**Epictetus – Life and Philosophy**

Epictetus was a 1st Century Stoic Philosopher whose writings, some have thought, contain the key to happiness. He was born in 55 C.E. and died in 135 C.E. Similar to Plato, “Epictetus” is not actually Epictetus’s birth name, his birth name is unknown. “Epictetus,” however, means “acquired” or “gained.” He lived his early life in Rome as a slave, where he studied Stoic philosophy underneath Musonius Rufus with the permission of his master. As a slave, Epictetus was tortured by his master, and at some point became lame (Seddon). Sometime after the death of Nero, Musonius freed his student Epictetus (probably around the age 13-16), and Epictetus eventually began teaching philosophy himself. Epictetus continued to teach philosophy in Rome until he was banished from Italy by Emperor Domitian in 89 C.E., at which point he moved to Northwestern Greece and remained there for the rest of his life. In Northwestern Greece he established a school called “the Hospital,” where he shared his philosophy with many people to help ‘cure’ them of their grief and suffering (Reeve and Miller 443).

Epictetus was a practical philosopher, which means that his teachings aimed at practical ideas one could use in everyday life to achieve happiness. This is an important distinction to make between Epictetus and other more well-known philosophers, such as Aristotle and Plato. Whereas many ancient philosophers considered philosophy to be a practice aimed at finding something theoretical such as ultimate truth or perhaps virtue, Epictetus says Philosophy is a way of life aimed at finding happiness (Reeve and Miller 443).

Two of Epictetus’s known works remain intact today, and they are called *The Discourses* and *The Enchiridion* (translates to “The Handbook”). Epictetus, like Socrates, actually never wrote anything down himself, but one his students named Arrian wrote down the things he said and compiled them into these two works. The Discourses is a longer work, which is thought to be a simple compilation of notes on Lecture’s given by Epictetus, and the Enchiridion is a compilation of many different statements designed to be a practical guide or *handbook* to everyday life for the common person. Some think that the Enchiridion is actually just sections of the Discourses refined and summarized (Seddon). Either way, the result is a handbook that may in fact hold the key to happiness for every person, regardless of race, gender, situation, or even time.

Epictetus’s philosophy can be summarized by the following passage, which is unsurprisingly the first treatise in his Enchiridion:

*“Some things are up to us and some are not up to us… The things that are up to us by nature free, unhindered, and impeded; the things that are not up to us are weak, enslaved, hindered, and not our own. So remember, if you think that things naturally enslaved are free or that things not your own are your own, you will be thwarted, miserable, and upset… But if you think that only what is yours is yours… then no one will ever coerce you… you will not do a single thing unwillingly… you will have no enemies, and no one will harm you, because you will not be harmed at all.”* (White 11)

At the outset of his solution for happiness, Epictetus breaks up *all of reality* into two kinds of things, things that we can control, and things that we cannot control, with most of the physical world existing as a part of the latter. Epictetus says that our grief comes from a desire or effort to control things that are outside of our control, and that the key to happiness is ultimately to *only try to control what you can control.* This is the nature of stoic philosophy, which hinges on the realization that most of the world is outside of your control, and the only controllable thing in this world, is your own mind and actions.

Epictetus explains this idea to the extreme, saying that the only thing we can control is actually our views, and perhaps our actions which follow from our views. Epictetus would say that the reason we fear death, or are saddened by the death of a loved one, is simply because we are trying to control their death, we want them to stay alive when it is out of our control if they will die or not. He would say that the minute you say to yourself, ‘I don’t want my loved one to die,’ that you are trying to control death, which is uncontrollable, and you will fail and be miserable. Isn’t this human nature though, to want our loved ones to escape, or at least delay, the terrible fate that is death? Epictetus challenges us with the following from his Enchiridion:

*“For example, death is nothing dreadful, but instead the judgement about death that it is dreadful—that is what is dreadful.”* (White 13)

“Death is nothing dreadful.” This statement, although it may seem a bit controversial to some nowadays, was a very common idea in the ancient world, especially amongst stoic philosophers such as Epictetus. Once again Epictetus points out that the source of all of our grief is that we think things which are not bad to be terrible and try to control them, even though we can’t.

Epictetus will, however, take this idea one step further, and propagate it not only as a way to avoid pain and suffering, but to find happiness. Epictetus will actually say that when terrible things happen, not only should we recognize that they are: First, out of our control. Second, not actually “terrible” things, but rather just things that happen that we think are terrible. But also he will say that we need to third actually *be happy* about the “terrible” things that happen because they are good, and *want* them to happen. This is the key to happiness. To understand the reason that Epictetus says we should be happy, even wanting, about the things that happen, we turn to the theological side of Stoicism.

Stoics, such as Epictetus, believe that the universe is determined by a divine and supreme Fortune or Fate, and that ultimately everything in the universe happens according to this supreme Fate. Epictetus will actually go on to say that since everything happens as is designed by Fate, and since Fate is divine and can do no wrong, then nothing bad actually ever happens in the world (White 19). But rather, everything that happens in the world is by nature *good,* and we should be *happy* about things that happen, including but not limited to: physical injuries that we incur, natural disasters, and the death of our loved ones. This, as is apparent, is where Epictetus’ views start to become more controversial.

*“Do not seek events to happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well.”* (White 13)

Once again from his enchiridion, when you substitute parts of this passage with modern circumstances, but maintain its integrity, its controversial nature becomes quite clear:

*‘If your family member dies of cancer, do not want them to stay alive and be cured of cancer, but instead want them to die as they did, painfully, and your life will go well.’*

Yes, this replacement may be dramatized, but it serves to illustrate the extreme nature of this idea. The ridiculous part of this idea though, is that even though it seems crazy and almost heartless, is that *it actually works*. If you were to change your own ideas so that you *want* things to happen *as they do*, then you will never be disappointed, because nothing will ever happen that you did not *want* to happen. It is a crazy and radical idea, but if it provides one happiness in a seemingly dreadful situation at no one’s expense, then who has the right to speak against it?

All in all, I believe Epictetus to be a very wise man, with very good advice for being happy, although sometimes it may be slightly extreme. So, to recap, Epictetus was a slave boy who grew up to teach stoic philosophy, and the key to happiness as he taught it is to never try to control anything that we can’t. Rather, we should try to change our views to try and *want* things to happen as they do, that way we can never be upset that something did not go our way. A good phrase that Epictetus would recommend is the Serenity Prayer, used by Alcoholics Anonymous and many other help groups to aid in combating addiction:

*“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change what I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”* (Niehbur)

An idea that would definitely be supported by Epictetus. A stoic idea, the very key to happiness.

# **Works Cited**

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