On the Ideas in Epictetus's Discourses III, 16

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1 The Problem

Epictetus's discourses III, 16 speaks of the dangers of associating with people of lower character or life-focus and being influenced by their behavior, thoughts, or mode of being, thus falling from the standards or ideals you claim to or hold yourself to [1]. It includes a warning to avoid, or at least be careful of associating with such people. I have some qualms with this line of thought, though it tolds some intrinsic appeal for me, too. Interestingly, this concept is also present in (especially modern evangelical) Judeo-Christian teaching, too. The benefits of adhering to these admonitions are obvious: it is easier to live up to and live out your ideals without the vitiating influence of others who do not hold the same principles. The downside, often discussed in Christian circles, is the lost opportunity of evangelizing to the others. Prostelyzation is not evidently a focus of Stoicism as it is in Christianity.

2 Analysis

The reason for the danger of being swayed away from the path is an interesting point to consider. Epictetus blames the danger on a lack of conviction about the principles. He seems to indicate that the 'worldly' people act with more conviction, and the hypothetical Stoic student is swayed by the force of their greater self-consistency and conviction in their beliefs. The warning to stay away from outsiders, then, is somewhat tempered by the condition: '**IF** you are weak, **IF** your conviction is insufficient, avoid such people.' The warning is presented as fairly comprehensive, though. This is, perhaps, a good time to point out that the Stoic's ideal or object of admiration, the Stoic sage, is, I believe, presented essentially as an abstract entity. No individual, I think, is generally regarded as a sage, only the complete embodiment of Stoic ideals. It is acknowledged that every person will make mistakes and fall short of the Stoic standard, and so no one person is a perfect role model. Perhaps this loophole, then, would be for a 'sage' only. I think, though, there is an acknowledgement of the possibility of more freely associating with outsiders if one's conviction and strength in the skills and principles of Stoicism is sufficient. From the last few lines of this section, it is clear that this admonition is directed to students in Epictetus's school, and is thus most applicable to students, who may not be wholly dedicated to Stoic thought (not to say I am, or that the exception applies to me).

I haven't as much analysis for the Christian parallel; I think the presentation of this idea was shallower, or I wasn't mature enough to grasp the depth or the meaning of the teaching quite as well. As I mentioned before, the Christian teaching is more strongly tempered by the accompaning (or similarly forceful or canonical) teaching to evangelize to the others. The Christian teaching is more focused on avoiding the corrupting influence while also trying to reach the others. One should mostly avoid casually spending time with others in circumstances or activities that would corrupt oneself. Stoicism is much more ambivalent, in that it does not primarily concern itself with the thoughts or behavior of others, but is still concerned with not being slowly degraded by the implicit values and interests of the others.

3   My Qualms

My concern is that such a warning, if taken to heart, could lead to social isolation and weakening or loss of social ties with others, and the loss of affection for others. Christianity would take the tack of trying to be a positive influence on the others, but also recognizing one's weakness and avoiding compromising situations. Soicism is similar, but places less value on relationships to others. I think it might be considered more heartless, in that it doesn't try to hard to pursue or convince others, and encourages its followers to concern themselves primarily with their own internal lives and their characters, abandoning negative influences if necessary and not sourcing significant value or pleasure from personal relationships. In both cases, a sense of self-awareness, sober evaluation of one's conviction and character, and self-evaluation of strength and succeptibility to tarnishing is the ultimate mediator. Still, I think it can be dangerous to hold *too* closely to a system of ideals that would isolate and cut off personal relationships, though the point made by Epictetus (and others) is quite well taken. I think one of the dangers for me is to be totally absorbed or consumed by pursuit of an ideal or ideaology by introspection, study, and doctrine, missing the learning that comes by experience and active learning.

4   Wrap-Up

Know thyself. Recognize your weaknesses. Know what is important to you: settle your principles, goals, and metrics of evaluation. Do not be swayed by the choices of others. Others may (will) value things differenly from you. Recognize that the choices of others (everyone) are determined by their values. Continuously evaluate your actions in terms of your values. Acknowledge when you are weak or when some situation is greater than you, or when it is not a circumstance in which you can act consistently with your character and ideals, and leave.

References

(1)   Epictetus; Dobbin, R. F., *Discourses and selected writings*; Penguin classics; Penguin: London, 2008.