consequences, some of which may not be fully addressed by empirically oriented literature. One such consequence is a threat to a certain kind of autonomy. I argue that this threat justifies a form of Cynicism about smartphone technology, styled after ancient Cynicism. Cynicism is importantly different from its colloquialized, contemporary namesake (“cynicism”). While ancient Cynicism shares the theme of opting out, in some sense, with contemporary cynicism, it is not a philosophy of withdrawn futility; in fact, the Cynic emphasis on embodiment may have an import on our lives in a time of smartphone ubiquity. Accordingly, I offer one Cynic value, autarkeia (self-sufficiency), which can be recruited to address the way that smartphone technology threatens our autonomy.

This article includes a Public Holistic Response by reviewer Ansgar Allen.

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Toward a Digital Cynicism

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¶1 It can seem that smartphones are everywhere, all the time, in contemporary life. I have one. People of all ages have one, and they have become increasingly prevalent with each subsequent generation of users. Smartphones are ubiquitous in rich countries, with this ubiquity becoming global ([Perrin 2017](#)). As a device, the smartphone is individualized, usually belonging to a single user, kept on one's person, often in a pocket, purse, or bag.

¶2 A sense of reliance on smartphones is common. People of all ages, children and adults alike, live with their smartphones close to them all the time. In fact, consumer research confirms the notion that smartphones function as a “pacifying technology”; people become more likely to seek out their phone in moments of stress and anxiety ([Melumad and Pham 2020](#)). This reliance manifests in our lives beyond our emotional experience. Consider an example from the book *Alone Together*. Author Sherry Turkle describes how children and teens who live in urban environments are denied “the right of passage” of navigating their city on their own for the first time without the aid of their phone (173). The point isn't to say that one should be exposed to unnecessary danger because “it builds character.” The point is that this kind of device has changed the way we live in significant ways—and not always for the best.

¶3 If one hasn't developed a felt reliance, then maybe one has acquiesced to the inevitable role of smartphones in our collective life. Often enough, this technology makes us estranged from one another and our environment. Binding social rituals, such as talking to others on public transportation, compete with individually tailored worlds that we take with us everywhere. Even social gatherings with familiar people are frequently subject to the rhythms that our smartphones dictate.¹ Accordingly, many people regard the phone as an unpleasant distraction from meaningful parts of life.² And yet, it can feel that smartphones are impossible to avoid. Indeed, part of what has made them pernicious is the way that ubiquity becomes enforced. Smartphones are how parents communicate with their children and how people do work and provide themselves with basic means of living.

¶4 Some are concerned that smartphones have a negative influence on attention, including one's ability to concentrate deeply and live productively with intention. Author Adam Alter despairs about behavioral addiction that may result from use of smartphones, screens, and the digital economy. We are inundated by intermittent variable rewards in an effort to gain social approval. Machine learning algorithms are designed and deployed to keep us hooked (Alter 2017). Tech whistleblowers illuminate the extent to which the digital economy has been specifically engineered to trigger addictive and compulsive behavior ([Newport 2019](#), 23–24). It's unclear whether smartphone use leads to permanent cognitive changes. Nonetheless, smartphones introduce complex ecological dynamics that may influence our motivation in profound ways ([Cecutti, Chemero, and Lee 2021](#), 973).

¶5 According to computer scientist Cal Newport ([2019](#)), “in our current moment, smartphones have reshaped people's experience of the world by providing an always-present connection to

a humming matrix of chatter and distraction” (4). “We didn’t ... sign up for the digital world in which we are entrenched,” he writes. “We seem to have stumbled backward into it” (7). Newport encourages us to join the “attention resistance” and offers a *philosophy of technology use* that he calls Digital Minimalism. This lays out a path to liberation from the burden of a stressful, omnipresent digital reality. I will later return to Digital Minimalism as an approach to the problem I’m laying out here.

What Kind of Problem Is This?

- ¶16 The term “problematic smartphone use” is utilized by researchers to capture a variety of negative effects associated with smartphones ([Pivetta et al. 2019](#)). This term is deployed to describe the way individuals engage in excessive and harmful use of a device. Accordingly, this research tends to focus on clinically defined disorders and behavioral addiction. There is research that attempts to establish connections between the simultaneous increase in rates of anxiety disorders and the widespread use of smartphones. But these findings are highly heterogeneous, making it difficult to establish uncontroversial significance. The connection between depression and smartphone use is better established ([Sohn et al. 2019](#)). And some research even supports the idea that “smartphone addiction” decreases social support over time ([Herrero 2019](#)).
- ¶17 So, what kind of problem is this? In an experimental context, we can devise ways to measure how smartphone technology influences or alters attention and cognition. We should try to understand how a device, like a smartphone, could alter our abilities by analyzing experimental data based on artificial tasks.³ But controlled experimentation is going to be limited in addressing the gap between one’s total experience of the world and the kind of specific instrumental variables that are necessary to design experiments with clear and useful results. In orienting our understanding of the effects of smartphones toward specific functional tasks, we may lose sight of how they alter our overall lived experience.
- ¶18 Similarly, research on “problematic smartphone use” as a factor of mental health will help us to determine the boundaries of healthy activities. But, as important as this research is, it could mean losing the forest for the trees. This is because problematic usage is a standard that implies that some use should be acceptable, that the technology should have the dominant place in society that it does, and that the problems caused, whether due to personal failings or disorders, are individual. Should we take it for granted that owning a smartphone, a device generally carried on the person, should be standard practice at all?
- ¶19 Even if ubiquitous smartphone use has become normal in some sense, why should we accept this form of normalcy when we could aspire to another standard? Smartphone use may have collective effects that are more subtle and/or global than behavioral addictions or mental health disorders. We ought to consider the effects that smartphone technology has on our lived experience, even when not manifesting as clinical disorders. The ubiquity of technology bears upon who we are and what we do—in other words, our identity and our pursuit of meaning in life.
- ¶110 One perspective comes from Shoshanna Zuboff ([2019](#)), who argues that smartphone use plays an important role in the foundational framework of a surveillance economy. Behavioral surplus is user data that is constantly being gathered through our clicks, eye movements, behavioral patterns, and locations. Using behavioral surplus, corporations produce a product that is sold to

advertisers and other influencers. According to Zuboff, the value of behavioral surplus creates the incentive to develop increasingly better technologies for surveilling and prediction. Companies used massive profitability from monetizing behavioral surplus to consolidate their influence over the digital economy ([Zuboff 2019](#)). Unchecked industry blindly pushes in the direction of more and more engagement through hyper-tailored algorithms. Companies like Facebook ignore serious problems that their products cause, directing their safety research instead toward issues that are profit-motivated, like algorithmic bias ([Hao 2021](#)).

¶11 Evgeny Morozov contends that Zuboff’s analysis is misguided in scope, arguing that the ills of “surveillance capitalism” are due to older treacheries, including class relations and the control of a decidedly more analog surplus ([Morozov 2019](#)). Indeed, there is much more to say about how the harms of this pervasive technology, like others before it, do not affect everyone equally. And these differences are often due to forms of social and economic vulnerability that originated long before the widespread adoption of smartphones. Whether we believe the entire scope of Zuboff’s argument or not, the feeling pervades: the de facto compulsory nature of smartphone technology continually embeds us into a network of nonconsensual surveillance, as the Googles and Facebooks of the world are emboldened to continually carry out their operations.

¶12 Whether this surveillance is a wholly novel form of exploitation, there is something significant to consider about the surveillance of the body. As Zuboff writes, surveillance begins with the body:

For all of the elaborate ways in which surveillance capitalists labor to render reality as behavior for surplus, the simplest and most profound is their ability to know exactly where you are all the time. Your body is reimagined as a behaving object to be tracked and calculated for indexing and search. Most smartphone apps demand access to your location even when it’s not necessary for the service they provide, simply because the answer to this question is so lucrative. ([2019](#), 241)

The smartphone’s connection to the body is its essential feature as a digital device. This is what distinguishes the smartphone from other kinds of screens with internet access. It is this connection to the body that makes smartphones so tempting as a distraction and facilitates the pernicious monetization discussed by Zuboff and others.

¶13 In *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, Albert Borgmann establishes the “device paradigm,” an explanation of the general character of contemporary technology ([1984](#), 40–41). There are two important features of the device paradigm. One is the elimination of the need for hands-on engagement to achieve what the technology provides; the other is the increasing opacity of the technology to ordinary users. Borgmann uses the example of a central heating system. The central heating system replaces the need to chop wood, kindle a fire, and so on. This cleaves persons from the natural world and eliminates a communal procedure ([1984](#), 41–44). In cohering to this paradigm, the smartphone is a device.

¶14 Tiger Roholt ([2022](#)) expresses the concern that our ability to have satisfactory, developed experiences is impaired as we become distracted from focal things and practices—a focal thing may be, for instance, the path of a run, and a focal practice, the celebration upon blowing out the candles at a birthday party.⁴ Smartphone technology increasingly dislocates our connection to focal things and practices like these by drawing attention to it instead of to focal things and

practices. Thus, the ubiquity of smartphones may even be harmful for the development of one's identity. Roholt uses the example of a seminar room, in which the technology draws attention away from an activity that requires the cohesiveness of the group, such that a hypothetical student does not get the attention and dialogical engagement necessary to develop as an academic philosopher ([2022](#), 166).

¶15 In their ubiquity, smartphones increasingly create a set of affordances that eliminate the opportunity for phenomenologically equivalent real-world interactions.⁵ We give up this engagement and associated skillfulness for the promise of technology and surrender to the logic of a device. Once lost, the human attention that would otherwise be used in the service of physical and social environments becomes what Zuboff called behavioral surplus. Applications and social networks often begin as novelties, but they become ubiquitous due to the portability and multifunctionality of smartphones. This is why I regard the smartphone itself as a worthy focus of my criticism.

¶16 Once the ubiquity becomes established, the smartphone influences our social environment. Consider, for example, research that supports the conclusion that surveillance through social media “chills behavior” ([Marder et al. 2016](#)). Similarly, the smartphone is assumed in many commercial contexts and even for employment and school (e.g., needing an app for two-factor authentication). The applications and networks begin to transform from optional, to default, to compulsory. The consequences of digital entrenchment are felt by all of us in the quality of our everyday lives—if in no other way than our craned necks.⁶ What are we to do?

Turning Toward Cynicism

¶17 Contemporary cynicism is a familiar attitude of scorn and distrust. There is a cynical disposition replete with self-enforced futility. It is part of the centripetal force that often prevents meaningful change and has been called “an enlightened false consciousness” ([Sloterdijk 1987](#)). The favorite refrain of the contemporary cynic is “If I don't do it, others would do it anyway” ([Sloterdijk 1987](#), 5). There is more than one type of contemporary cynic.⁷ For most consumers, a form of fatalistic cynicism may be the default attitude toward smartphones. And then, there is a cynicism in the way that the powerful stakeholders in the digital space wield control. For example, critical approaches to design are appealed to cynically to create favorable comparisons among competitors instead of to genuinely address how technology embeds background conditions that perpetuate social problems ([Hind and Seitz 2022](#)).

¶18 But I am going to discuss a different kind of cynicism. The original Cynics (capital “C” here) were a group of ancient Greek mendicant philosophers who renounced the life of average citizens. Like the contemporary cynic, they were suspicious of societal values and norms. While they were often perceived as unruly and unprincipled outsiders, lessons can be drawn from ancient Cynics that lead toward a contemporary ethic.⁸

¶19 *Autarkeia* (“self-sufficiency”) is deemed by some scholars to be among the core virtues of the Cynic archetype, Diogenes of Sinope ([Rich 1956](#)). Diogenes was known for taking his desire to be *autarkes* to cartoonish extremes. He infamously renounced all wealth and excess. He had only a few possessions. At one time, this included a cup, but he abandoned it when he observed a child using cupped hands to catch water from a fountain ([Laertius 2018](#), 6.37). He was determined to need nothing that he could provide with his person alone. Similarly, Diogenes is often portrayed

as an agitator, a social critic whose philosophical discourse comes in the form of dramatic acts of public indecency.

- ¶20 He is reported to have told an admiring Alexander the Great that the only thing he wanted from him was for him to stand out of the sunlight ([Laertius 2018](#), 6.38). In one famous anecdote, Diogenes allegedly made a mockery of Plato's attempt to define man as a featherless biped by bringing a plucked chicken to the Academy and releasing it ([Laertius 2018](#), 6.40). One thing these anecdotes share is the expression of the centrality and inevitability of embodied existence. In seeing the child drinking from cupped hands, Diogenes turns back toward the simplicity of the body and the power of improvisation. Even the great Alexander is just another person under the sun for Diogenes, and he is even blocking its light, which the body needs—and this is true aside from any metaphorical “light” at play. The rhetorical impact of releasing a live chicken into a seminar disrupts intellectual activity to reveal the absurdity of self-definition in the context of precarious animal life.
- ¶21 Stoicism is popularly understood to have descended from Cynicism. The early Stoic Epictetus discusses the value of being inwardly content and needing nothing but virtue. He invokes Diogenes of Sinope in describing the tranquility and freedom that one gains by living without need of attachments ([2020](#), 4.1). This theme seems relevant to smartphone technology; however, the spiritual emphasis of Stoicism does not properly contextualize the attachment to smartphones. One difference between Cynics and Stoics is an emphasis on the body. The body is frequently regarded as central to ancient Cynicism and Cynical practice. Cynic shamelessness often reflects centralizing the body, putting it into focus against the backdrop of a materialistic culture that strikes the Cynic as artificial and absurd.
- ¶22 One way of responding to the problems of smartphone ubiquity is a form of minimalism, such as that suggested in *Digital Minimalism*.⁹ The method begins with a “digital declutter,” a thirty-day hiatus from any unnecessary applications and social media. One can then thoughtfully choose which aspects of one's former digital life to restore with a heightened sense of intention. The “digital declutter” is a way to transition from smartphone immersion to a more independent way of living.¹⁰ Though minimalists may be motivated by other concerns, the focus of the minimalist approach is personal productivity and mental health.
- ¶23 Given the concerns I've discussed, I worry that minimalism is not enough. There are two amendments to make to Digital Minimalism. First, instead of focusing on personal utility (functionality, hedonism), we ought to focus on virtue and what provides us with the opportunity to become stronger in resisting the forces that perpetuate the worst ills of smartphone ubiquity, whether collectively or individually. Second, we should develop a relational ethic consistent with rhetorical demands that arise as needed to compete with smartphone ubiquity. It's not enough to just reject the ubiquity of smartphone technology for ourselves; we must live *in defiance of it*, especially when this contrasts with social expectations. Like Diogenes of Sinope who made a spectacle of himself by living out his philosophy as a kind of performance art, we should embrace an ethic of demonstrating the absurdity of our contemporary condition to others.
- ¶24 What will this mean? Mathew Pierlott discusses “cultivating a cynical consciousness” about the sweatshop fashion industry, which regularly exploits workers laboring under terrible conditions in desperate circumstances. His recommendations include “consumer boycotting, working with

activists, and supporting politicians with serious commitments to labor justice” (2011, 183). Cynicism seems an appropriate response to the immoral fashion industry, and similar methods may be appropriately applied to smartphone technology. Taking a note from Diogenes, we should think about what rhetorical techniques might be appropriately disruptive to smartphone ubiquity. This may mean adopting provocative language and imagery for rhetorical purposes.¹¹

¶25 *Autarkeia* in the context of Digital Cynicism means eliminating the use of smartphone technology as much as possible by freeing the body from the device, reverting to alternative analog technologies, and strengthening one’s ability to get along without a smartphone. Obviously, not everyone can give up their smartphone without forfeiting important responsibilities or essential means to living. Similarly, a commodified self-extradition from technology that might require purchasing devices or applications can’t be the prescription of Digital Cynicism. This is highlighted by the emphasis on simplicity and renunciation of material possessions seen in the earliest Cynics. Nonetheless, it is worth thinking not just about what is essential with respect to our digital life, but also about how we cultivate a resistance through speech or independence. Undoubtedly, it is difficult to say in abstract what this should mean for a given, situated individual.

¶26 Technology is not always bad. There is no question that technology generally, and smartphone technology specifically, has been enabling for some users. In valorizing embodied self-sufficiency, one may worry about the danger of excluding all but conventionally abled people. This is a far too narrow notion of self-sufficiency than what I have in mind. Technology is only a problem for the ancient Cynic insofar as it disembodies the embodied human person, thus removing the person from a more authentic natural condition. Their argument is that society fallaciously sets up material conditions through structures of value that merely transform, rather than eliminate, the plights of human existence. We pay a price in autonomy, and for what?

¶27 We should ask whether and to what extent technological adaptation enhances our social lives and allows us to have meaningful experiences. It’s clear that much of the time the use of smartphone technology diminishes the aesthetic experience of other people, that it is neither enabling nor adaptive. Smartphone technology often mediates capabilities and social experiences that could otherwise be deployed independently, often in more aesthetic and enjoyable ways.

¶28 *Autarkeia* is foregrounded as a virtue here, but it is one of many possible ways of developing Cynicism toward a practical philosophy. I have focused on a self-conscious ethic for the technological twenty-first century that aims to restore or develop a form of autonomy, enhancing the meaning in our lives. But generally, Cynicism provides an opportunity to interrupt the relationship between the body and the device, creating an occasion for critical technical practice. Thus, I invite you to join in my thinking of how to pave a way to a Digital Cynicism.

Notes

1. Sociologist Claude Fischer has objected to Turkle’s conclusions, including those in *Alone Together*. He complains about anecdotal evidence and cherry-picked data, even though he ultimately admits that solid evidence was emerging to support the conclusion that a high level of Facebook use has a negative impact on well-being. See Fischer (2015).
2. This is a consistent theme among authors writing about this topic, including many of the authors I cite. For example, see Roholt (2022), Gertz (2018), and Carr (2014).

3. But the more important data arguably already exists; it is monetized to the public's detriment more readily than it is marshaled in the aim of our collective benefit.
4. The terms "focal things" and "focal practices" originate with Borgmann.
5. Furthermore, this allows public interest in forms of infrastructure that do not rely on mobile smartphone technology to lapse. Where interest lapses, this infrastructure runs the risk of losing funding. The option to opt out of the personal technology becomes more limited.
6. Smartphones can be quite uncomfortable to use. For an example of how smartphones affect respiration and make reading more difficult, see Homna et al. (2022).
7. Ansgar Allen (2020, 164–67) remarks on the socially transformational function in the disregard and presumed falseness of official slogans in late Soviet cynicism. Despite lacking self-consciousness, this function is closer to what I hope to gesture toward with my argument than the others mentioned here.
8. For instance, Dennis Schutijser (2017) argues that ancient Cynicism can be interpreted as a way of life, as inspired by Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.
9. The "[Digital Minimalism](#)" subreddit is inspired by the book *Digital Minimalism*. It boasts over twenty-seven thousand members at the time of writing this (see <https://www.reddit.com/r/digitalminimalism>).
10. It's like the so-called Cynic "shortcut to virtue" through the adoption of mendicancy.
11. For more developed discussions of Diogenes' and other Cynic rhetoric, see Allen (2020, 27–34); Navia (2005, ch. 2).

Acknowledgments

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Review Statement

The *PPJ* supports [Collaborative Community Review \(CCR\)](#), an open peer review process rooted in transparency, community engagement, and ongoing developmental conversations. It is designed to shape scholarship so that it might effectively enrich public life and cultivate habits of responsiveness and collegiality among participants. CCR focuses on four style criteria: accessibility, relevance, intellectual coherence, and scholarly dialogue.

The following reviewers participated in CCR for this article:

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A Public Holistic Response to “Toward a Digital Cynicism”


Ansgar Allen 

About the Public Holistic Response

The PPJ invites reviewers to compose a Public Holistic Response as part of the review process. Public Holistic Responses are vital to the PPJ’s mission as they aim to nurture generosity and collegiality among authors and review teams; encourage reflection on how the work engages or might further engage with stakeholder communities; incentivize post-publication discussion; and give formal recognition of the time and care that reviewers have invested in the work.

- ¶1 This article raises a number of concerns about the ubiquity of smartphones in psychic and social life, taking care to avoid being too definite about what precisely is wrong with the technology (it is not assumed that phones are simply productive of anxiety, for instance). This kind of approach fits well with one of the more radical interpretations of ancient Cynicism and what the ancient Cynics were up to. According to this view, the activity of judgment-making was suspended in the spirit of practical investigation. Cynics did not cleave to fixed norms or values, nor did they have a stable conception of themselves or a settled understanding of what they were seeking to achieve. Rather, ancient Cynicism was a critical practice that was, at the same time, a type of investigation. It was a form of critique and a mode of enquiry which was set to unsettle everything, including conventional ideas of what critique and enquiry might look like.
- ¶2 In its critique of technology, for instance, ancient Cynicism took on all the civilizational artifices, the whole raft of beliefs and ways of being, with which each device was imbricated. And so, when Diogenes famously threw away his cup to see if he could survive without one (using now only his hand), this was a practical investigation into what living without a cup might look like, and what having a cup might have once facilitated (with all the drinking habits and social conventions that surround the cup, and how and when the cup is delivered to the mouth for drinking). This was not a premediated philosophical declaration against the technology of the cup, then, but an investigation into what the cup signified as a cultural, civilizational object.
- ¶3 By analogy, a digital Cynicism, as figured in this article, might proceed in a similar manner. One can imagine a Cynic pursuit of digital disconnectivity, for instance, as a practical investigation into how far technology has reached into our lives, an investigation that would operate by a kind of necessary disruption, a practical disruption, to explore the effects of doing without certain technologies, or of engaging with technology differently. If Cynic practices can still be revived in our present (this cannot be assumed), the pursuit of digital disconnectivity would not be a private experiment. It would be publicly done in an act deliberately chosen to confound all onlookers. And it would be an act which would require considerable boldness and sustained strength of will. A Cynic employee might arrive at work, for instance, having discarded their phone and then, by extension, all devices which might locate that phone. This employee could declare that they are willing to work, but only with a notepad and a typewriter, and then set down in that manner and stick with it, and see how that determination would rip through the fabric of the workplace, producing all manner of responses ranging from cool and calculated, to bemusement and bemused judgmentalism, and perhaps some measure of anger, frustration, even hysteria—each response differently symptomatic of our collective entrapment.

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