

EPICTETUS

c. AD 55–c. 135

Keith Seddon

What have you been studying all along but to distinguish what is yours from what is not yours, what is in your power from what is not in your power, what is subject to hindrance from what is unhindered? Why did you go to the philosophers? To be as unfortunate and miserable as always? No – but to be free from fear and troubles.

Epictetus, Discourses 4.1.83–4

EPICTETUS (pronounced Epic–TEE–tus) was a Stoic philosopher who taught for a brief period in Rome and then in his own school in Nicopolis (in north-western Greece) from the end of the first century into the early decades of the second century. His school acquired a good reputation, attracting students from all over the Roman Empire. One of his students was Flavius Arrian (c. 86–160) who composed both the longer *Discourses* and the short *Handbook* through which we know of Epictetus and his teaching. We are told by the early Christian writer Origen (c. 185–254) that Epictetus had been more popular in his day than had Plato in his (*Contra Celsum* 6.2).

Along with all the other philosophers of the Hellenistic period, Epictetus saw moral philosophy as having the practical purpose of guiding people towards leading better lives. The aim was to live well, to secure for oneself a happy and flourishing life – what Epictetus frequently refers to as a ‘good flow of life’, or simply a ‘good flow’. Although his curriculum was comprehensive, and included alongside ethics the other traditional branches of philosophy, logic and physics, the emphasis of his teaching – if we are to accept the *Discourses* and *Handbook* as representative of his approach – was practical ethics. His intention and his hope was that his students would become happier and better people, striking examples of how well one may live in a world of uncertainties with all its potential for dissatisfaction, illness, and vexation of spirit.

What is it to study philosophy? Is it not to prepare yourself for the things that come upon us? ... What, then, should each of us say as each hardship befalls us? ‘It was for this that I was exercising, it was for this that I was training.’

(Discourses 3.10.6–7)

The Stoic outlook that Epictetus seeks to convey, originated by its founder Zeno of Citium 400 years earlier, promises immunity to all harms. The ills we

suffer, says Epictetus, result from mistaken beliefs about what is truly good and where our real advantage lies. There is very little we can do to free ourselves from the presence of bad people, and things that break down or just break. There is no way we can *guarantee* the success of our ventures and the securing of those material goods that we desire and whose possession (we think) will make our lives better or even cure our misery. And despite taking every precaution, there is nothing we can do to permanently ward off ill-health, disease and eventual death – for ourselves and for those we love. Most people ignore what on the face of it is a bleak prospect, or muddle along gaining what temporary pleasure they can from this or that until misfortune deprives them of it, and the old disappointments and frustrations return, and the whole cycle is repeated. Our ability to control these ‘external’ things (as Epictetus calls them) is limited, partial, and at best temporary. Instead of changing these external things to suit our desires and preferences, Epictetus teaches us to change *ourselves* – that is, to change the way we regard these things and to change what we hold to be of real value and real importance. In short, he seeks to effect a transformation of his students’ inner selves.

The central claim of Stoic ethics is that only virtue (excellence of character) and actions motivated by virtue are good, and that conversely, only vice and actions motivated by vice are bad (*Discourses* 2.9.15, 2.19.13). The sorts of things that people usually value and pursue, such as pleasure, wealth, possessions, health, status and so forth, are commonly regarded as *good* (and being deprived of these things, *bad*) – but the Stoics deny that this is so, saying that such advantages do not benefit those who possess them in all circumstances: wealth, for example, can be put to bad uses, and health does not benefit you if, because you have it, you are conscripted and marched off to war. Virtue, on the other hand, understood as the capacity to make use of such advantages wisely, can never fail to be beneficial, and is thus held to be the only good thing (this argument does not originate with the Stoics, but goes back at least as far as Plato where we find it in the *Euthydemus* 278e–281e and the *Meno* 87c–89a).

The person who leads a flourishing life and is happy – happy, not in the sense that they are having a good time, or are enjoying some temporary pleasure, but whose happiness is of a special kind, being stable and enduring, a persistent flourishing that pervades their whole life – this person is virtuous (that is, they possess an excellence of character) and everything they do results from the perfected application of virtue.

For Epictetus, the way to attain and maintain this special sort of excellence is to understand what is ‘in our power’ or ‘up to us’ (*Discourses* 1.22.9–16; *Handbook* 1). The ‘external things’ we have already mentioned – other people,

our possessions, the health of our bodies, and so forth – are not in our power, that is, they are not completely and always in our power. If we let our happiness depend upon these things we will be doomed to disappointment and frustration. But our own characters, our inner selves if you like – what we think about things, our intention to act this way rather than that (and for these reasons), what we think is worth pursuing or avoiding (and why) – these are always in our power, if only we can learn how to exercise this power.

In order to develop the right sort of character, and to maintain a ‘good flow of life’, even when adversity strikes, free from anxieties, frustrations and emotional upsets no matter what the provocation (which to this day is referred to as ‘being stoical’), we need to learn how to ‘make proper use of impressions’. This is the key that opens our way to the transformation of character that will secure, if not an enduring and permanent ‘good flow’ (for this is reserved for the Stoic Sage whose wisdom and practice is fully perfected), at least worthwhile progress towards it.

To have an impression is to be aware of something. Suppose that on my way to the lounge as I walk past the front door I glance through the coloured glass and have an impression of someone standing on the porch. Epictetus talks about ‘assenting to impressions’, and to assent to this impression I must be prepared to accept the truth of the proposition *that there is someone standing on the porch*. I am not altogether sure. I look again, and decide to open the door to look properly. And what I find is my old coat hanging there where I left it to dry off after being caught in last night’s storm. *Now*, of course, I assent to the proposition *that my old coat is hanging up in the porch*. This interpretative move from impression to conviction of how things stand is in most circumstances immediate and unconscious. But we also *evaluate* what we believe to be the case, and this, in any one case, also requires assenting to the proposition *that this is something good for me, or this is something bad for me*. Epictetus’ concern is with this evaluative type of assent; his claim is that assenting to external things being good or bad is an error.

Imagine that out on the porch I look down my driveway to notice for the first time that at the height of last night’s storm a tree has blown down onto my rare and expensive classic car, causing severe damage. My immediate reaction, as someone whose Stoic training is barely underway, is to think that this is terrible, and this is to assent to the impression that the tree lying across my car is something *bad* for me, and further, that it is appropriate for me to have an emotional response to what has happened. Accordingly, I am assailed by anger, disappointment, and also self-reproach (for not parking my car in a safer place). There goes my ‘good flow of life’.

It is not the things themselves that disturb people but their judgements about those things.

(*Handbook* 5)

My mistake is to assent to something's being bad when really it is 'indifferent' – it is indifferent with respect to being good or bad, being neither. The tree's falling is an 'external' event which is not up to me. To let my well-being, my 'good flow', rest on external things that are not in my power, to which I allow myself to respond with disturbing emotions, is a recipe for disaster. As we have seen, the only good thing is virtue, my own inner character or disposition of spirit. It is right for me to assent to the impression that a tree has fallen on my car, but wrong to assent to the impression that this is something bad. Epictetus teaches that I should replace the faulty impression by some 'fair and noble' one (*Discourses* 2.18.25). Well, there are several impressions I can assent to: this is nothing bad for me, because the only harm I can suffer is to act viciously, and to be overcome by violent or disturbing emotions; this event concerns external things which are not in my power, and does not affect my 'good flow of life'; this is the sort of thing that can happen to external things, and something of the sort is bound to happen eventually. This latter observation reflects an exercise that is called 'acting with reservation', carried out by the Stoic who goes about their affairs reflecting that 'I will succeed in this action, I will continue to exercise possession of this object, and it will stay in good condition, *unless something intervenes to prevent the outcome I most prefer*'.

For if nothing but virtue and vice (excellence of character or its opposite) are really good and bad, and everything else is 'indifferent', then the Stoic, who just like everyone else has undertakings to complete and projects to further, will have preferences for some 'indifferent' things occurring, and preferences for others (the 'dispreferred indifferents') *not* occurring. Their task is to pursue them, or avoid them, virtuously.

Epictetus teaches that what actually comes about is down to Zeus, or the gods, or providence, or fate understood as an organising principle that permeates the whole of creation bringing about the unfolding of the universe according to a divine plan. Of course there is much to say about this, but let us conclude this chapter by noting that the Stoic trainee considers that they are in service to Zeus, and that their ultimate responsibility in striving to foster their excellence of character is to contribute through their own virtuous actions to the divine plan, and no matter what actually happens (whether their preferred indifferents come about or not) they accept in good spirits their own fate and the fate of the world.

References and Suggestions for Further Reading

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