

Epictetus (AD c.50-c.120)

Brad Inwood

Biography

Epictetus was a Greek Stoic philosopher of the late first and early second centuries ad. He developed Stoic ideas of responsibility into a doctrine of autonomy and inner freedom based on his concept of moral personality (*prohairesis*). Ethics and practical moral training are central to his thought, but he was also responsible for innovations in epistemology. He emphasized the need to achieve freedom from the passions and to maintain equanimity in the face of a world determined by a providential, though often inscrutable, fate. He frequently treats the Stoic Zeus as a personal deity, and his distinctive combination of personal piety and stringent rationalism (together with his pungent style) have contributed to his enduring influence.

1. Life and works

Born in Hierapolis of Phrygia, Epictetus was a slave owned by a powerful freedman at the court of Nero. He became a follower of the Stoic Musonius Rufus and a philosopher in his own right. At around the age of 40 he was banished and moved to Nicopolis on the Adriatic coast of Greece; there he taught until his death some time after 120. His thought owed most to early Stoicism, especially its third head Chrysippus, on whom he lectured. Epictetus wrote nothing for publication, but his student Arrian (a Roman aristocrat) recorded and published his informal lectures, mostly on ethics (the Discourses, of which four books survive). Epictetus' formal teaching consisted of the exegesis of early Stoic texts and possibly those of other philosophers. Arrian also compiled a Handbook of Epictetus' teaching (the Enchiridion). The Neoplatonic commentator Simplicius wrote a commentary on it, and it has been widely read since its revival in the Renaissance.

2. Teachings

The central idea of Epictetus' moral teaching is the distinction between what is in our power (*eph' hēmin*) and what is not. This contrast goes back to early Stoic discussions of determinism and moral responsibility (see Stoicism §21). For Epictetus, only our mental life (thoughts, beliefs, decisions, emotions) is in our power and so 'free'; hence it and the moral state dependent on it (virtue or vice) are the key to happiness. Everything else, including bodily pleasure and pain, is subject to control by external forces and so irrelevant to genuine moral welfare.

Epictetus did not organize his teaching around the traditional triad of logic, physics and ethics. Rather (Discourses III 2) he developed a scheme of three topics or areas of practice. First, desires and aversions must be managed, so as never to desire the unattainable nor to flee the inevitable. Two mental techniques are recommended to achieve this: the rational anticipation of possible negative outcomes and 'reservation' (*hupexairesis*, a restriction of desires with the proviso 'if that is what Zeus wills for me'). Since the only truly valuable things are in our power, this goal can be achieved by learning the difference between what is good and what is merely 'preferred'.

Second, one must learn to manage impulses and choices and learn what the appropriate thing to do is in different circumstances; one must also learn the importance of living in an orderly, well-thought-out manner. The third topic aims at gaining control over one's own assent so that all error and precipitancy are avoided.

The first topic will free us from irrational passions (*pathē*). The second will guide us in our dealings with others. The third topic – based essentially on logic and epistemology – is reserved for those who have progressed through the first two. The intellectual strength it yields should be put to use in supporting a moral life, not indulged in for its own sake – a conception of the purpose of logic which goes back to the earliest generations of the Stoic school. In the Discourses Epictetus stresses that logic is of no value in its own right, but that it must serve ethical needs. (He makes the same point about virtually every form of learning, whether the expertise of professional literary critics and grammarians or even his own ability to expound the classical texts of early Stoicism.) The role of logic, then, is to help us understand the workings of the world and our place in it – which requires the ability to make reliable inferences from careful observations.

Epictetus made one important innovation, which concerns the so-called 'preconceptions' (*prolēpseis*), the antecedent notions which most humans share. Earlier Stoics too were committed to the task of examining them and rendering them consistent with each other, with their experience, and with the common conceptions of other people. But for earlier Stoics the origin of these preconceptions lay in the normal experience of the world which virtually everyone shares. Epictetus converts these preconceptions into something approaching innate ideas. The impact of this change on ethics was negligible, but it foreshadowed important epistemological developments and the openness to Platonism which one senses in Marcus Aurelius.

We may form an impression of Epictetus' competence in logic and dialectic from his account of the master argument of Diodorus Cronus §5, which shows first-hand familiarity with several different Stoic views as well as with Diodorus, and from his many references to the technicalities of Stoic logic (Discourses II 19).

Physics, the second traditional branch of philosophy, is largely taken over from earlier Stoic theory. The key point is the providential organization of the world by nature (which Epictetus often regards as a personal god, Zeus). Nature is a rational organizing force and the principles which guide it are similar in kind to our own rationality. Hence, like earlier Stoics, Epictetus regards it as the perfection of our own rationality to accommodate ourselves willingly to the inevitable operations of the world. Where Chrysippus had spoken of the goal of life as learning to live in accordance with an understanding of what happens by nature, Epictetus speaks more often of following the will of Zeus. This more religious tone may be due to the nature of the Discourses, addressed as they were to a non-specialist audience; there is no reason to believe that Epictetus' views on the importance of physics or theology to ethics differed much from those of Chrysippus or Cleanthes (whose Hymn to Zeus he quotes at the end of the Enchiridion alongside Plato's Crito and Apology, and Euripides).

3. Ethics

Ethics is clearly the core of Epictetus' teaching. Following a trend which is also apparent in the work of Seneca and Musonius, and which culminates perhaps in the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus emphasizes the importance of inner mental life. All philosophers who claimed Socrates as their basic inspiration held that happiness (Eudaimonia) was the goal of life and that it depended on the care of the soul. But later Stoics put more emphasis on the autonomy of our inner life, its independence of the contingencies of our bodily and social experience. Several features of Epictetus' thought flow from this:

1. The contrast between what is in our power (*eph' hēmin*) and what is not: 'In our power are belief, impulse to action, desire, aversion – in a word, everything that *we* do; not in our power are our body, possessions, reputation, political office – in a word, everything that is not our own doing' (Enchiridion 1.1).
2. The focus on *prohairesis*, or moral personality. Earlier Stoics seldom mention this term (which is important for Aristotle (§20), though in a different sense); Epictetus adopted it to express the idea that their moral identity is something which rational agents can control and for which they are wholly responsible. In this respect it recalls Seneca's novel emphasis on will (Latin *voluntas*). Epictetus does not refer to anything which could not be expressed by referring to the commanding faculty (*hēgemonikon*) and to assent as earlier Stoics did, but the new term permits an emphasis on inner mental life.
3. The polarization between our impressions (*phantasiai*) and the critical use which we make of them. Impressions can be external, such as the appearance of a possible source of pleasure or pain, or internal, such as our own opinions and notions, but all must be subjected to critical scrutiny before we accept them. This process, the 'use of impressions', is, like the Socratic *elenchos* (see Socrates §§2–3), internalized, and it is the most important moral practice which Epictetus urges on his audience.

Other philosophical schools appear frequently in Epictetus' lectures; he does not merely preach to the converted. He takes an anti-Epicurean stance, attacking Epicurus' neglect of logic, his denial of providence, his hedonism, and most of all the anti-social implications of his egoism (see Arcesilaus; Carneades; Epicureanism §§10–11). The Academics are also attacked for their scepticism. As one might expect, Epictetus has an ambivalent attitude to Cynics. He rejected the extremes of their life-style. But from another point of view, their moral autonomy made them an ideal for which to strive. It was inevitable that Epictetus should look up to the Cynics, whose very extremism turned them into symbols of the values which he held most dear. All human beings, he thought, must strive for inner freedom; the independent and even anti-social behaviour of the Cynics expressed in a socially visible form the ultimate goal of moral life for Epictetus.

List of works

Epictetus (c. early 2nd century) Discourses, trans. W.A. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and London: Heinemann, 1925–8; trans. J. Souilhé, Epictète: Entretiens, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1941.

(Greek text with, respectively, English translation and French translation; the latter edition is the more up to date.)

Epictetus (c. early 2nd century) *The Handbook (Enchiridion)*, trans. W.A. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and London: Heinemann, 1925–8; trans. N. White, *The Handbook of Epictetus*, Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983.

(The former includes Greek text; the latter is the best available translation, with a good introduction to Epictetus.)

References and further reading

Arnold, E.V. (1911) *Roman Stoicism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

(Standard work, somewhat dated but still useful.)

Bonhöffer, A. (1890) *Epictet und die Stoa*, Stuttgart: Enke.

(Still fundamental.)

Bonhöffer, A. (1894) *Die Ethik des Stoikers Epictet*, Stuttgart: Enke.

(Still fundamental.)

Hershbell, J.P (1989) ‘The Stoicism of Epictetus: Twentieth Century Perspectives’, in W. Haase (ed.) *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Berlin: de Gruyter, II 36.3: 2, 148–163.

(Excellent literature review; includes discussion of Epictetus’ relation to other philosophers.)

Hijmans, B.L. (1959) *Askēsis: Notes on Epictetus’ Educational System*, Assen: Van Gorcum.

(Epictetus’ life and work; focuses on moral education.)

Long, A.A. (1991) ‘Representation and the Self in Stoicism’, in S. Everson (ed.) *Psychology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 102–120.

(Emphasizes the philosophical interest of Epictetus’ psychology.)