

Epictetus and Stoic Philosophy August 22, 2010



Epictetus (AD 55–AD 135) was one of the preeminent Stoic philosophers. Born as a slave, his master was so impressed by him that he sent him to Rome to study. He taught in Rome until A.D. 94, when the emperor Domitian banished him (he was threatened by the growing influence of philosophers). He spent the rest of his life in exile, and subsequently established a school and lectured. Marcus Aurelius was one of his students. The philosophy we have from Epictetus was taken from lecture notes by one of his students, as he did not write for publication. What follows is a discussion of Stoic philosophy and the teachings of Epictetus.

Stoicism

Stoicism was founded in Athens in the early 3rd century B.C. A friend of mine described the philosophy of stoicism in one word: "Whatever". This is a good summation of the discipline. Stoics believe that one should devote themselves to living in accordance with

nature; meaning, that one should align their will with the way things are, not as they would have them to be. Fate is predetermined and cannot be controlled. One should focus on what they do have control over, and that is their response to things and their own actions.

Stoics also believe that one should adhere to their system of moral responsibility and detach or disassociate from emotional responses to life's events. Even the death of a loved one is to be accepted as just the natural order of things, and one should not grieve. A person should consider their problems or negative happenings in their life as they would if the things happened to another person.

As stated by many other philosophies, material possessions are to be given no weight. If something is taken, it should have been considered given to begin with, and it is just returning to where it came.

Peace of mind was the key for the Stoics. They believe that we are all part of the whole, and should work together and show compassion for our fellow human beings.

Arguments against Stoicism:

- 1) Determinism is incompatible with ordinary notions of moral responsibility, and with the possibility of praise and blame. It is also held that if determinism is true, then there is no point in anyone's making any effort to do anything or to accomplish any goals.

The Stoics maintained that these objections could be met,

and that determinism is compatible with moral responsibility and with the making of effort.

- 2) Given the Stoic's position on what the ideal state is for a human being, they have to regard all particular states of the external world as indifferent, i.e., neither good or bad, since the best state to be in was one of not being dissatisfied with any external state at all.

Stoics disagree with this, but caution that if someone does evil that they are to be considered ignorant, not paying attention to their innate reason, and should not be judged.

Stoicism was a very popular philosophy, and had a following throughout Greece and Rome until all philosophy schools were closed in 529 A.D.

Epictetus

Epictetus' philosophy sets the stage for much modern thought on how to live a tranquil life. He was a good teacher, and considered himself successful when his ideas were easily grasped and put to use in someone's real life, where they could actually do some good elevating their character. Moral progress is achieved by working on yourself daily. One must remain vigilant.

Epictetus' prescription for the good life centered on three main themes: mastering your desires; performing your duties; and learning to think clearly about yourself and your relations within the larger community of humanity.

If a person seeks merely to fulfill their desires, they will not find the contentment they seek. Humans are unable to fulfill all of their desires, because they are unlimited by anything other than life span. One should set their sights lower, not expecting to have certain desires satisfied, and live with the idea that such desires were not worth fulfilling anyway.

All events are completely determined by prior states of the universe as a whole. According to this form of determinism, anyone knowing all there is to know about the world prior to a given time would be able to predict with complete certainty what would happen at that time and later times.

Pain can be managed, as it is not really important in the big scheme of things. Death should not be feared. One should hold in contempt this fear.

In accepting the world as it is and not how we wish it would be, we must let some things go completely and postpone others for the time being. What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about the things.

Do not enter any contest in which victory is not up to you.

If it ever happens that you turn outward to want to please another person, certainly you have lost your plan of life. Someone cannot hurt you unless you let them. They can even kill you, but they cannot harm you.

Do not compare yourself to others. Being jealous of their success or feeling inadequate is foolish. You must consider whether you are willing and able to do exactly what they did in order to achieve their success. Cut

out everything that is for reputation or luxury.

Set up a certain character and pattern for yourself which you will preserve when you are by yourself and when you are with people. Be silent for the most part, or say what you have to in a few words. If your talk is about others, talk without blaming or praising or comparing.

Be of service to your fellows. Be a good friend. Be particular about who you choose to associate with, lest you become like someone you do not want to become like. Be on guard for an enemy lying in wait.

When it comes to pleasure, weigh the price you pay for giving in to that pleasure against the benefit derived from having that pleasure fulfilled. If you resist, you can revel in the victory of having power over that desire.

Strive for progress rather than perfection. Your progress can be destroyed by a single day or a single action. You must put your best foot forward in all of your endeavors.

Some Tidbits

The following are excerpts from lectures that Epictetus delivered. While most of them read like a modern day self-help book, they serve as a good reminder of how to achieve inner harmony.

"First say to yourself what you would be; then do what you have to do."

"Prudent people look beyond the incident itself and seek to form the habit of putting it to good use."

"Moral progress results in freedom from inner turmoil."

"Be on your guard against a false sense of self-importance."

"It is foolish to wish that an employee, relative, or friend be without fault...It is within our control not to be disappointed by our desires if we deal with them according to facts rather than by being swept away by them...Freedom comes from understanding the limits of our own power and the natural limits set in place by divine providence."

"There is no need to yearn, envy or grab. You will get your rightful portion when it is your time."

"Keep your head. Our busy minds are forever jumping to conclusions, manufacturing and interpreting signs that aren't there."

"Your happiness depends on three things, all of which are within your power: your will, your ideas concerning the events in which you are involved, and the use you make of your ideas...Stop aspiring to be anyone other than your own best self: for that does fall within your control."

"Try not to merely react in the moment. Pull back from the situation. Take a wider view; compose yourself."

"Worry and dread are a waste of time and do not set a good example for others...you're not responsible for what others think of you."

"It's better to be a good person and fulfill your obligations than to have renown and power."

"Make it your regular habit to consider your roles...and the natural duties that arise from them. Once you know who you are and to whom you are linked, you will know what to do."

"The wise person knows it is fruitless to project hopes and fears on the future. This only leads to forming melodramatic representations in your mind and wasting time."

"You become what you give attention to."

"Abstain from casual sex...an active sex life within a framework of personal commitment augments the integrity of the people involved and is part of a flourishing life."

"Only the morally weak feel compelled to defend or explain themselves to others."

"Invoke the characteristics of the people you admire most and adopt their manners, speech and behavior as your own."

"Within the divine order, we each have our own special calling. Listen to yours and follow it faithfully."

"Move forward by resolving to heal *yourself*."

"Popular perceptions, values, and ways of doing things are rarely the wisest."

"Don't listen to what people say. Watch what they *do* and evaluate the attendant consequences."

"When people do not act as you would wish them to, exercise the muscles of your good nature by shrugging your shoulders and saying to yourself "Oh well". Then let the incident go...Forgive others for their misdeeds over and over again. This gesture fosters inner ease. Forgive yourself over and over again. Then try to do better next time."

"To live a life of virtue, you have to become consistent, even when it isn't

convenient, comfortable, or easy. It is incumbent that your thoughts, words, and deeds match up. It's so simple really: If you say you're going to do something, do it. If you start something, finish it."

"Why should we bother being good? To be good is to be happy; to be tranquil and worry-free...The virtuous life holds these as treasures: your own right action; your fidelity; your honor; and your decency."

"The marks of good reasoning are clarity, consistency, rigor, precision of definitions, and avoidance of ambiguity."

"Your relentless *pursuit* of wisdom postpones your actually possessing it. Quit chasing after tonics and new teachers."

"Practice having a grateful attitude and you will be happy."

"Let your ideas and plans incubate before you parade them in front of the naysayers and trivializers."

"Give your best and always be kind."

Some Thoughts

I really enjoyed reading Epictetus. It's an easy read and as I said, a good reminder of how best to live to achieve ataraxia.

Of course, many of his suggestions are easier said than done. It is difficult for most people to detach from their emotions in order to make a reasonable decision and action.

I love the advice about forgiving others when they disappoint you. It is important to remember that other human beings *will* hurt you. Expecting

them not to is unreasonable and will only bring pain.

I also relate and would like to follow the advice on making a comparison to others. This is a bad habit of mine. When I do this, I will always fall short because I pick those who have superior qualities to compare myself to. While this line of thinking has to do with my upbringing, it is up to me to derail the pattern.

One cannot go wrong with striving to follow Epictetus' advice. He has philosophies that are congruent with many beliefs of other philosophers, such as Seneca, who was also a Stoic. There are even some similarities to [the philosophy of Epicurus](#). All philosophy, one way or another, involves focus on the inner life and the rejection of outward appearances and material things.