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Masterpiece

“Discourses of Epictetus” (c. A.D. 108)

Virtue as Its Own Reward

In his ‘Discourses of Epictetus,’ the Stoic’s principal lesson is how best to meet the requirements of life.

by Joseph Epstein

Chief among the schools of ancient philosophy were the Academics led by Plato, the Peripatetics by Aristotle, the Epicureans by Epicurus, and the Stoics founded by Zeno of Citium. Only Stoicism, now nearly entirely eclipsed, gained a strong footing in the Roman Empire, where it was embraced by Marcus Aurelius, best of all emperors, who, in his *Meditations*, produced one of the leading Stoic texts. The major Stoic teachers were Chrysippus, Diogenes of Babylon and, above all, Epictetus (A.D. 55-135). Cicero and Seneca claimed to be Stoics, but the wavering temperament of the first and the expensive tastes of the second did not permit them to live the philosophy in the quotidian manner Stoicism requires.

Epictetus, the slave of a freedman of Nero named Epaphroditus, who eventually freed him, was Phrygian (from Western Anatolia) by birth and lame in one leg. When in A.D. 89 the Emperor Domitian banished all philosophers from Rome, Epictetus took up residence in what is now Albania. Like Socrates, whom he much admired, Epictetus committed none of his teachings to writing. He had the good fortune to have among his pupils Arrian, the chronicler of the campaigns of Alexander the Great, who transcribed Epictetus’ teachings around A.D. 108 into a work called the “*Encheiridion*,” or “*Handbook*,” but which now carries the overarching title of “*Discourses of Epictetus*.”

In what has come down to us, Epictetus largely ignores the scientific and metaphysical teachings of the Academics and Peripatetics. He concentrates instead on ethics and the ideal of the virtuous life. Virtue, in Epictetus’ philosophy, brings tranquility, leading on to happiness. Unlike the Epicureans, who taught that tranquility resided exclusively outside the life of action, the Stoics were not disdainful of the active life, and in Marcus Aurelius the theme of service not only to individuals but to the wider community is part of the human contract. Epictetus’ philosophy is

grounded in common sense. How best to meet the requirements of life, or how to live one's life "conformable to nature," is his principal lesson.

The first step on the way to doing this, according to Epictetus, is the scrupulous observation of appearances to form a right judgment of them. "Either things appear as they are," he notes, "or they are not, and do not even appear to be; or they are not, and yet appear to be." Misapprehension of appearances sets one on the track of anguish, frustrated desire, sadness, ruin. This advice of Epictetus is a precursor to Henry James's advice to be a person on whom nothing is lost.

"No man is free unless he is master of himself," claims Epictetus, and self-mastery comes through will. We must will what is right for us, and will the avoidance of what is not. Will is strengthened through accurate observation of appearances. Will operates only on those things within our power. "In our power are opinion, movement toward a thing, desire, aversion...; and in a word, whatever are our own acts; not in our power are the body, property, reputation, offices...; and in a word, whatever are not our own acts." This distinction anticipates Reinhold Niebuhr's serenity prayer, later adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous: "O God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, / The courage to change what can be changed, / and the wisdom to know the one from the other."

Desire, for Epictetus, must be carefully monitored. One must not "require a fig in winter." Freedom is gained, he holds, "not by the full possession of the things which are desired, but by removing the desire." Do not "desire many things, and you will have what you want." (This advice, if followed, would close down the consumer society.) All that you truly have need of is "firmness, of a mind which is conformable to nature, of being free from perturbation."

"From your own thoughts," Epictetus states, "cast away sadness, fear, desire, envy, malevolence, avarice, effeminacy, intemperance." Among the things we must not desire is long life. Behind this desire is the fear of death, which is useless since all things in life are transient. Like Montaigne, Epictetus invokes us never to allow death to be long out of mind. Montaigne hoped that death would take him while he was cultivating the cabbages in his garden. "May death take me," Epictetus says, "while I am thinking of these things, while I am thus writing and reading." We know that Montaigne's death was a painful one, of quinsy, which rendered him speechless at the end. How Epictetus died is not known.

Virtue is truly its only reward for Epictetus, for, though he frequently cites God and his greater design of the world, no mention in his work is made of an afterlife. Nor is there any talk of the fate of the soul once departed, if depart it does, from the body. What one gains from the philosophy of Epictetus is awareness, a plan for righteous conduct, and self-mastery of the kind available only to those rare philosophers for whom word and deed are indivisible.

—*Mr. Epstein is the author, most recently, of "Masters of the Games: Essays and Stories on Sport" (Rowman & Littlefield).*

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