

Notes on *Epictetus*

Epictetus (Greek Επικτήτος; c.55–c.135) was a Greek *Stoic* philosopher.

The essence of **Epictetus's** psychology is revealed by two of his most frequently quoted statements:

- We are disturbed not by events, but by the views which we take of them.
- I must die. Must I then die lamenting? I must be put in chains. Must I then also lament? I must go into exile. Does any man then hinder me from going with smiles and cheerfulness and contentment?

The influence of **Epictetus** continues today. The psychologist **Albert Ellis**, the founder of *Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy*, credits **Epictetus** with providing a foundation for his system of psychotherapy (*How to Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable about Anything*, 1998).

The philosophy of **Epictetus** is well known in the military through the writings and example of **James Stockdale**, an American fighter pilot who was shot down over **North Vietnam**, and became a prisoner of war during the **Vietnam War**, and later a vice presidential candidate. In *Courage under Fire: Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior* (1993), **Stockdale** credits **Epictetus** with helping him endure seven and a half years in a **North Vietnamese** military prison -- including torture, and four years in solitary confinement. In his conclusion, **Stockdale** quoted **Epictetus** as saying,

"The emotions of **grief**, **pity**, and even **affection** are well-known

disturbers of the soul. Grief is the most offensive; Epictetus considered the suffering of grief an act of evil. It is a willful act, going against the will of God to have all men share happiness." (p. 235).

The philosophy of Epictetus plays a key role in the 1998 novel by Tom Wolfe, *A Man in Full* and stems largely from Wolfe's discussions with Stockdale. Stockdale's essays extolling the wisdom of Epictetus and the virtues of Stoicism have in recent years been studied by officer candidates in all services. In 2005, Nancy Sherman, a teacher at the US Naval Academy, published *The Stoic Warriors - the Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind*.

Useful Quotes

- All philosophy lies in two words, sustain and abstain.
- All religions must be tolerated... for every man must get to heaven in his own way.
- Be careful to leave your sons well instructed rather than rich, for the hopes of the instructed are better than the wealth of the ignorant.
- Bear in mind that you should conduct yourself in life as at a feast.
- Control thy passions, lest they take vengeance on thee.
- Difficulties show men what they are. In case of any difficulty remember that God has pitted you against a rough antagonist that you may be a conqueror, and this cannot be without toil.
- First learn the meaning of what you say, and then speak.

- First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do.
- For it is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of death and hardship.
- Freedom is not procured by a full enjoyment of what is desired, but by controlling the desire.
- If virtue promises happiness, prosperity and peace, then progress in virtue is progress in each of these for to whatever point the perfection of anything brings us, progress is always an approach toward it.
- If you do not wish to be prone to anger, do not feed the habit; give it nothing which may tend to its increase.
- If you wish to be a writer, write.
- If you would cure anger, do not feed it. Say to yourself: 'I used to be angry every day; then every other day; now only every third or fourth day.' When you reach thirty days offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the gods.
- Know, first, who you are; and then adorn yourself accordingly.
- Make the best use of what is in your power, and take the rest as it happens.
- Preach not to others what they should eat, but eat as becomes you, and be silent.
- The good or ill of a man lies within his own will.
- Only the educated are free.
- What is the first business of one who practices philosophy? To get rid of self-conceit. For it is impossible for anyone to begin to learn

that which he thinks he already knows.

- When you close your doors, and make darkness within, remember never to say that you are alone, for you are not alone; nay, God is within, and your genius is within. And what need have they of light to see what you are doing?

So far as is known, **Epictetus** himself wrote nothing. All that we have of his work was transcribed by his pupil **Arrian** (author of the *Anabasis Alexandri*). The main work is *The Discourses*, four books of which have been preserved (out of an original eight).

In a preface to *The Discourses*, addressed to **Lucius Gellius**, **Arrian** states that "whatever I heard him say I used to write down, word for word, as best I could, endeavouring to preserve it as a memorial, for my own future use, of his way of thinking and the frankness of his speech".

Arrian also compiled a popular digest, entitled the *Enchiridion*, or *Handbook*. The *Enchiridion-Handbook* is **Arrian's** anthology of particularly poignant quotes of **Epictetus** Ji, which **Arrian** excerpted from the larger *The Discourses of Epictetus* that **Arrian** likewise transcribed from his memory of the Great Master's ways and words. The final entry (52) of the *Enchiridion* (i.e. *Handbook*) is a compendious quote which begins, "Upon all occasions we ought to have these [four] maxims ready at hand:"

"Conduct me, Zeus, and thou, O Destiny,
Wherever thy decree has fixed my lot.
I follow willingly; and, did I not,
Wicked and wretched would I follow still."
(**Diogenes Laertius** quoting **Cleanthes**; quoted also by **Seneca**, *Epistle 107*)"

"Who'er yields properly to Fate is deemed
Wise among men, and knows the laws of Heaven."

(From **Euripides' *Fragments***, 965)

"O Crito, if it thus pleases the gods, thus let it be."

(From **Plato's *Crito***)

"Anytus and Meletus may indeed kill me, but they cannot harm me."

(From **Plato's *Apology***)

"The uneducated man blames others;
The partly-educated man blames himself;
The educated man blames no one."

--Epictetus Ji, from Nicholas White's Translation of the "Handbook" of Epictetus by Arrian (ed. Hackett Pub Co Inc (Indianapolis), 1983). White's Translation is the best of those of the ENCHIRIDION, and the Classics Club/Thomas Wentworth Higginson Translation is the best of the available translations of the DISCOURSES.

The name given by **Epictetus'** parents, if one was given, is not known - the word *epiktetos* in Greek simply means "acquired."

True to *Stoic* form, **Epictetus** lived a life of great simplicity, marked by teaching and intellectual pursuits. Some claim that he married once, late in life, to help raise a child who would have otherwise been left to die. Others say that he did not marry, and remained childless. **Demonax** supposedly rebuked **Epictetus'** exhortation to marry by sarcastically asking whether he could marry one of the philosopher's daughters.

Epictetus focused more on ethics than the early *Stoics* had.

Repeatedly attributing his ideas to **Socrates**, he held that our aim was to be **masters of our own lives**.

The role of the *Stoic* teacher, according to **Epictetus**, was to encourage his students to learn, first of all, the *true nature of things*, which is invariable, inviolable and valid for all human beings without exceptions.

The *true nature of things* is their partition into two categories:

1. *Prohairesis* Things: those things that are subject to our exclusive power -- the first category of things includes **judgment, impulse, desire, aversion**, etc. ; and
2. *Aprohairesis* (or *Adiaphora*) Things: those things that are not subject to our exclusive power -- the second category of things includes **health, material wealth, fame**, etc.

Epictetus then introduced his students to two cardinal concepts:

1. the concept of *Prohairesis* -- *Prohairesis* is what distinguishes humans from all other creatures. It is the faculty that makes us **desire** or **avert**, **feel impelled** or **repelled**, **assent** or **dissent**, according to our own **judgments**. Epictetus repeatedly says that "we are our *prohairesis*".
2. the concept of *Dihairesis* -- *Dihairesis* is the judgement that is performed by our *Prohairesis*, and that enables us to distinguish what is subject to our exclusive power from what is not subject to our exclusive power.

Finally, **Epictetus** taught his students that good and evil exist only in our *Prohairesis* and never in external or *aprohairesis* things. The good student who had thoroughly grasped these concepts and employed them in everyday life was prepared to live the philosophic life, whose objective was *eudaimonia* (*happiness* or *flourishing*). This meant *living virtuously*, in accordance with *reason* and in accordance with the *true nature of things*.

Epictetus was probably born at **Hierapolis, Phrygia**:





Epictetus lived most of his life in **Rome** until his exile to **Nicopolis** in northwestern **Greece**, where he died.

Epictetus spent his youth as a slave in **Rome** to **Epaphroditos**, a very wealthy freedman of Nero. Even as a slave, Epictetus used his time productively, studying **Stoic Philosophy** under **Musonius Rufus**. He was eventually freed and lived a relatively hard life in ill health in **Rome**. It is known that he became crippled, yet the exact cause remains in dispute. Some reports claim that his injuries were a result of cruel treatment by his owner, **Epaphroditos**, while yet other reports claim that **Epaphroditos** was an ideal master who enthusiastically supported Epictetus'

studies.

Epictetus was exiled along with other philosophers by the emperor **Domitian** sometime between 89 and 95.

It was **Epictetus'** exile by **Domitian** that began what would later come to be the most celebrated part of his life. After his exile, **Epictetus** traveled to **Nicopolis, Greece**, where he founded a famed philosophical school. This school was even visited by **Emperor Hadrian**, and its most famous student, **Arrian**, became a great historian in his own right.
