

12-1-1961

Epictetus

Arthur W. Klinck

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Klinck, Arthur W. (1961) "Epictetus," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 32, Article 76.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol32/iss1/76>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Epictetus

By ARTHUR W. KLINCK†

EDITORIAL NOTE: This article is a tribute and memorial to a colleague whom the Lord removed from a consecrated and effective life of service through a sudden and for us untimely death. It was found among his papers. It is not merely sentiment, however, that accounts for the decision to publish it. Its intrinsic value lies in its clear presentation of the basic teaching of Epictetus. It should contribute to the reader's better appreciation in particular of Paul's ethical principles. The references in the text are to volume and page of the two-volume *Loeb Classical Library* edition of Epictetus, translated by W. A. Oldfather, one of the revered teachers of the deceased.

I. INTRODUCTION

SOME time around the year A.D. 70, about the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, a lame and sickly little slave boy was added to the great household of Epaphroditus, freedman and favorite of Nero. Certainly there was nothing to recommend him physically. Yet it may be that that patience and perseverance of spirit so evident throughout his discourses had already begun to show itself in a certain nobility of demeanor which slave work could not erase and slave clothes could not conceal. Something about the boy interested the great Stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus, who admitted the boy to his school and possibly also to his immediate family — a godsend to a mind like that of Epictetus.

Little is known of his course of instruction and training, except that it was thorough. His discourses show an exceptionally deep insight into the ideas behind the words of the great philosophers. He also had a large measure of that saneness and judgment which are always unpopular with extremists, to whom vehement de-

nunciation and rash opposition to tyranny are more pleasing. Epictetus himself had no revolutionary ideas, either politically or philosophically. His ideal "Stoic" would never raise the standard of rebellion against existing authority. He would rather endure whatever inconvenience or privation or even suffering or death an unjust ruler might inflict upon him. Yet, when on suspicion of treason the philosophers were banished from Rome in the year A.D. 90, he was included in the decree. Stoically accepting the situation, he spent the rest of his life in Nicopolis, in southern Epirus, where he gathered his pupils about him, engaged them in earnest conversation, answered questions, and by precept and example, taught them his philosophy. His teaching and his pupils were his all. Neither property nor family were his. Kindly and sympathetic, yet sharply rebuking conscious error and hypocrisy, it was no wonder that the better class of his students revered him as they did.

He himself wrote nothing, but his precious philosophy was faithfully preserved for posterity by his devoted pupil, Arrian, the historian. Though one half of Arrian's notes have been lost, yet, with the *Encheiridion* and *Fragments*, an almost complete philosophical system may be pieced out. To this task we shall now turn.

II. THE PERSON OF GOD

The difficulty in describing Epictetus' personal faith in a Supreme Being arises from the fact that at times he is quite

plainly placing himself upon the level of his pupils or lightly using the popular theology of the day to illustrate his point. Such illustrations dare not, of course, be pressed, yet their frequency leads us to believe that deep in the consciousness of the philosopher was rooted the old orthodox Graeco-Roman theology with its stereotyped forms and observances, which continually cropped out in his discourses. He never broke openly with the popular religion, mentioning his own "household gods" as a matter of course. I. 125. The traditional gods of Rome he recognizes as by nature pure and undefiled." I. 411. Apparently he admits the supernatural power of divination when he says that "we do not need the entrails on their own account, but only because through them the signs are given; nor do we admire the crow or the raven, but God who gives his signs through them." I. 119. And yet he takes a somewhat dim view of the practice, admitting that in many cases it is of little value to the one seeking guidance. He even considers it a mark of cowardice on the part of one who does not dare to face the future. "What then induces us to employ divination so constantly? Cowardice, fear of the consequences. This is why we flatter the diviner, saying, 'Master, shall I inherit my father's property?' . . . Then if the diviner says that you will inherit the property you thank him as though you had received the inheritance from him." He himself recognizes that the diviner is only the instrument of God and that the divine oracle is in no way dependent on the person sacrificing or on any extraneous circumstance. Shall we, then, employ divination? Yes, he says, but "without desire or aversion just as the way-

farer asks which of two roads leads to his destination, without desire to have the right-hand or the left-hand one. So we ought to go up to God as a guide, make use of him as we do of our eyes . . . and accept the impression of precisely such things as they reveal to us." I. 257

How much of this seemingly orthodox adherence to the accepted state religion is sincere and how much is a mere gesture of respect for popular institutions which he himself does not believe in will never be known. Certain it is at least that his religion strove in every possible way to fit into the scheme of things, even to the extent of conforming to the Emperor cult, which to a man of the philosopher's insight would seem silly in the extreme. Still, his slave nature, which in spite of his apparent freedom of will and conscience crops out from time to time, would lead him to make the best of it, and not awaken antagonism to such an extent that his precious philosophy would no longer be able to do its work. It is interesting to compare the ideas of the Christians at his time, ideas diametrically opposed in this respect to the syncretistic leanings of Epictetus.

Whatever sincere respect there may have been in the system of Epictetus for the gods in the accepted sense, there is clearly evident a far greater reverence for the One God, who created and controls all. This "Ho Theos" is identical with the "Zeus," though by no means so with the "Zeus" of the classical theology with all his anthropomorphic intrigues, adulteries, vindictiveness, and downright meanness. In a way there seems to be more in common with the Yaweh of the Jews, with whom Epictetus may have had contact, or

even with the God of the Christians, though there is no direct evidence that the philosopher was conversant with the theology of either body. This "God," or "Zeus," is a lofty being to whom are attributed practically all the ideas which we associate with a Supreme Being. He is eternal, the almighty Creator, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, just, and yet a father of sinful man. And yet at times there is an added idea, which is a clear break with the Jewish or Christian system. He does not merely attribute omnipresence and immanence to his Zeus — he goes even farther and identifies him with nature in a truly pantheistic sense. "All things obey and serve the Cosmos, both the earth and the sea and the sun, and the other stars and the plants and animals of the earth. Obedient to it also is our body, both in sickness and in health, when the Cosmos wishes, both in our youth and in old age. . . . For the Cosmos is mighty and superior to us and has taken better counsel for us than we can, by uniting us together with the universe under its governance. Besides, to act against it is unreasonable and, while accomplishing nothing but a vain struggle, it involves us in pain and sorrows." II. 443. 445. Thus God is the Cosmos, an identification rare in Epictetus yet clearly expressed here. (Cf. editor's note II. 443. See also the fragment II. 445, where Epictetus quotes with approval the words of Musonius Rufus to this effect.) But one has the feeling in reading through his works that the God whom he so firmly trusts and serves, who is immanent in his own soul and in the heart of nature, is infinitely above these mere works of His hands. This will appear more fully in our discussion of his view of the work of God.

III. THE WORK OF GOD

There is no doubt in the mind of Epictetus as to the origin of the universe. "Assuredly from the very structure of all made objects we are accustomed to prove that the work is certainly the product of some artificer and has not been thrown together at random." II. 41. There is not a trace here of the doctrine of evolution, a species of which had been held before his time. In the adaptability of the various creatures to their purpose and of the organs of the human body to their specific functions, as for example, the sexual organs for reproduction through the passions and desires natural to them, II. 43, he sees not gradual development but design on the part of the Creator, who made these creatures of His so they cannot but act as they do. His argument is still valid. As a rational natural philosophy, then, it is infinitely superior to modern evolution with its prerequisite of faith regardless of inconsistencies, logical jumps, begging of the question, and unproved hypotheses.

This God made all things. He is the Creator of the sun, the moon, and all the stars. It is He who moves them in the heavens and keeps them in harmony, II. 101, so as to produce the seasons with their various fruits. All is administered well and justly by His almighty power. II. 252. "When he bids the plants flower, they flower; when he bids them put forth shoots, they put them forth; when he bids them bear fruit, they bear it; when to ripen, they ripen. And again when he bids them drop their fruit and let fall their leaves and gather themselves together and remain quiet and take their rest, they remain quiet and take their rest." II. 101. As for the animals, "they find ready pre-

pared by nature what pertains to their bodily needs — not merely food and drink, but also a bed to lie on. And they have no need of shoes, bedding or clothing, while we are in need of these things. For in the case of animals, created not for their own sake but for service, to have created them in need of anything was not beneficial." II. 108. And therefore, says Epictetus, the all-wise and almighty Creator produced them "born for service, ready for use, in need of no further attention." II. 109

But the culmination of His creative act was man. Nature, both inanimate and animate, was called into being to support man's body while it is here on earth. II. 109. To man He gave strength of body, but above all, a rational mind, so that he can conquer the forces of nature, rule the animals, and subject all to his power. Divine guidance is always at his command. To man God always supplies strength as long as it is His will that man exist. "It does not fail the blind, it does not fail the lame. Shall it fail the good man? . . . Does God so neglect his own creatures, his own servants, his witnesses whom alone he uses as examples to the uninstructed to prove that he both is and governs the universe well and does not neglect the affairs of men, and that no evil befalls a good man in life or death?" II. 235. Such, then, is God's providence, taking care of all. Yet especially of those whom He calls His own, seekers after His truth.

However, arguments against the providence of God — arguments which take the rare exception to disprove the rule — were current in the times of Epictetus just as they are today. "Yes, but what if he does not provide food?" (the seemingly

unanswerable case of God's apparent neglect of the good). The answer is ready. "Why what else but that as a good general he has sounded the recall? I obey, I follow, lauding my commander and singing hymns of praise about his deeds. For I came into the world when it so pleased him and I leave it again at his pleasure." II. 227. And so Epictetus sticks to the fact that there is perfect safety with God. A man asks himself: "Is it impossible to find a fellow-traveller who is strong, faithful, safe, free from suspicion or treachery? Thus he reflects and comes to the thought that if he attach himself to God he will pass through the world in safety. — How do you mean, attach himself? — Why, so that whatever God wills, he wills, and whatever God does not will, he also does not will." The one satisfactory companion for life is God Himself, and therefore, he admonishes, let us also be satisfied with His decisions even if for the time being we do not understand them. When we are invited to a banquet we take what is set before us. If a person should bid his host set before him fruit or cakes he would be regarded as eccentric. Yet in the world at large we ask the gods for things they do not give us, and that too when there are already many others which they have given us. II. 463

Yet the average man, says Epictetus, fails to recognize the providence of God, though the philosopher cannot understand how this can be so except it be a lack of sincerity on his part. "Why, one single gift of nature should suffice to make a man who is reverent and grateful perceive the providence of God. Do not talk to me now of great matters — take the mere fact that milk is produced from grass and

cheese from milk and wool grows from skin — who is it that has created or devised these things? 'No one,' says somebody. O the depth of man's stupidity and shamelessness!" II. 111

The average man fails to take any notice of God's providence. What, then, should be the reaction of the "good man" to the love of God manifested in and around him? In the first place he should seek to please Him, remembering that "one looks from above on what is taking place, and that you must please him rather than man." II. 205. This implies an honest desire to please God, and where there is a will there is a way. "It is done justly and graciously and fairly and restrainedly and decently, is it not also done acceptably to the gods?" II. 99. This implies obedience and submission to God's will wherever it is known. II. 512

Obedience must sometimes grow into resignation. This does not change the attitude of the philosopher. For good or for apparent evil I resign myself to His will. "It is his to set the task, mine to practice it well." I. 197. "For this is your business, to play admirably the role assigned to you, but the selection of that role is another's." II. 497

A person who thus cheerfully leaves all to God's direction will also fittingly praise Him for His goodness, for "from everything that happens in the universe it is easy for a man to find occasion to praise Providence if he has within him these two qualities, the faculty of taking a comprehensive view of what has happened in each individual instance, and the sense of gratitude." II. 41. A sample of such praise is worth quoting here. "Great is God who hath furnished us with these

instruments with which we till the earth. Great is God that he hath given us hands and the power to swallow and a belly and the power to grow unconsciously and to breathe while asleep . . . above all . . . that God has given us the faculty to comprehend these things and to follow the path of reason." II. 113. "For what else can I do, a lame old man, but sing praises to God? Were I a nightingale I would act the part of a nightingale. . . . But since I am a reasonable creature, it is my duty to praise God." II. 115

IV. MAN

Man, the center of creation, for whom all things were made—what is he really? Epictetus gives us a concise definition. "You are a little soul, carrying around a corpse." II. 471. Man consists therefore of two parts, the soul, which is the more important, and the body, which without the soul is but a dead thing. The body we have in common with the beasts. It is from the earth and will necessarily return to earth when the soul departs. That which distinguishes us from the animals is the soul. It is identical with life, which is not only from, but is actually a part of, God. I. 121. "A part of his own being which he has taken from himself and bestowed upon us." I. 121. "You are a fragment of God, you have within you a part of him, you are bearing God with you, poor wretch, and know it not!" I. 261

All human beings are created free and equal. All are constituted alike—their relationship to each other in worldly matters makes no difference. To the wealthy the philosopher says: "Do you remember what you are and over whom you rule? That they are kinsmen, that they are brothers by

nature, that they are the offspring of Zeus? —But I have a deed of sale for them and they have none for me! —Do you see whither you bend your gaze, that it is to the earth, that it is to the pit, that it is to these wretched laws of ours, the laws of the dead and not to the laws of the gods that you look?" I. 99. Here we see the vehement protest of a former slave that he is equal to his master.

So much for the essential equality of men. The subject will be touched on again in the discussion of social ethics.

Common to all men is the natural love of life. "If a man dies young, he blames the gods, because he is carried off before his time. But if a man fails to die when he is old, he too blames the gods, because when it was long since time for him to rest, he has trouble. Yet none the less when death draws near he wishes to live and sends for the doctor and bids him spare no zeal or pains. People are very strange—wishing neither to live nor die." II. 469. Anyone casually looking about him may see for himself the truth of the philosopher's words in this respect—also in the next.

In spite of the fact that man was created by God, who is Himself good, and that man has within him a fragment of God, Epictetus recognizes, though he does not adequately account for, a certain *predisposition* to evil in human nature. There is no suggestion of a fall from a created state of righteousness—to Epictetus man was created susceptible to the influence of the flesh, and it is only the good man who even partially escapes it. "It is because of this kinship of the flesh that those of us who incline toward it become wolves, faithless and treacherous and hurtful, but

most of us becomes foxes, that is to say, rascals of the animal kingdom. For what else is a slanderous and malicious man but a fox or something even more rascally and degraded? Take heed therefore and beware that you become not one of these rascally creatures." I. 27. In the discussion of this point we cannot help wishing that Epictetus had treated it fully and consistently instead of leaving only scattered references. It may have been dealt with in the half of his discourses which have been lost. And yet it seems to me from several apparently contradictory passages that he himself was not clear as to the extent of man's responsibility for his evil actions. He assumes Socrates' statement that "all men err involuntarily," I. 117, to be true, and yet he also says the following: "When we do wrong from this day forth we shall ascribe to this action no other cause than the decision of our will which led us to do it, and we shall endeavor to destroy and excise that cause more earnestly than we destroy and excise from the body its tumors and abscesses . . . and we shall no longer blame either slave or neighbor or wife or children as being cause of any evils in us. . . . We ourselves and not the things outside of ourselves are our masters." I. 89. This certainly leaves no excuse; regardless of the circumstances in which he may be placed, man is responsible for the evil he does.

This again seems quite consistent with his doctrine of the free will of man. Man has this free will by nature—it is his to do his best with. Education is necessary, or the will is easily perverted, readily turned from its divine sense of direction. To one who permits his free will to operate at random Epictetus says: "You are mad!

You are beside yourself! Do you know that freedom is a noble and precious thing? But for me to desire at haphazard that those things should happen which at haphazard seem best to me is dangerously near being . . . shameful." I. 93

After making his pupils somewhat doubtful as to the capability of their wills to prescribe for themselves, he goes on to tell how the will should be educated, in order to be completely free. "True instruction consists in learning to desire each thing as it actually happens. And how do they happen? As he that ordains them has ordained. And he has ordained that there be summer or winter, abundance or drouth, virtue and vice and all such opposites for the harmony of the whole." I. 93. The true education of man is not therefore to make him capable of changing these laws but to try to bring ourselves into harmony with them. I. 97

A man whose free will has been brought into harmony with the will of God is invincible, nothing can "dismay" him. I. 127. "How can you, tyrant, be my master? Zeus has set me free! or do you think it likely that he will let his son be made a slave? . . . You are, however, master of my dead body, take it!" I. 131. The dangerous positions into which such a man may be forced are but a test of his moral purpose. "In what role do you want the stage now? As a witness, summoned by God, God says: Go to bear witness for me, for you are worthy to be produced by me as a witness." I. 199

Such is the ideal. Can the average man attain to it? Apparently not, in this life at least. In order to find out how we stand, self-examination is necessary, an honest facing of the facts, and search after har-

mony with the will of God. We can shape our lives. "For as wood is the material of the carpenter and bronze that of the sculptor, just so each man's own life is the subject-matter of the art of living." I. 107

V. THE PURPOSE OF PHILOSOPHY

What is philosophy? Our philosopher answers: "A recognition of the conflict between the opinions of men and a search for the origin of that conflict, a condemnation of mere opinion, coupled with scepticism regarding it, and a kind of investigation to determine whether the opinion is rightly held, together with the invention of a kind of a standard of judgment as we have invented the balance for the determination of weights or the carpenter's rule for the determination of things straight or crooked. . . . Are our opinions right? . . . Why not rather those of the Syrians or Egyptians? . . . Therefore the opinion that each man holds is not a sufficient criterion for determining the absolute truth." I. 287. And therefore it seems "that the first business of philosophy is to get rid of those things which one knows, for it is impossible to get a man to begin to learn that which he thinks he knows." I. 337. For what is the final purpose of philosophy? Certainly not the things which a good many so-called philosophers strive after. "What do I care . . . whether all existing things are composed of atoms or of indivisibles or of fire or of earth? Is it not enough to learn the true nature of the good and evil and the limits of desires and aversions, of choice and refusal, and by employing these as rules, to order the affairs of our own life and dismiss the things which are beyond us?" II. 441

Briefly, then, the purpose of philosophy is to teach us how to do good and avoid evil and so bring our whole being into perfect harmony with the divine. This necessarily leads to a discussion of Epictetus' instruction in the special fields of ethics, which to him is the only worthwhile subject of serious thought.

VI. PERSONAL AND SOCIAL ETHICS

"Isn't there such a thing as reverence, faith, justice? Prove yourself to be superior in these points in order to be superior as a human being." Reverence and faith—the reaction of man towards the Supreme Being, these attitudes are placed on a par with, or possibly higher than, justice toward our fellow men. A good deal of the moralizing of today would be much more effective if this point of old Epictetus were recognized. Right actions are not something which can be veneered onto a person—no, they are an outgrowth, proceeding from the heart. Epictetus scorns the idea of some in his day that the eating or refraining from swine's flesh is the essence of holiness toward God. He shows that this is only a matter of opinion. While to some it is an act of virtue, to others it is a veritable abomination. So also with other outward observances. In themselves they mean nothing. This must have shocked the "pious" Roman, proud of his regular sacrifice and oblation, just as it shocked the punctilious Pharisee to be called a whited sepulcher full of dead men's bones, or the Antisaloon League crusader, or blue law advocate of today, to suggest that all his outward zeal does not in itself make a Christian of him. No. Epictetus is of the opinion, and rightly so, that, while true piety necessarily shows itself in ethical acts,

it is not always present in the heart of one who does seemingly good deeds.

One of the primary emotions of a true philosopher is gratitude toward God, for "from everything that happens in the universe, it is easy for a man to find occasion to praise Providence if he has within him these two qualities—the faculty of taking a comprehensive view of what has happened in each individual instance, and the sense of gratitude." A man who is lacking in this sense is missing one of the chief virtues to which he can attain.

A slave himself during his formative years, it is quite natural that Epictetus should have had personal experience with the virtues of patience, resignation, and contentment and should have given them so prominent a place in his system.

Physical pain is not regarded as an evil and is to be endured without complaint. "I have a pain in my head.—You do not have a pain in your bones, do you? Why then are you indignant? Our losses and pains have only to do with the things that we possess." I. 125. "Let us be thankful that things are not worse than they are and take what is allotted to us cheerfully. Sickness is to be borne philosophically, knowing that the purpose of our training was to be able to endure this." II. 83. Pains are only a test as to whether or not we have learned the lessons of life. And yet, in spite of his extremely stoical attitude, Epictetus allows for a little humanity. "I have a headache.—Well, do not say, 'Alas!'—I have an earache.—Well, do not say, 'Alas!'—And I am not saying that it is not permissible to groan, only do not groan in the center of your being." I. 127. After all, the body or the condition of the body matters little. "For the future, put

your confidence in these doctrines and walk about erect, free, not putting your trust in the size of your body like an athlete, for you ought not to be invincible in the way an ass is invincible." I. 127. The solution of the problem of pain and sickness lies in reason and reflection, not in brute strength, and therefore the moral strength of the Stoic finds expression in his patience with respect to bodily pain and resignation when all is hopeless.

This attitude must lead to contentment, especially since we know that Someone is taking care of us. Here Epictetus' ideas run nearly parallel to those of the New Testament. "If God has given you a great deal, be content therewith—if but little, do not desire more. Be willing to practice contentment with what has been given you." I. 13. A truly instructed philosopher has learned to desire each thing exactly as it happens. "And how do they happen? As he that ordains them has ordained." I. 93. "Therefore be satisfied. The origin of sorrow is this, to wish for something which does not come to pass," I. 175, a condition of mind in which the true Stoic should never allow himself to be.

As in the case of these virtues, so in the other phases of self-control a man should always be master of the situation and not, like an animal, yield to every whim. "For animals it is sufficient to eat and to drink and rest and procreate and whatever else of the things which within their own province the animals severally do, while to us, to whom has been made the additional gift of the faculty of understanding, these things are no longer sufficient." II. 43. But in general these may be used if not abused. So also with earthly goods—use them, but do not set your heart on them. ("The love

of money is the root of all evil," has rather close parallels in Epictetus.)

Personal purity is strongly advocated by Epictetus. His first consideration is, of course, the purity of the soul. "The prime and highest purity is that which appears in the soul, and the same is true of impurity. But you would not find the same impurity in the soul as you would in the body, and as being soul, what else would you find impure about it than that which makes it dirty for the performance of its duties? Nothing but its enormous decisions. It follows therefore that impurity of soul consists in bad judgments, and purification consists in creating the proper kind of judgments within it . . . this is the only soul which is secure against confusion and pollution." II. 413

Closely connected with purity of soul is purity of body. With Epictetus cleanliness is a virtue. "Not even the animals which associate with men are dirty, the horse or the highly-bred dog . . . no, but the hog and the miserable rotten geese and worms and spiders, the creatures farthest removed from associations with human beings." II. 421. But man is far above even the cleanest of animals in this respect, thinks the philosopher. "No one could question that the instinct of cleanliness is most assuredly a necessary element and that man is distinguished by this quality if anything. When therefore we see some animal cleaning itself, we are in the habit of saying in surprise that it is acting like a human being. And again, if one finds fault with some beast, we are in the habit of saying immediately as though in apology, 'Well, of course it is not a human being.'" II. 411. (The editor notes here an incorrect generalization. "Many animals, like cats, and

the filidae in general, moles, most birds, snakes, etc., are distinctly more cleanly than any but the most civilized man. Epictetus was clearly not strong on natural history." II. 408. *Note.*) However the comparison may fail, there is no doubt as to his sincerity in advocating cleanliness at a time when the excesses, probably oriental in origin, to which Christian asceticism soon went in regard to despising cleanliness, already seem to have begun to manifest themselves at his time among enthusiastic young Stoics and would-be Cynics. It is interesting to note how Epictetus, simple and austere as he was, vigorously maintained the validity of the older Greek and Roman feeling in this regard. (II. 412. *Note.*) Filthiness is allowable under no circumstances. Simple and rough clothes are to be worn, it is true, but these are to be kept looking well. But "where can I find a rough cloth that looks well? — Man, you have water, wash it!" II. 421

As examples of personal cleanliness, Epictetus even brings in the two "saints" of his system, Socrates and Diogenes! True, he says, they have been maligned as filthy persons. It is even said that Socrates did not bathe at all regularly, and a good many young men believe that they are following this example by being personally filthy. Nothing could be farther from the truth. We have the witness of contemporaries of both that they were always sweet and clean and that people even sought out their company for this reason. I. 417. (It is the writer's opinion that Epictetus, in order to gain the added prestige of the great philosophers for his system, here as elsewhere stretches the truth to fit his argument. The editor suggests that Soc-

rates may have bathed frequently at home in cold water while he neglected the warm public baths. [II. 417. *Note.*]) "It is impossible that something dirty and needing to be cleaned off should not be left on the person from our sweat and the pressure of our clothes. . . . For that reason we have water, oil, hands, a towel, a strigil (scraper), and every other kind of equipment to cleanse the body. It was impossible that some impurity from eating should not be left on our teeth—for that reason nature says: wash your teeth! Why? In order that you may be a human being and not a beast or a pig. . . . You think you are worthy of the smell? Very well, be worthy of it. Do you think that those who sit by your side, those who recline beside you, those who kiss you are worthy of it too? Bah! go away into the wilderness somewhere or other, a place worthy of you, and live alone, smelling yourself! For it is only right that you should enjoy your uncleanliness all by yourself. . . . It is a characteristic of one who has grown rotten through and through!" II. 413—415. This sounds as if with Epictetus "cleanliness is next to godliness."

Purity of mind and body in another sense is put forth as an essential of the true philosopher. Epictetus advocates sexual purity, which he says was ignored or treated lightly by men of his age generally as it is undoubtedly becoming more and more so in our own day. Not only impure deeds but impure thoughts are a violation of the deity within us. "It is within yourselves that you hear him, and do you not see that you are defiling him by impure thoughts and filthy actions? Yet in the presence of even an image of God you would not do any of the things that you

are doing. But when God himself is present within you, seeing and hearing everything, are you not ashamed to be thinking and doing these things? . . . Oh, insensible of your own nature and object of God's wrath!" I. 263. To the adulterer he says that he ought to be cast out on the dung-hill as a useless vessel — "Whom are you harming? The man of fidelity, of self-respect, of piety . . . also neighborly feeling, friendship, the state." I. 235. "Women, it is true, are common property! And the little pig is common property of the invited guests, but when portions have been assigned, if it so please you, approach and snatch up a portion of the guest who reclines at your side, steal it secretly or slip in your hand and glut your greed, and if you cannot tear off a piece of the meat, get your fingers greasy and lick them! . . . So with women, when the lawgiver, like a host at a banquet has apportioned them, look for your own portion." I. 237. Plato, he says, is willfully misunderstood by the women of Rome, "for they pay attention only to the words and not to the meaning of the man. The fact is, he does not bid people marry and live together, one man with one woman, and then go on to advocate the community of woman, but he first abolishes that kind of marriage altogether and introduces another kind in its place." I. 460. Here, as always, Epictetus tries to fit in the ideas of philosophers with the existing laws of the state, adapting his philosophy to the practical needs of the ordinary man. (See *Note* I. 460.)

Can personal purity be attained? Not perfectly, says Epictetus, yet an approach to it can be made by constant vigilance and by "setting your desire upon becoming pure in the presence of your pure self and

God." I. 355. In this way "in your sex life preserve purity as far as you can[!] before marriage, and if you indulge, take only those privileges which are lawful." II. 519. This statement weakens and even destroys his whole structure of sexual purity. For if certain sexual indulgences before marriage are lawful, what are they? Adultery with a married woman is ruled out, of course. Fornication? The keeping of a mistress? The various forms of the Greek vice? Apparently these are permissible in cases of necessity. It is the rule rather than the exception for young men to indulge in these shameful practices, so much so that "you should not make yourself offensive, or censorious to those who do indulge, nor make frequent mention of the fact that you do not yourself indulge." II. 519. Here he finds himself confronted by a solid wall of habit and tradition and tries to make the best of it, instead of, like St. Paul to his young helper Timothy, telling them to "flee youthful lusts" and showing them the inexhaustible source of strength against these temptations in the power of God to create in them a clean heart. Compromise is dangerous in any case — here it is fatal!

An uncompromising honesty in all the affairs of daily life is a prime virtue of the Stoic. He warns his pupils not to be "lions in the schoolroom and foxes outside." II. 345. Courage of his convictions and an absolute avoidance of hypocrisy, no matter what the circumstances may be, are essential to the philosopher. "When you do a thing which you have made up your mind ought to be done, never try not to be seen doing it, even though most people are likely to think unfavorably of it. If, however, what you are doing is not right, avoid the deed altogether. But if it is right, why

fear those who rebuke you wrongly?" II. 523

Modesty is a virtue in which the philosopher ought to surpass the uneducated. Honor, fame, the immortality of his name among those of his city, he counts as less than nothing. A man comes to Epictetus regarding a priesthood which he is trying to secure. "Drop the matter," says Epictetus, "you will be spending a great deal to no purpose."—"But my name will remain after me."—"Inscribe it on a stone, and it will remain after you."—"But I shall wear a crown of gold!"—"If you desire a crown at all, take a crown of roses, you will look better in that!" I. 137. To another he says, "Why do you walk around in our presence as though you had swallowed a spit?" I. 143. Why so self-important? Man should look not only on what he has done successfully but also on what he has neglected, and so by a daily self-examination keep himself always in a state of true humility.

As we should despise the honors that may be heaped upon us by our fellow men, so also with dishonor. If disgrace follows a voluntary act of our own it is something to be ashamed of—not the disgrace itself, but the moral lapse which brought on the disgrace. But "is anything disgraceful to you which is not your own doing, for which you are not responsible, which has befallen you accidentally, as a headache or a fever? . . . If your parents were poor or if they have left their estate to others . . . what follows? Ought you to wish for what is not given you or be ashamed when you fail to get it?" II. 229

A philosophically educated person will constantly keep his mental and moral equilibrium and not be swayed by the emotions

which rule the conduct of the ordinary man. It is true that natural affection cannot and should not be entirely avoided. "If once a child is born it is no longer in our power not to love it or care for it." I. 151. "A person who altogether neglects his offspring is below the animals." A sheep does not abandon its young, nor a wolf. Shall a man abandon his? I. 151. And yet, when God removes the object of one's love, the loss should be borne philosophically. Never say about anything "I have lost it," but only, "I have given it back." Is your child dead? She has been given back. I have had my farm taken away. Very well, this too has been given back. Yet it was a rascal that took it away!—But what concern is it of yours for whose instrumentality the Giver called for its return? So long as he lets you keep it, take care of it as a thing which is not your own, as travelers treat an inn. II. 491. Family or possessions, all may be withdrawn by the Giver without a murmur from the ideal Stoic, because his heart is not set on them.

However, Epictetus does not go as far as some of the extreme Stoics in advocating an absolute apathy. He leaves room for brotherly love, even toward those we do not know, toward mankind in general. "For what is pleasanter to a man who loves his fellow men than the sight of large numbers of them?" II. 323. He does not advocate seclusion for his pupils as Christian asceticism was soon to do. Mix with the crowd, but keep your head. It is natural to pity your needy fellow men and extend a helping hand, so much so that it is the mark of the truly contemptible man that he is incapable of helping anyone. II. 447. Still, pity must remain within proper

bounds, like all other emotions. Sympathize, comfort and console, yet do not groan "from the center of your being!" (This is a rather different kind of compassion from that shown by Jesus at the grave of Lazarus. Pressed, it would make for inhumanity and hypocrisy, but Epictetus apparently only meant it insofar as we are not to let our sympathy get the better of our judgment and will.)

In his relations to his fellow men a man will often be tempted to be angry. This natural tendency is bitingly censured by Epictetus. "When you attack someone with vehemence and threatening, remember to tell yourself beforehand that you are a tame animal . . . and then you will never do anything fierce and so will come to the end of your life without having to repent or be called to account." II. 471. "Why, man, if you must needs be affected in a way that is unnatural in your relation to another, pity him rather, do not hate him. . . . Drop this readiness to take offense and this spirit of hatred!" I. 123. The cure for anger he sees in not setting our heart on things of this life. "Stop admiring your clothes, and you will not be angry at the man who steals them. Stop admiring your wife's beauty, and you will not be angry at her adulterers! Rather be angry at yourself for the lack of control of your own emotions." Pity should displace anger. "As we pity the blind and the halt, why do we not pity those who have been made blind or halt in their governing faculties?" I. 179. If you yield to wrath you are putting yourself on their level. My enemy's anger does not harm me—it makes no impression whatever. "Take your stand by a stone and revile it, and what effect will you produce? If then a man listens like a stone what pro-

fit is there to the reviler?" I. 165. Even a mean and persistent reviler can do me no harm—rather, good results. He becomes one who "trains me for my contest. He exercises my patience, my disposition, my gentleness." II. 121. Is your neighbor bad? Yes, for himself, but for me he is good . . . he exercises my fair-mindedness. II. 123

On the basis of the above we at once see that revenge would be ruled out absolutely. "Am I to injure the man that injures me? First call to mind what injury is, and then it comes to something like this: Since so-and-so has injured himself by doing me some wrong. . . . Why do we not represent the case to ourselves in such light as this?" I. 281. On this point Epictetus now goes too far, and, in the interest of avoiding anger toward the criminal, loses sight of his baneful influence on society. "Ought a murderer or adulterer be put to death? We should rather ask: 'Ought not this man be put to death who is in a state of error or delusion about the greatest matters and is in a state of blindness . . . in the judgment which distinguishes between good and evil?' And if you put it this way you will realize how inhuman a sentiment it is that you are uttering." I. 123. Here he sounds like a modern sentimentalist, altogether losing sight of the fact that the upholding of the law requires the punishment of the lawbreaker regardless of sentiment (cf. St. Paul's attitude concerning the duty of the government to "execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.") And yet Epictetus requires of his followers an absolute obedience to law. "Who was it that sent the order? Our prince, our general or the law of our State? Give it to me then, for I must always obey the law in every particular." II. 219. (His attitude here re-

minds me of that of the conscientious American who will not break the law himself, but sees no responsibility for himself to help to keep others from breaking it.)

Such then are the ethical principles of Epictetus in their most important aspects. In general his rules are sound. In some few instances they incline to the sentimental rather than to the practical.

VII. THE PROBLEM OF DEATH

There is one more problem, which, while partly touching the field of ethics, may be handled better separately—the problem of death.

"What is death? A bug-bear! Turn it about and learn what it is and see: it does not bite. The paltry body must be separated from the bit of spirit either now or later, just as it existed apart from it before. For if it be not separated now it will be later." I. 218—219. The mere separation of the spirit from the body. Why should that be something dreadful? It is rather the fear of death which is dreadful, which makes men incapable of performing their proper functions. "Our confidence ought to be toward death, and our caution toward the fear of death." I. 217. And anyway, "not death is dreadful, but a shameful death." I. 215. And there is another factor to be considered. Are we not altogether under the jurisdiction of a benevolent Providence? No evil will ever befall us in life or in death. "Why, death is actually something necessary, so that the revolution of nature may be accomplished," I. 219. "Therefore make no tragic parade of the matter but speak of it as it is. It is now time for the material of which you are constituted to be restored to those elements

from which it came, and what is terrible about that?" I. 365. Even the *means* of death is of no importance whatever. "Once that I have learned that what is born must also perish, so that the world may not stand still nor be hampered, it makes no difference to me whether a fever shall bring the consummation, or a tile, or a soldier." II. 371

So death is *merely the door* leading out of this life—the agency causing death is no concern of mine. How, then, about suicide? Epictetus speaks of the "Open Door," as have many before and since. Yet he does not advocate suicide except as a last resort. "Let me not give up my life irrationally, faint-heartedly or on some casual pretext. For again God does not so desire, for he has need of such a universe and of such men as I to go to and fro upon it. But if he gives the signal to retreat as he did to Socrates, I must obey him who gives the signal as I would a general." I. 195. "When things seem to you to have reached that unbearable stage, merely say, 'I won't play any longer' and take your departure, but if you stay, stop lamenting" I. 157.

Whether by disease, accident, old age, or an unavoidable suicide, death is inevitable. It is the one great fact which cannot be denied. The means may vary, but the fact remains. Therefore the greatest problem of man is to face this greatest of facts and learn how to die. "Let others practice lawsuits, others problems, others syllogisms; do you practise how to be chained, to be racked, to be exiled, how to die. Do all these things with patience, with trust in him who has deemed you worthy of this position." I. 225. Be it life or death for you, make either worthy of a philosopher!

VIII. THE "IDEAL CYNIC"

In all men there is a natural desire to be free, yet there are various definitions of freedom. Epictetus says, "He is free for whom all things happen according to his moral purpose." I. 91. While it is only God who can set us free, II. 367, this is always done by the same means, by education, and education is within the reach of all. The free man is the educated one. I. 221. He is "educated so that nothing outside of his moral purpose dismays him or leads him into situations which cannot but cause him harm. He is free to live as he wills who is subject neither to compulsion nor hindrance nor force, whose choices are unhampered, whose desires attain their ends, whose aversions do not fall into what they would avoid." II. 245. "Whosoever is rid of sorrows, tears and turmoils, this man is by the selfsame course rid also of slavery." I. 221. Only a good man can attain to this state where everything without exception works out in harmony with his wishes. "Who wishes to live in error? — No one. — Who wishes to be an adulterer, a deceiver, impetuous, unjust, unrestrained, pervish, abject? — No one. — Therefore there is no bad man who lives as he wills, and accordingly no bad man is free." II. 247. He is under the control of desires, passions. If not outwardly a servant, though he appear in public as a free and respected citizen, yet at heart he is a slave to his evil nature. Still moral improvement is possible even for one already far gone. It is possible for everyone to become free, in a measure at least, if he will only strive toward perfection. No one reaches it in this life, yet all should hold it up as a model. This model Epictetus personifies as the "Cynic," who is a perfect

man. Socrates and Diogenes approached perfection in some respects, yet were not perfect. The attainment of perfection requires time and infinite patience. There is no royal road to success here. Study, an ethical life, honest self-examination, a constant striving toward all that is noble—these will go far toward the attainment of a likeness to the "Ideal Cynic." I. 107 to 109

IX. ESTIMATE OF THE SYSTEM OF EPICTETUS

There is much in the system of Epictetus which we can commend. It is decent and law-abiding, not eccentric and offensive as had been that of many of the Cynics. It is vastly superior to mere sophism and to a great deal of the popular thinking of the day. Honestly seeking to inculcate the virtues, which in most cases are correctly outlined, it was bound to be an influence making for outward decency. It is a religion of conviction, of courage, of self-respect. As such we are bound to respect it, whether we agree with all of its tenets or not. Whatever criticism we may make with regard to deficiencies or weaknesses, we honor the philosopher himself for his evident honesty and sincerity. To some of the deficiencies we shall now turn.

In spite of the many things to recommend it, Epictetus' system influenced but few directly. It did not have the fervent appeal to the masses which Christianity made everywhere—only the serious, responsible type would be likely to respond. There was no final, infallible authority, the word of a Christ as passed on by his apostles—no authority except the fallible "ego" and the equally imperfect "saints" of antiquity. There was no ideal of perfection—no one in whom all virtues were

combined in their perfect state—no "sinless one" to whom the pupil could be referred as an example of what a life should be. The attempt to use Socrates and Diogenes completely failed of its purpose, even though distance did lend enchantment to the view. There was no background of history on the basis of which moral and religious truths could be taught, and so the system was pedagogically inferior to Christianity with its unlimited field of sacred biography and history in the Old and New Testaments. It was lacking in mysticism, a factor which is stronger in religion than most of us are willing to admit. We can see the tendency today, especially in the nonliturgical Protestant denominations, with the cold, intellectual atmosphere, the aspect of a meeting house or a lecture room instead of a house of God, the playing down of faith, and the attempted substitution of reason in even the smallest particular. Do these deficiencies have to be compensated for in some way in the case of both pastors and people,

perhaps by the childish solemnity of the secret orders, with their "Supreme Dragon," "Exalted Cyclops," "Grand Master," and other high sounding titles, elaborate ritual, mystic rites, and (fake) traditional antiquity? One wonders.

Epictetus' Stoic system could not cope with the conviction and fervor of early Christianity: the end was inevitable. Could it have stood against the Christianity of modern liberalism with its syncretism, its lack of conviction on any vital point? Remove divine inspiration and miracle, a virgin-born God-man, and the vicarious atonement; substitute for the fervent preaching of St. Paul or the quiet assurance of St. John a groping theology of doubts and probabilities and compromise; put this washed-out type of thinking back 2,000 years, and let it engage with Stoicism in the war for existence, and in my mind there is no doubt whatever as to the final victory of the Greek philosophy or the swamping of both under some worthier religion.