

EPICTETUS

FROM *Enchiridion**Who Was Epictetus?*

Epictetus was born a slave in about 55 CE in Phrygia, a region of what is now south-western Turkey. The name his parents gave him is unknown: Epictetus is the Greek word (*epiktetos*) for a thing that is acquired as property. He was brought up in Rome as a slave in the household of a wealthy master who was himself a former slave but had been freed and had risen to become a secretary to the notorious Roman emperor Nero. Because of this, Epictetus would have been familiar with life at the imperial court and would have had some exposure to the shifting world of Roman politics. He also seems to have been given unusual privileges by his master, Epaphroditus, and was given permission to attend lectures by one of the foremost Stoic philosophers of the time, Musonius Rufus.

At some point—we don't know exactly when—Epictetus was granted his freedom, and from that point until his old age he devoted his life entirely to the study and teaching of philosophy. In 95 CE Nero's successor Domitian expelled all the philosophers in Italy, suspecting them of stirring up republican sympathies, and Epictetus moved to Greece, where he founded a school at Nicopolis. His boarding school was successful and became a destination for the sons of upper-class Roman families who admired and wanted to learn from Greek culture and philosophy. Epictetus focused on teaching practical philosophical lessons, based on rational arguments, aimed at inspiring his students to make a break with received moral and social notions and to learn to live better lives. Over time his reputation grew, and his school may even have been visited by the emperor Hadrian.

Epictetus did not write down any of his lectures, but they were recorded by some of his students, in particular one named Arrian. The written lectures (only half of

which survived) are now known as the *Discourses*, and Arrian also prepared a practical guide to Epictetus's thought called the *Manual* or, in Greek, *Enchiridion*. Although not written by Epictetus himself, these works were thought at the time and since to be essentially his words.

In accordance with his philosophy, Epictetus lived very simply and had few attachments or possessions. It was only late in his life that he retired from teaching and the responsibilities of being a philosopher and allowed himself to take on a family, adopting an abandoned child and taking in a female servant to act as a mother and domestic helper. Though Epictetus suffered from ill health and walked with a limp throughout his life,* he lived to the age of about 80 and died in 135 CE.

What Is the Structure of This Reading?

The *Enchiridion* is not intended to be a summary of Epictetus's overall thought but instead is a compilation of practical pieces of advice for daily life based on his philosophy. These are the kinds of things Epictetus would have taught his students, though presented here without the rhetorical flourish that can be found in his *Discourses*, and separated from much of the argumentation he would have used to support them.

Some Useful Background Information

1. Epictetus is known as a Stoic philosopher. Stoicism was a school of thought founded in the third century BCE by Zeno of Citium in Athens, and largely developed by his successor Chrysippus between about 230 and 210 BCE. It was the dominant philosophy

* There is an apocryphal story which goes that, while he was a slave, he was tortured by his master who twisted his leg. Enduring the pain with apparent indifference, Epictetus warned Epaphroditus that his leg would break; when it did break, he said, "There, did I not tell you that it would break?" From then on Epictetus was lame.

of the Roman world until the rise of Christianity as a state religion in the fourth century CE. At its core Stoicism combines a belief in a deterministic natural world, governed by natural laws or *logos*, with an emphasis on the human capacity to make free choices and to use our reason to see the world as it really is rather than merely as it appears to be. It is thus up to us how to act, and wise persons will bring their actions into line with the natural course of things—which, according to Stoicism, is itself part of the larger rationality of the universe and not merely arbitrary—rather than try to change things that cannot be changed. For Epictetus, as for the other Stoics, philosophy is not merely an intellectual discipline but a way of life, involving constant training and practice. We should seek to free ourselves from the undue influence of our passions and instead follow the path of reason, in order to achieve peace of mind and clear judgment. Following Socrates, the Stoics believed that unhappiness and (apparent) misfortune are the results of human ignorance of the reason inherent in nature.

Some Common Misconceptions

1. Today the word “stoic” has come to mean unemotional and able to endure hardship without complaint. This meaning is not completely disconnected from its origins in this philosophical movement, but it can be misleading: the Stoics did not seek to eliminate or ignore emotion, but to train themselves to use careful, clear judgment to assess the appropriateness of these passions or sensations rather than passively reacting to them.
2. Epictetus advises, in part, that we can find peace of mind by adapting our will to how the world is, rather than by vainly seeking to impose our will on something that cannot be changed. This is more than the simple fatalism it might seem, however. According to Stoic philosophy the world of things that are beyond our power, understood properly, is a universe that contains an inherent rational order—in fact, is sometimes described as God becoming immanent—and so it is not just prudent but also right to make ourselves in tune with it.

How Important and Influential Is This Passage?

Epictetus’s writings had enormous influence for hundreds of years after his death. Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor from 161 to 180 CE and the author of the very influential *Meditations*, describes reading Epictetus’s *Discourses* as a crucial event in his intellectual development. Epictetus’s work was one of only a handful of pagan writings that were respected and protected by the early Christian Church, and the *Enchiridion* was used almost verbatim as a rulebook for Eastern Orthodox monasteries. With the advent of the printing press, the *Discourses* and *Enchiridion* were some of the first works to be mechanically printed and they have remained continuously in print since 1535. Epictetus’s views are often a touchstone of modern self-help psychology, especially in holding that our emotional responses to events are what create anxiety and depression, rather than the events themselves, and that with proper counseling these responses can be understood as irrational and unnecessary.

FROM *Enchiridion**

I

There are things which are within our power, and there are things which are beyond our power. Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion—in a word, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our power are body, property, reputation, status, and, in a word, anything we don't have the power to control.

Now the things within our power are by nature free, unrestricted, unhindered; but those beyond our power are weak, dependent, restricted, alien. Remember, then, that if you attribute freedom to things by nature dependent and take what belongs to others for your own, you will be hindered, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will find fault both with gods and men. But if you take for your own only that which is your own and view what belongs to others just as it really is, then no one will ever compel you, no one will restrict you; you will find fault with no one, you will accuse no one, you will do nothing against your will; no one will hurt you, you will not have an enemy, nor will you suffer any harm.

Aiming, therefore, at such great things, remember that you must not allow yourself any inclination, however slight, toward the attainment of the others;† but that you must entirely give up on some of them, and for the present postpone the rest. But if you would have these, and possess power and wealth likewise, you may miss the latter in seeking the former; and you will certainly fail to get the only thing which can bring happiness and freedom.

Seek at once, therefore, to be able to say to every displeasing appearance, "You are but an appearance and by no means the real thing." And then examine it by those rules which you have; and first and chiefly by this: whether it concerns the things which are within our own power or those which are not; and if it concerns anything beyond our power, be prepared to say that it is nothing to you.

II

Remember that desire demands the attainment of that of which you are desirous; and aversion demands the avoidance of that to which you are averse; that he who fails of the object of his desires is disappointed; and he who incurs the object of his aversion is wretched. If, then, you shun only those undesirable things which you can control, you will never incur anything which you shun; but if you shun sickness, or death, or poverty, you will run the risk of wretchedness. Remove the habit of aversion, then, from all things that are not within our power, and apply it to things undesirable which are within our power. But for now, suspend desire completely; for if you desire any of the things not within our own power, you must necessarily be disappointed; and you are not yet secure of those which are within our power, and so are legitimate objects of desire. Where it is practically necessary for you to pursue or avoid anything, do even this with discretion and gentleness and moderation.

III

With regard to whatever objects either delight the mind or are useful or are tenderly beloved, remind yourself of what nature they are, beginning with the merest trifles: if you have a favorite cup, that it is but a cup of which you are fond—for thus, if it is broken, you can bear it; if you embrace your child or your wife, that you embrace a mortal—and thus, if either of them dies, you can bear it.

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V

Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of things. Thus death is nothing terrible, or otherwise it would have appeared so to Socrates. But the terror consists in our notion of death, that it is terrible. When, therefore, we are hindered or

* Translated by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, with modifications by the editor.

† Things you cannot control, such as riches or reputation.

disturbed, or grieved, let us never impute it to others, but to ourselves—that is, to our own views. It is the action of an uninstructed person to reproach others for his own misfortunes; of one entering upon instruction, to reproach himself; and one perfectly instructed, to reproach neither others nor himself.

VI

Be not elated at any excellence not your own. If a horse should be elated, and say, “I am handsome,” it might be endurable. But when you are elated and say, “I have a handsome horse,” know that you are elated only on the merit of the horse. What then is your own? The use of the phenomena of existence.* So that when you are in harmony with nature in this respect, you will be elated with some reason; for you will be elated at some good of your own.

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VIII

Don’t demand that events should happen as you wish; but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will find peace.

IX

Sickness is an impediment to the body, but not to the mind unless the mind decides that it is. Lameness is an impediment to the leg, but not to the mind. Say this to yourself with regard to everything that happens. For you will find it to be an impediment to something else, but not truly to yourself.

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XII

If you would improve, lay aside such reasonings as these: “If I neglect my affairs, I shall not have enough to live on; if I do not punish my servant, he will be good for nothing.” For it is better to die of hunger, free from grief and fear, than to be wealthy but uneasy;

and it is better that your servant should be bad than you unhappy.

Begin therefore with little things. Is a little oil spilled or a little wine stolen? Say to yourself, “This is the price paid for peace and tranquillity; and nothing is to be had for nothing.” And when you call your servant, consider that it is possible he may not come at your call; or, if he does, that he may not do what you wish. But it is not at all desirable for him, and very undesirable for you, that it should be in his power to disrupt your peace of mind.

XIII

If you would improve, be content to be thought foolish and dull with regard to externals.† Do not desire to be thought to know anything; and though you should appear to others to be somebody, distrust yourself. For be assured, it is not easy simultaneously to keep your will in harmony with nature and to secure externals; while you are absorbed in the one, you must necessarily neglect the other.

XIV

If you wish your children and your wife and your friends to live forever, you are foolish, for you wish things to be in your power which are not so, and what belongs to others to be your own. Similarly, if you wish your servant to be without fault, you are foolish, for you wish vice not to be vice but something else. But if you wish not to be disappointed in your desires, that is in your own power. Exercise, therefore, what is in your power. A man’s master is he who is able to provide or remove whatever that man seeks or shuns. Whoever then would be free, let him wish nothing, let him decline nothing, which depends on others; otherwise he must necessarily be a slave.

XV

Remember that you must behave as at a banquet. Is anything brought round to you? Put out your hand and take a moderate share. Does it pass by you? Do

* “The phenomena of existence”: the appearances of things, impressions.

† Merely external or conventional signs (e.g., status symbols), as opposed to the genuinely important things.

not stop it. Is it not yet come? Do not yearn in desire toward it, but wait till it reaches you. Behave like this with regard to children, wife, status, riches, and you will in time be worthy to feast with the gods. And if you do not so much as take the things which are set before you, but are able even to forego them, then you will not only be worthy to feast with the gods, but to rule with them also. For, by thus doing, Diogenes and Heraclitus,* and others like them, deservedly became divine, and were so recognized.

XVI

When you see anyone weeping for grief, either that his son has gone abroad or that he has lost some money or property, take care not to be overcome by the apparent evil, but discriminate and be ready to say, “What hurts this man is not this occurrence itself—for another man might not be hurt by it—but the view he chooses to take of it.” As far as conversation goes, however, do not disdain to sympathize with him and, if need be, to groan with him. Take heed, however, not to groan inwardly, too.

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XX

Remember that it is not he who gives abuse or blows, who affronts, but the view we take of these things as insulting. When, therefore, anyone provokes you, be assured that it is your own opinion which provokes you. Try, therefore, in the first place, not to be bewildered by appearances. For if you take some time before reacting, you will more easily command yourself.

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XXII

If you have an earnest desire toward philosophy, prepare yourself from the very first to have the multitude laugh and sneer, and say, “Suddenly we have a philosopher among us”; and, “What makes him so pretentious now?” Now, for your part, don’t be pretentious,

but keep steadily to those things which appear best to you, as one appointed by God to the role of philosopher. For remember that, if you are persistent, those very people who at first ridiculed you will afterwards admire you. But if you let them persuade you not to be a philosopher, you will incur a double ridicule.

XXIII

If you ever happen to turn your attention to externals, for the pleasure of anyone, be assured that you have ruined your scheme of life. Be content, then, in everything, with being a philosopher; and if you wish to seem so likewise to anyone, appear so to yourself, and it will be enough for you.

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XXV

Is anyone given preferential treatment over you at a formal party, or in being honoured, or in being asked to join a confidential conversation? If these things are good, you ought to rejoice that he has them; and if they are evil, do not be grieved that you have them not. And remember that you cannot be permitted to rival others in externals without using the same means to obtain them. For how can he who will not haunt the door of any man, will not attend him, will not praise him, have an equal share with him who does these things? You are unjust, then, and unreasonable if you are unwilling to pay the price for which these things are sold, and would have them for nothing. For how much are lettuces sold? An obol,[†] for instance. If another, then, paying an obol, takes the lettuces, and you, not paying it, go without them, do not imagine that he has gained any advantage over you. For as he has the lettuces, so you have the obol which you did not give. So, in the present case, you have not been invited to such a person’s formal dinner because you have not paid him the price for which a supper is sold. It is sold for praise; it is sold for paying court. Give him, then, the value if it be for your advantage. But if you would at the same time not pay the one, and

* Diogenes of Apollonia (fifth century BCE) and Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 535–c. 475 BCE) were Greek philosophers and precursors of Socrates.

† A small Greek coin.

yet receive the other, you are unreasonable and foolish. Have you nothing, then, in place of the dinner? Yes, indeed, you have—not to praise him whom you do not like to praise; not to bear the insolence of his lackeys.

XXVI

The will of nature may be learned from things upon which we are all agreed. As when our neighbor's boy has broken a cup, or the like, we are ready at once to say, "These are casualties that will happen"; be assured, then, that when your own cup is likewise broken, you ought to be affected just as when another's cup was broken. Now apply this to greater things. Is the child or wife of another dead? There is no one who would not say, "This is an accident of mortality." But if anyone's own child happens to die, it is immediately, "Alas! how wretched am I!" It should be always remembered how we are affected on hearing the same thing concerning others.

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XXIX

In every affair consider what precedes and what follows, and then undertake it. Otherwise you will begin enthusiastically, indeed, careless of the consequences, and when these are developed, you will shamefully give up. "I would conquer at the Olympic Games." But consider what precedes and what follows, and then, if it be for your advantage, engage in the affair. You must conform to rules, submit to a diet, refrain from rich food; exercise your body, whether you choose it or not, at a stated hour, in heat and cold; you must drink no cold water, and sometimes no wine—in a word, you must give yourself up to your trainer as to a physician. Then, in the combat, you may be thrown into a ditch, dislocate your arm, turn your ankle, swallow an abundance of dust, be whipped, and, after all, lose the victory. When you have reckoned up all this, if your inclination still holds, set about the combat. Otherwise, take notice, you will behave like children who sometimes play at being wrestlers, sometimes

gladiators, sometimes blow a trumpet, and sometimes act a tragedy, when they happen to have seen and admired these shows. Thus you too will be at one time a wrestler, and another a gladiator; now a philosopher, now an orator; but nothing in earnest. Like an ape you mimic all you see, and one thing after another is sure to please you, but is out of favor as soon as it becomes familiar. For you have never entered upon anything thoughtfully; nor after having surveyed and tested the whole matter, but carelessly, and with a halfway zeal. Thus some, when they have seen a philosopher and heard a man speaking like Euphrates*—though, indeed, who can speak like him?—have a mind to be philosophers, too. Consider first, friend, what the matter is, and what your own nature is able to bear. If you would be a wrestler, consider your shoulders, your back, your thighs; for different persons are made for different things. Do you think that you can act as you do and be a philosopher, that you can eat, drink, be angry, be discontented, as you are now? You must watch, you must labor, you must get the better of certain appetites, must break off with your friends and family, be despised by your servant, be laughed at by those you meet; come off worse than others in everything—in positions, in honors, before tribunals. When you have fully considered all these things, approach, if you please—that is, if, by parting with them, you have a mind to purchase serenity, freedom, and tranquility. If not, do not come hither; do not, like children, be now a philosopher, then a tax collector, then an orator, and then one of Caesar's officers. These things are not consistent. You must be one man, either good or bad. You must cultivate either your own reason or else externals; apply yourself either to things within or without you—that is, be either a philosopher or one of the mob.†

XXX

Duties are universally defined by social relations. Is a certain man your father? In this are implied taking care of him, submitting to him in all things, patiently receiving his reproaches, his correction. But he is a bad

* Euphrates was a well-known Stoic philosopher from the generation before Epictetus, who lived in the southern area of what is today Syria between 35 and 118 CE. Several contemporaries praise his great talent as an orator.

† Common people, masses.

father. Is your natural tie, then, to a *good* father? No, but to a father. Is a brother unjust? Well, preserve your own just relation toward him. Consider not what *he* does, but what *you* are to do to keep your own mind in a state conforming to nature, for another cannot hurt you unless you allow it. You will then be hurt when you consent to be hurt. In this manner, therefore, if you accustom yourself to contemplate the relations of neighbor, citizen, commander, you can deduce from each the corresponding duties.

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XXXIII

Begin by prescribing to yourself some character and demeanor, which you are able to stick to whether alone or in company.

Be mostly silent, or speak only what is necessary, and in few words. We may, however, enter sparingly into discourse sometimes, when occasion calls for it; but let it not run on any of the common subjects, as gladiators, or horse races, or athletic champions, or food, or drink—the vulgar* topics of conversation—and especially not on men, so as either to blame, or praise, or make comparisons. If you are able, then, by your own conversation, bring over that of your company to proper subjects; but if you happen to find yourself among strangers, be silent.

Let not your laughter be loud, frequent, or abundant.

Avoid taking oaths, if possible, altogether; at any rate, so far as you are able.

Avoid public and vulgar entertainments; but if ever an occasion calls you to them, pay attention not to imperceptibly slide into vulgarity. For be assured that if a person be ever so pure himself, yet, if his companion be corrupted, he who converses with him will be corrupted likewise.

Provide things relating to the body no further than absolute need requires, as meat, drink, clothing, house, servants. But cut off everything that looks toward show and luxury.

Before marriage guard yourself with all your ability from unlawful sexual intercourse with women; yet be not uncharitable or severe to those who are led into this, nor boast frequently that you yourself do otherwise.

If anyone tells you that a certain person speaks ill of you, do not make excuses about what is said of you, but answer: “He was ignorant of my other faults, otherwise he would have mentioned these as well.”

It is not necessary for you to appear often at public spectacles;† but if ever there is a proper occasion for you to be there, do not appear more solicitous for any other than for yourself—that is, wish things to be only just as they are, and only the best man to win; for thus nothing will go against you. But abstain entirely from acclamations and derision and violent emotions. And when you come away, do not discourse a great deal on what has passed, or no more than is necessary to get it out of your system. For it would appear by such discourse that you were dazzled by the show.

Be not eager or ready to attend private recitations;‡ but if you do attend, preserve your gravity and dignity, and yet avoid making yourself disagreeable.

When you are going to confer with anyone, and especially with one who seems your superior, think about how Socrates or Zeno§ would behave in such a case, and you will not be at a loss to meet properly whatever may occur.

When you are going to meet someone powerful, imagine to yourself that you may not find him at home, that you may be shut out, that the doors may not be opened to you, that he may not notice you. If, with all this, it be your duty to go, bear what happens and never say to yourself, “It was not worth so much”; for this is vulgar, and like a man bewildered by externals.

In company, avoid a frequent and excessive mention of your own actions and adventures. For however agreeable it may be to yourself to allude to the risks you have run, it is not equally agreeable to others to hear about your exploits. Avoid likewise an endeavor to excite laughter, for this may readily slide you into

* Characteristic of ordinary, unsophisticated people (from the Latin *vulgaris* meaning “of the common people”).

† Public games, such as sporting events.

‡ Private lectures or poetry recitals.

§ Socrates and Zeno were famous Greek philosophers. Zeno of Cyprus (335–263 BCE) was the founder of Stoicism.

vulgarity, and, besides, may be apt to lower you in the esteem of your acquaintance. Approaches to indecent conversation are likewise dangerous. Therefore, when anything of this sort happens, use the first fit opportunity to rebuke him who makes advances that way, or, at least, by silence and blushing and a serious look show yourself to be displeased by such talk.

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XXLI

It is a sign of lack of intellect to spend much time in things relating to the body, as to be immoderate in exercises, in eating and drinking, and in the discharge of other animal functions. These things should be done incidentally and our main strength be applied to our reason.

XXLII

When any person does ill by you, or speaks ill of you, remember that he acts or speaks from an impression that it is right for him to do so. Now it is not possible that he should follow what appears right to you, but only what appears so to himself. Therefore, if he judges from false appearances, he is the person hurt, since he, too, is the person deceived. For if anyone takes a true proposition to be false, the proposition

is not hurt, but only the man is deceived. Setting out, then, from these principles, you will meekly bear with a person who reviles you, for you will say upon every occasion, "It seemed so to him."

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XLVIII

The condition and characteristic of a vulgar person is that he never looks for either help or harm from himself, but only from externals. The condition and characteristic of a philosopher is that he looks to himself for all help or harm. The marks of a proficient are that he censures no one, praises no one, blames no one, accuses no one; says nothing concerning himself as being anybody or knowing anything. When he is in any instance hindered or restrained, he accuses himself; and if he is praised, he smiles to himself at the person who praises him; and if he is censured, he makes no defense. But he goes about with the caution of a convalescent, careful of interference with anything that is doing well but not yet quite secure. He restrains desire; he transfers his aversion to only those things which thwart the proper use of our own will; he employs his energies moderately in all directions; if he appears stupid or ignorant, he does not care; and, in a word, he keeps watch over himself as if he were an enemy waiting in ambush. ■

Suggestions for Critical Reflection

1. Does Epictetus say that you can avoid being disappointed by disciplining yourself not to want the things that you can't—or might not—get? How practical, or healthy, is this advice?
2. "Sickness is an impediment to the body, but not to the mind unless the mind decides that it is." What do you make of this?
3. Why do you think Epictetus says that "it is not easy simultaneously to keep your will in harmony with nature and to secure externals"?
4. How attractive do you find Epictetus's stoicism? Is it a good guide for everyday life? Does it seem to you a good way to be happy?