

NEW REPUBLIC

Against Cynicism

A philosopher's brilliant reasons for living

by Adam Kirsch | July 19, 2013



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Peter Sloterdijk has been one of Germany's best-known philosophers for 30 years, ever since the publication of his [Critique of Cynical Reason](#) in 1983—a thousand-page treatise that became a best-seller. Since then Sloterdijk has been at the forefront of European intellectual life, contributing to public debates over genetic engineering and economics and hosting a long-running discussion program on television, all while publishing a steady stream of ambitious philosophical works. The *Critique of Cynical Reason* appeared in English many years ago, but it is only recently that Sloterdijk has begun to emerge on the American horizon. [Bubbles](#), the first volume in a trilogy called *Spheres*, his magnum opus, appeared here in 2011. Now it is followed by [You Must Change Your Life](#), another wide-ranging and challenging book. Along with [Rage and Time](#), which appeared in English in 2010, these volumes make it possible to begin to come to grips with Sloterdijk as a stirring and eclectic thinker, who addresses himself boldly to the most important problems of our age. Above all, he is concerned with metaphysics—or, rather, with what to do with the empty space that is left over when metaphysics disappears—along with religion, faith in revolution, and the other grand sources of meaning that long gave shape and direction to human lives.

Sloterdijk was born in 1947, making him just the right age to participate in the student movement of the 1960s. By the early 1980s, when he wrote *Critique of Cynical Reason*, the idealism and the world-changing energy of that movement had long since dwindled into splinter-group violence, on the one hand, and accommodation to the realities of capitalism and the Cold War, on the other. In that cultural moment, Sloterdijk's diagnosis of "cynicism" was very timely. "The dissolution of the student movement," he wrote, "must interest us because it represents a complex metamorphosis of hope into realism, of revolt into a clever melancholy."

Despite its parodic Kantian title, Sloterdijk's *Critique* is not a work of theoretical abstraction; it is a highly personal confession of this generational world-weariness. As a philosopher, Sloterdijk is especially struck by the way he and his peers were able to master the most emancipatory and radical philosophical language, but utterly unable to apply its insights to their own lives and their own political situations. Coming after *Critical Theory*, whose post-Marxist diagnoses of social ills are a key reference point and antagonist for Sloterdijk, younger thinkers have found themselves brilliant at diagnosis and helpless at cure. "Because everything has become problematic, everything is also somehow a matter of indifference," Sloterdijk observes. The result is cynicism, which he defines in a splendid paradox as "enlightened false consciousness": "It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice."

If we are to break out of this learned helplessness, Sloterdijk argues, we must ransack the Western tradition for new philosophical resources. Such ransacking is exactly the method of Sloterdijk's thought, first in the *Critique* and then, on an even grander scale, in *Bubbles* and *You Must Change Your Life*. Drawing on very wide reading—wider, the reader often feels, than it is deep—Sloterdijk excavates the prehistory of contemporary problems, and some of their possible solutions. In the *Critique*, he offers an extended analysis of the culture of Weimar Germany, in which he locates the origin of twentieth-century cynicism—as well as describing the many sub-varieties of cynicism (military, sexual, religious), and doing a close reading of Dostoevsky, and cataloguing the meaning of different facial expressions. The effect on the reader is of being shown around a *Wunderkammer*, where what matters is not the advancing of an argument but the display of various intellectual treasures.

If the "cynicism" that Sloterdijk describes is a post-'60s phenomenon, the prescription that he offers is a return to '60s values of spontaneity, passivity, and the wisdom of the body. But he does not describe these in the language of hippiedom; instead, and characteristically, he finds a grounding for them in the oldest regions of the Western philosophical tradition. The hero of his book is Diogenes, who was himself derided as cynical—literally, "dog-like"—by the people of Athens. But there is a vast difference, Sloterdijk argues, between the exhausted cynicism of the late twentieth century and what he calls, using Greek spelling, the "kynicism" of Diogenes. When Diogenes defecated or masturbated in the street, when he slept in a bathtub, or told Alexander the Great to get out of his sunlight, he was employing a joyful language of radical bodily gestures to defeat the philosophers' imprisoning language of abstract concepts. "Neither Socrates nor Plato," Sloterdijk writes, "can deal with Diogenes—for he talks with them ... in a dialogue of flesh and blood."

Sloterdijk finds in Diogenes what many of his contemporaries found in Norman O. Brown, or in Zen, or for that matter in drugs and music: permission to turn off reason, objectivity, "logocentric" thinking, the head. After all, wasn't it enlightened Western reason that gave us the nuclear bomb? "The bomb is not one bit more evil than reality

and not one bit more destructive than we are,” he writes in one of the book’s prose-poetic passages. “It is merely our unfolding, a material representation of our essence.... In it, the Western ‘subject’ is consummated.” Behind Sloterdijk’s dark paean to the bomb, it is possible to detect those other Western abominations, Nazism and the Holocaust, which would have shadowed his upbringing in postwar Germany. The choice, he concludes, is between the bomb or the body, cynicism or kynicism. “In our best moments,” he writes almost mystically, “when ... even the most energetic activity gives way to passivity and the rhythmic of living carry us spontaneously, courage can suddenly make itself felt as a euphoric clarity.... It awakens the present within us.”

In *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Sloterdijk charted a wholly individual path to a familiar spiritual position, a Romanticism of what Wordsworth called “wise passiveness.” This pattern is repeated in Sloterdijk’s later books: he is better at the forceful restatement of old problems than at the invention of new solutions. This might be regarded as an objection by certain kinds of philosophers, who see themselves as contributors to a technical process that produces concrete results. For Sloterdijk, whose greatest influences are Nietzsche and Heidegger, it is not at all disqualifying, for his goal is, as he writes in *You Must Change Your Life*, “a provocative re-description of the objects of analysis.” Like a literary writer—and he once told an interviewer that he thought of writing the *Spheres* trilogy as a novel—Sloterdijk’s goal is to restate our basic quandaries in revelatory new language, to bring them home to us as living experiences instead of stale formulas. The prison of reason, the need for transcendence, the yearning for an absent meaning: these have been the stuff of literature and philosophy and theology for centuries. In Sloterdijk, these old subjects find a timely new interpreter.

If Sloterdijk had remained the thinker who wrote the *Critique*, he might not be terribly interesting to us today. There is already something “period” about the book’s distrust of the intellect (expressed in the most sophisticated intellectual terms), its romanticizing of “kynicism,” and the way it genuflects before the bomb. To compare it with his work of the last ten years, however, is to see how significantly Sloterdijk has evolved—both in his response to the times and in the scope of his vision. What he saw in the *Critique* as the malaise of a disappointed generation becomes, in *Bubbles* and *You Must Change Your Life*, something much bigger and more profound. It is the plight of humanity after the death of God, which Sloterdijk follows Nietzsche in seeing as a catastrophe the true dimensions of which we do not yet fully appreciate. At the same time, the impatience with Marxism that is already visible in the *Critique* evolves into a full-throated defense of liberal capitalism, especially in *Rage and Time*, which is largely an account of communism, and also Christianity, as ideologies driven by resentment and fantasies of revenge. (Here, too, the influence of Nietzsche is clear.)

Another way of putting this is that Sloterdijk is a thinker of, and for, the post-Cold War world. If you were to sketch Sloterdijk’s understanding of history, as it emerges in his recent work, it would go something like this. From earliest times until the rise of the modern world, mankind endowed the world with purpose and time with directionality by means of religion, the belief in the gods and God. As that belief waned, the Enlightenment faith in progress, and the more radical communist faith in revolution, replaced transcendent purposes with immanent ones. But by the late twentieth century, and certainly after 1989, neither of those sets of coordinates any longer mapped our world. What Sloterdijk initially diagnosed as mere “cynicism” becomes, in his mature work, a full-fledged crisis of meaning, which can be figured as a crisis of directionality. Again and again he refers to Nietzsche’s madman, who asked: “Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down?”

So far this is a familiar, indeed a venerable, way of thinking about the problem of nihilism in liberal civilization. Sloterdijk’s originality lies in the way these old problems still strike him with undiminished force; and also in his refusal to remain passive in the face of them. The whole thrust of Sloterdijk’s thought is a rebuke to Heidegger, who mused, late in life, that “only a God can save us.” On the contrary, he insists, we must save ourselves—and, what is more, we can save ourselves. Salvation, for Sloterdijk, lies in just the area where Heidegger believed perdition lay: that is, in the realm of technology.

Yet technology, for Sloterdijk, seldom has to do with machines. It is mental and spiritual technology that interests him: the techniques with which human beings have historically made themselves secure on the Earth. He does not analyze these strategies in terms of religion, which he sees as a vocabulary unavailable to us today. Rather, he re-configures them with metaphors from the realms of immunology and climatology, using language that sounds respectably scientific even when its actual bearing is deeply spiritual. He is especially fond of repurposing contemporary buzzwords to give them new dimensions of philosophical meaning, as with the term “greenhouse effect.” Considered spiritually, the greenhouse effect is not something to be deplored, but a necessity for human existence: “To oppose the cosmic frost infiltrating the human sphere through the open windows of the Enlightenment, modern humanity makes use of a deliberate greenhouse effect: it attempts to balance out its shelllessness in space, following the shattering of the celestial domes, through an artificial civilizatory world. This is the final horizon of Euro-American technological titanism.”

Here Sloterdijk’s old critique of the Enlightenment is turned inside out. Human beings need to breathe an atmosphere not just of oxygen, but also of meanings and symbols and practices. The decline of religion meant the fouling of humanity’s old mental atmosphere, so that it is no longer breathable. But where Sloterdijk in the *Critique* wanted to go backward to Diogenes—in this resembling his antagonist Heidegger, who sought salvation in the pre-Socratics—Sloterdijk in *Bubbles*, from which this passage comes, believes that the only way out is forward. By using technological reason, we have found ways to air-condition our bodies; but we must also find a way to use our reason to build air-conditioning systems for our souls. Only our minds can save us.

This leads to the central metaphor of Sloterdijk’s *Spheres* trilogy, which appeared in Germany between 1998 and 2004. “Spheres,” he writes, “are air-conditioning systems in whose construction and calibration ... it is out of the question not to participate. The symbolic air conditioning of the shared space is the primal production of every society.” Law, custom, ritual, and art are ways we create such nurturing spheres, which for Sloterdijk are not so much topological figures as emotional and spiritual microclimates: “The sphere is the interior, disclosed, shared realm inhabited by humans—in so far as they succeed in becoming humans.”

In *Bubbles*, the only part of the trilogy so far translated into English, Sloterdijk writes primarily as a historian of art and ideas, using his eccentric erudition to come up with numerous depictions of such nurturing “spheres” in human culture. A painting of Giotto depicts two faces turned sideways, joining to create a new face—an emblem of intimacy; Saint Catherine of Siena imagines the eating of her heart by Christ; Marsilio Ficino theorizes that love involves a mutual transfusion of blood, carried in superfine particles in the lovers’ gaze.

It is no coincidence that many of these examples come from the iconography of Christianity, since religion has been mankind’s best generator of spheres. What Sloterdijk hopes to do is to retrieve religion’s power to create intimacy while shearing it of its untenable dogmas. “It will be advantageous for the free spirit to emancipate itself from the anti-Christian affect of recent centuries as a tenseness that is no longer necessary. Anyone seeking to reconstruct basic communal and community experiences needs to be free of anti-religious reflexes,” he insists. In pointed contrast to Alain Badiou—who, on the basis of scattered statements in his books, seems to be Sloterdijk’s *bête noire*—there is no attempt here to harness the messianism and apocalypticism of Christianity for political ends. Sloterdijk’s ideal is not Pauline conversion but Trinitarian “perichoresis,” a technical word he seizes on: “Perichoresis means that the milieu of the persons is entirely the relationship itself,” he writes, envisioning love as a total mutual absorption.

But if Sloterdijk is not a believer, then where does he think we can actually experience this kind of perfectly trusting togetherness? Where do we find a sphere that is wholly earthly, yet so primal as to retain its power even now? The answer is surprising, even bizarre. In a long section of *Bubbles*, Sloterdijk argues that the original sphere, the one we all experience and yearn to recapture, is the mother’s womb. This is not, for him, a place of blissful isolation, where the subject can enjoy illusions of omnipotence; if it were, the womb would be only a training ground for selfishness and disillusion. Sloterdijk emphasizes instead that we are all in our mother’s womb along with a placenta. The placenta is what he calls “the With”—our first experience of otherness, but a friendly and nurturing otherness, and thus a model for all future “spheres” of intimacy.

This leads Sloterdijk to what he calls, not without a sense of humor, an “ovular Platonism.” There is a preexisting realm to which we long to return, but it is not in heaven. It is in the uterus, and since the uterus will always be with us (barring some remote but imaginable *Brave New World* scenario), so too will the possibility of genuine spheres. We need to recover, and give to one another, the trust that we once gave our placentas. Indeed, Sloterdijk argues that our culture’s disregard for the postpartum

placenta—we incinerate it, instead of reverently eating it or burying it—is both a cause and a symptom of our loneliness: “In terms of its psychodynamic source, the individualism of the Modern Age is a placental nihilism.”

The reader who has no patience for this kind of thing—who finds the whole “With” concept New Agey, or unfalsifiable, or just wildly eccentric—will probably not get very far with Sloterdijk. This is not because placenta-ism is central to his thought. On the contrary, it is just one of the many provocative ideas that he develops and then drops in the course of the book, which reads less like a structured argument than a long prose poem. Sloterdijk’s strength and appeal come from the intuitive and metaphorical quality of his thought, his unconventional approaches to familiar problems, his willingness to scandalize. As a theorem, the “With” is easy to refute; as a metaphor, it is weirdly persuasive. It is another way of describing, and accounting for, the central experience of homelessness that drives all of Sloterdijk’s thought. Deprived of our “With,” he writes, “the officially licensed thesis ‘God is dead’ ” must be supplemented “with the private addendum ‘and my own ally is also dead.’ ”

There is something hopeful about this supplement: if we cannot re-gain God, Sloterdijk contends, we can still re-gain the sense of having an ally. Indeed, the “sphere” concept is powerful because of the way it rewrites the history of religion in respectful but fundamentally secular terms. The need for spheres—for meanings, symbols, contexts—is what is primary for human beings. That our most successful spheres have been religious ones is, for Sloterdijk, a contingent fact, not a necessary one.

An identical logic informs *You Must Change Your Life*, in which Sloterdijk re-formulates his understanding of religion using a new geometrical metaphor: not the nurturing sphere, but the aspiring vertical line. (He barely mentions spheres at all in the new book, adding to the impression that his thoughts do not form a system but a series of improvisations.) If *Bubbles* mined religion—and science and art—for images of intimacy, *You Must Change Your Life* emphasizes instead the human proclivity for self-transcendence, for constantly remaking and exceeding ourselves, for going “higher” in every sense. Just as he half-jokingly adopted the term “greenhouse effect,” Sloterdijk now seizes on the p.c. euphemism “vertically challenged”: “This turn of phrase cannot be admired enough,” he writes. “The formula has been valid since we began to practice learning to live.”

The word “practice” is central to Sloterdijk’s argument here, and to his understanding of religion. We are living, he observes, at a time when religion is supposedly making a comeback around the world. The old assurance that all societies must inevitably converge on secularism is failing. For Sloterdijk, however, it is a mistake to think that what people are turning to is faith in the divine. Rather, the part of religion that still matters to us, for which we have a recurring need, is its practices: the “technology,” primarily mental and inner-directed, that allows us to reshape our ways of thinking and feeling. With typical bravado, he argues that “no ‘religion’ or ‘religions’ exist, only misunderstood spiritual regimens.”

In fact, Sloterdijk argues, our time is characterized by a widespread embrace of training techniques, physical and metaphysical. In one chapter of *You Must Change Your Life*, in a typically counterintuitive stroke, he pairs the rise of the modern Olympic games with the spread of Scientology as examples of the invention of new types of spiritual-cum-athletic regimens. The sheer idiocy of the theology behind Scientology shows, for him, how irrelevant doctrines are to the contemporary appetite for religion. L. Ron Hubbard’s *Dianetics* was a spiritual technology before it was a church, and this kind of technology can be found at the heart of all religious traditions. “If one looks to the heart of the fetish of religion,” Sloterdijk writes apropos of Scientology, “one exclusively finds anthropotechnic procedures.”

“Anthropotechnics” is another favorite term of Sloterdijk’s, because of the way it combines a technological meaning and a spiritual meaning. Genetic engineering and bionics are one kind of anthropotechnics, a way of working on human beings to improve them. But so too, he insists, are the exercises of Ignatius de Loyola, or the harsh training procedures of Buddhist monks. Fasting, memorization of sacred texts, hermitism, self-flagellation—such practices actually transform the human being, building a new and “higher” inner life on the foundations of the old one.

Much of *You Must Change Your Life* is devoted to a cultural history and typology of these kinds of training practices, passing freely between Eastern and Western traditions. When Jesus on the cross declares “*consummatum est*,” Sloterdijk says that we ought to see this as a victor’s cry, equivalent to that of a Greek athlete winning a race or a wrestling match. The phrase should be translated, he argues, not as a passive “it is finished” but as “Made it!” or “Mission accomplished!” For the conquest of death is the ultimate goal of all spiritual training, and the great founders—Jesus, Buddha, Socrates—are those who won the championship by dying on their own terms. This phenomenon is what Sloterdijk refers to as “the outdoing of the gladiators by the martyrs.”

To identify religion as a form of competitive training is to reimagine history, and in *You Must Change Your Life*, Sloterdijk offers a mock-Hegelian account of the evolution of the human subject. In the beginning, he writes, all human beings lived in a swamp of habit and mass-mindedness. A few rare and gifted individuals lifted themselves up to the dry ground, where they could look back on their old lives in a self-conscious and critical spirit. This constitutes the true birth of the subject: “anyone who takes part in a programme for de-passivizing themselves, and crosses from the side of the merely formed to that of the forming, becomes a subject.”

These pioneers in turn draw imitators after them, people eager to remake themselves in the image of the miraculous founders: Jesus has his Paul, Socrates his Plato. In the modern age, society attempts to universalize this experience of enlightenment, to awaken all the sleepers, but with uneven and sometimes disastrous effects. For humans live on a vertical, and the definition of a vertical is that there will always be a top and a bottom: “The upper class comprises those who hear the imperative that catapults them out of their old life, and the other classes all those who have never heard or seen any trace of it.”

If this is elitism—and it is, with a vengeance—then so be it. “Egotism,” Sloterdijk writes, “is often merely the despicable pseudonym of the best human possibilities.” Indeed, it is not hard to see that what Sloterdijk has written is a re-formulation and defense of the idea of the *Übermensch*. The whole book could be thought of as a commentary on a single line of Nietzsche’s from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which Sloterdijk repeatedly quotes: “Man is a rope, stretched between beast and *Übermensch*.” Here is the original vertical—or, as Sloterdijk also has it, a kind of Jacob’s ladder, on which men ascend toward the heavens and descend toward the Earth.

For a German thinker of Sloterdijk’s generation to rehabilitate the idea of the Superman might seem like a dangerous proposition. But in his hands the concept is totally disinfected of any taints of blond beastliness or the will to power. Indeed, the figures whom Sloterdijk cites as the supreme self-trainers, at the top of the human vertical, are Jesus and Socrates—the very ones Nietzsche despised as teachers of herd morality. It is central to Sloterdijk’s vision that, for him, supremacy is totally divorced from domination. He imagines that only self-mastery is what matters to human beings, that the training of the self is more noble and satisfying than control over others. If this is a blind spot, it is one that allows him to take his Nietzsche guilt-free.

The image of the stretched rope appeals to Sloterdijk because it manages to sustain the idea of verticality—and also of hierarchy and value—in the absence of the divine. Like a snake charmer, Sloterdijk needs to make the rope of human existence stand straight without attaching it to anything on high. This is what he calls “the problematic motif of the transcendence device that cannot be fastened at the opposite pole.” The main intuition, and gamble, of *You Must Change Your Life* is that the human instinct for verticality can survive the relativizing of space in a godless world. What remains is a sort of highly intellectualized and sublimated vitalism: “Vitality, understood both somatically and mentally, is itself the medium that contains a gradient between more and less,” he writes. “It therefore contains the vertical component that guides ascents within itself, and has no need of additional external or metaphysical attractors. That God is supposedly dead is irrelevant in this context.”

The line, then, like the sphere, becomes for Sloterdijk a substitute for metaphysics. Metaphysics, he says in an aside that captures his whole argument, really ought to be called metabiotics: it is life itself that aspires upward, even if space has no up or down to speak of. “Even without God or the *Übermensch*, it is sufficient to note that every individual, even the most successful, the most creative and the most generous, must, if they examine themselves in earnest, admit that they have become less than their potentiality of being would have required,” he writes near the end of the book, revealing the deep Protestant roots of this conception of the conscience.

One of the most appealing things about Sloterdijk’s philosophy is that, like literature, it leaves itself vulnerable. It does not attempt to anticipate and to refute all possible objections. And the objections to *You Must Change Your Life*, as with *Bubbles*, are not far to seek. For one thing, by conceiving of religion as an elite training regimen, Sloterdijk implies that a religion is justified only by its saints. Anyone who is not a saint is insignificant, and so the average person’s experience of religious meanings—whether metaphysical doctrine or spiritual consolation or tradition or identity or communion—is dismissed out of hand. This is false to the lived reality of religion for most

people, and shows how tendentious Sloterdijk's equation of religion with "practice" really is.

Then there is the question-begging insistence that metabiotics, Sloterdijk's discomfitingly biological philosophy, will do in the absence of metaphysics. It is certainly true that even non-believers continue to act as if there is such a thing as excellence, self-improvement, self-overcoming. But it is not certain that these "salutogenic energies," as Sloterdijk calls them, are capable of sustaining themselves indefinitely in the absence of some metaphysical validation. Much of modern literature, from Leopardi to Beckett, suggests that they cannot. What is missing from *You Must Change Your Life* is an investigation of what happens when the vertical collapses, as it does sometimes for everyone, even believers. Sloterdijk needs to offer a psychology of depression to complement his psychology of aspiration. This is as much as to say that Sloterdijk has not solved the immense problems that he raises, even though he claims to know the way toward the solution. But maybe the philosopher does not need to solve problems, only to make them come alive; and this he does as well as any thinker at work today.

Adam Kirsch is a senior editor at The New Republic and a columnist for Tablet, and the author most recently of Why Trilling Matters (Yale).

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