

“Takeaways” by Mark Stary (Updated: 1/8/21)

Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life

by A.A. Long (Oxford, 2002)

#1 TEACHING STYLE

Epictetus likes to exaggerate and play himself down. Although he has no time for discourse that is merely elegant and flowery, he is a virtuoso user of colloquial Greek. Unlike his students, however, he probably did not have the elaborate training in schoolbook rhetoric that was the staple of Roman education. While his discourses are replete with allusions to Greek myths, he draws on figures and situations familiar to anyone with a smattering of culture. (Pg. 13)

Evidently Musonius taught Epictetus how to use black humor and hyperbole to make a philosophical point. We can also gather from this passage that Musonius included logic in his curriculum. That is not evident from the digest of his lectures, but the Suda Lexicon describes him a ‘Logician and Stoic.’ (Pg. 15)

The schools he explicitly attacks are Epicureanism and Skepticism, both Pyrrhonian and Academic. He shows no interest in technical science, and he strongly distances his philosophical project from the rhetorical and cultural embellishments offered by rhetoricians and grammarians. (Pg. 16-17)

He believes, as leading philosophers before him had believed, that human beings are born with all that they need, in terms of basic capacities, to understand the world, and that impediments to living well can be corrected or at least ameliorated by a combination of the right doctrines and unremitting self-discipline. (Pg. 17)

At Epictetus’ date (and if fact, from long before) philosophy in general was taken to be a medicine for alleviating the errors and passions that stem from purely reactive and conventional attitudes. (Pg. 18)

Epictetus remarks on how, at dawn, he reminds himself of ‘what author (or text) I need to read over’. He evidently set his students certain reading assignments, for them to present and interpret in class, as a basis for group discussion and his own commentary. (Pg. 44)

From beginning to end the theme of most discourses is developed through a rapid inter-change of questions and answers, interspersed with imperatives, short expositions, anecdotes, examples, and quotations. By speaking in this way, Epictetus involves his audience continuously. His questions are ways of getting them to interrogate themselves, and his responses or illustrations are equally designed to shatter complacency and effect a transformation of consciousness. (Pg. 61)

If he is right, human beings all agree in wanting to flourish, to have their desires for happiness fulfilled, to possess what is really good and to avoid what is really harmful, and to favour justice over injustice. His task, as he sees it, is to show how people’s particular value judgments are typically at odds with their ethical preconceptions, and thus people fail to achieve the happiness and correct behavior they naturally want. (Pg. 82)

Actually, however, Epictetus is consistently reticent and self-deprecating about his own competence and identity as a philosopher. (Pg. 93)

We might say that Epictetus combines natural theology with theological poetics. By using numerous metaphors drawn from social and political life, he offers his students an understanding of how human beings should see themselves in relation to God. (Pg. 168)

Every situation, he proposes, mundane or exceptional, is equally germane to his equally germane to his students' performance of Stoicism and to their showing in action what they have learnt as distinct from 'spewing out' their lessons. (Pg. 243)

Epictetus' philosophy of action is designed to equip his students with an art of living for all seasons: 'It is circumstances that reveal people' (1.24.1). (Pg. 244)

A reader who did not know the antecedent Stoic tradition would form the impression that cheerfulness and family affection are central to the outlook that Epictetus hopes to encourage in his students even though their achievement of these attitudes will not strictly qualify for the 'good feelings' of the ideal Stoic. (Pg. 245)

I graduated college with a teaching degree in art education. I've always enjoyed teaching (I teach therapy dog classes and art in the summer), but my heart belongs to the 'art' more than the teaching (and the daily tasks teaching entails). I found these passages on Epictetus' teaching style fascinating. I think interjecting humor (sometimes even self deprecating) and not using high brow language can be a very successful way to get through to students. Those techniques (to me) make the lessons and teachers more human and relatable. Also as a teacher, I also believe that it is important that one is passionate about the subject one is teaching. Epictetus' advice to read in the morning to keep fresh on the subject (music, art, philosophy, etc.) and also showing how the lessons may be incorporated in a positive way to daily life (I believe) is also important.

#2. GOD

Hence Stoics take God/reason/fate to be present everywhere, but they do not take this fact to collapse the obviously vast differences between the kinds of things that make up the universe, or to reduce human beings to the level of cogs in a machine. As human beings, we share in the structure characteristic of minerals, the vegetative capacities belonging to plants, and the sentient and goal-directed mobility of animals in general. Yet, none of these things constitutes the nature distinctive of our species. That nature expresses itself in our minds, thanks to which we have the capacity to discover where human beings fit within the cosmic order and to organize our lives as a community of persons, cooperating in social objectives and respecting one another as rational participants in the scheme of things. This nature of ours equips us to become reflective, active, and confident contributors to every situation we encounter. (Pg. 21)

Stoicism, then, views the world as a system that is both deterministic and providential. God, the omnipresent active principle, establishes and implements everything in a causal sequence that leaves no room for events to occur otherwise than the way they do, though it does leave room (here things get complicated) for us to be the agents of our own decisions and hence answerable, praiseworthy, or

blamable for what we think and do. Yet, because God is taken to be supremely rational and benevolent, the casual sequence is also and no less basically the fulfillment of divine providence. Hence no state of the world at any time could have been different from what it is, nor could it have been better planned than the way it is. (Pg. 22)

In his ubiquitous references to God or Zeus, Epictetus has in mind the creator of the world and all its natural contents. To that divine being, just like adherents of the great monotheistic religions, he ascribes wondrous providence, supreme goodness, and omniscience. Epictetus' divinity is the maker of the best of all possible worlds. Conformity to God and imitation of God are expressions that he uses in characterizing human excellence; for God is the paradigm of the the virtues human beings are equipped to achieve. (Pg. 144-145)

For Epictetus, as for all Stoics, our minds are literally 'offshoots' of God, parts of God that God has assigned to be the mind or self of each person. (Pg. 145)

The Stoic outlook on God is this -worldly in the sense that there is no supernatural domain for which we should be preparing ourselves in this life, no 'end of days' when lives will be judged. The life that we have now is what requires all of our attention; the only punishment for those who neglect the principles of Stoicism, Epictetus says, is to 'stay just as they are', emotionally disturbed and discontented. (Pg. 146)

God is the formative principles of stones, plants, and non-humans as well as human animals. Not only that. The Stoic God is embodied in everything and is the cause of everything. (Pg. 148)

In Xenophon's second passage Socrates comments on the value to humans of the diurnal rotation, seasonal change, the earth's produce, the utility of domesticable animals, and, above all, the gift of rationality and language, taking all of this to be evidence of divine handiwork and providence. (Pg. 152)

In the divinely directed Stoic world everything ultimately fits together like the combination of concords and discords in a perfectly composed and conducted symphony. (Pg. 154)

Just as God has done the best he can with the materials at his disposal, so individual persons can be invited to take this divine model as an authority and guide for their own lives. (Pg. 172)

As rational minds housed in unavoidably vulnerable bodies, we are severely restricted in our direct power to influence external events. But we are responsible for what happens only to the extent that it results from own judgments and decisions. What falls outside our agency, whether a natural event or the act or tutoring of other persons, need not and should not affect our status and values as rational minds; so we should regard all such things as the way they had to be in this God-directed world. That leave us a mental and moral space that is exclusively and wonderfully ours, and the capability of filling it with the understanding that we are not alone but partnered by God. (Pg. 180)

We don't need God, as distinct from ourselves, to tell us what to do; but we are able to tell ourselves what to do only because of the way our nature has been constructed. And the author of our nature's construction is God. Hence for Epictetus, the goal of 'following God' is equivalent to 'living in accordance with nature, which was the standard Stoic definition of the good life. (Pg. 188)

**God is in everything. *Don't worry about a supernatural domain after death where you will be judged. Live now. *Human minds are offshoots of Gods. *Language and rationality are examples of God's*

*divinity. *We humans should imitate God; he has done the best he can with the material he has, so should we, etc. etc. etc... All sample bullet points of Stoics concepts of God that make more sense to me than anything I've learned (thus far in my life) to explain the universe, including being raised Catholic.*

#3. FREEDOM

Hence committed Stoics will interpret circumstances that are conventionally regarded as misfortunes as challenges and to be accepted and even welcomed because they give them the means of proving and showing their rationality and dignity as fully-fledged human beings. (Pg. 22)

FREEDOM, underwritten by the theology we have just observed, has nothing to do with liberty in a social or political sense. The freedom that interests Epictetus is entirely psychological and attitudinal. It is freedom from being constrained or impeded by any external circumstance or emotional reaction. He diagnoses unhappiness as a subservience to persons, happenings, values and bodily conditions, all of which involve the individual subject in surrendering autonomy and becoming a victim to debilitating emotions. Happiness, by contrast, is unimpeded-ness, doing and experiencing only what you want to do and experience, serenity, absence of any sense that things might be better for you than you find them to be. (Pg. 27)

The basis for this ideal freedom brings us to the second core concept, JUDGMENT. Following his Stoic authorities, Epictetus regards all mental states, including emotions, as conditioned by judgments. In desiring or in being averse to something, a person, according to this view, has formed a judgment concerning what it is good to pursue or bad to experience; emotions are the outcome or concomitant of such judgments. (Pg. 27)

What is required of anyone who wants genuine freedom is to transfer all wants, values, and attachments away from externals and situate them within the scope of one's volition. Prohairesis or volition is the locus of all that truly matters to humans who have understood cosmic order and their own natures and capacities. (Pg. 29)

As I continue on this journey of Stoicism, I find these passages about freedom very helpful. Instead of looking at daily misfortunes as something that potentially can alter one's day or attitude in a negative direction, I attempt to take the attitude that I have the FREEDOM to judge (or withhold judgment) to act (or not act) on these incidents and potentially put a positive spin on them (the best I can anyway!) Using misfortunes as potential opportunities to practice what I've learned on my Stoic adventure.

#4. DIAMON

But who tells you that your capacities are equal of Zeus's? Yet, for all that, he has presented to each person each person's own divine spirit (daimon), as a guardian, and committed the person's safekeeping to this trustee, who does not sleep and who cannot be misled. To what better and more caring guardian could he have entrusted us? (Epictetus; Pg. 26)

It is up to individual persons to make their own daimon accord with God: they will be virtuous and flourish if they do this, and not otherwise. (Pg. 164)

In the Physics course of the College of Stoic Philosophers MA School, I've gained a much deeper understanding about my inner daimon. I voluntarily believe in it and listen to it whole heartedly. The inner sense that something is wrong, or to do or not do something, I believe is our subconscious mind connected to the consciousness of the cosmos.

#5. SOCRATES

The Stoics had also treated Socrates' life as a virtual paradigm of Stoic wisdom's practical realization, and they were especially impressed by accounts of Socrates' fortitude, self-control, and imperviousness to physical and emotional stress. The exemplary Socrates – unflinching victim of a supremely unjust prosecution and sentence – became so popular with Roman moralists that Cicero and Seneca mention him in the same breath as such homegrown Roman saints as Regulus and Cato. When Epictetus aligns Stoic doctrines with Socrates or when he asks his students to reflect on Socrates' equanimity at his trial, imprisonment, and death, he is doing just what his Greek predecessors had done. (Pg. 68)

Socrates fulfilled himself by attending to nothing except reason in everything he encountered. And you, although you are not yet a Socrates, should live as someone who at least wants to be a Socrates. (Epictetus; Pg. 69)

The first and chief thing about Socrates was that he never got worked up in a discussion, never uttered anything abusive or aggressive, but put up with others' abuse... What then? Well, nowadays the thing isn't very safe, especially in Rome. (Epictetus; Pg. 87)

That is to say, Epictetus is telling his students that they should not try to outdo Socrates or worry about Callicles' taunt of Socrates for preferring conversation with you men to engaging in politics. We should think of Epictetus as recommending his students to use discourse that is appropriate to their interlocutor's mindset and social status. (Pg. 89)

They are 'never to call themselves philosophers or talk in lay company about their principles but simply practice them' (Ench. 46) They should take Socrates as their model: he 'eluded the attention of most people, and they used to come to him asking to be introduced to philosophers. (Epictetus; 121)

Enjoyed learning more about Socrates and his influence on Epictetus. Not many folks in my life are practicing Stoics. Sometimes I find myself dropping a Stoic quote or rattling off some nonsense to folks in my daily life and often it doesn't get over. These passages about Socrates may help me keep my Stoic VERBAL practice between the ditches and focus more on my behavior and application.

#6. GOALS

The goal of philosophy is to produce not career philosophers but 'excellent persons'. (Pg. 111)

Training one's desires and aversions, the topic of the first field of study, is the prerequisite for emotional health and for all subsequent advances in philosophy. (Pg. 114)

The goal of the philosophers' principles is to enable us, whatever happens, to have our governing faculty in accordance with nature and to keep it so. (Epictetus; 118)

Therefore, the philosopher's greatest and primary function is to test and discriminate between mental impressions and to accept none of them that has not been tested. (Pg. 131)

Their thesis is that strictly nothing is good except good reasoning or moral knowledge and nothing is strictly bad except bad reasoning or moral ignorance. (Pg. 132)

One man has a beautiful wife, you have the absence of longing for a beautiful wife. Do you think these are little things? How much would these very people – the wealthy, the powerful, the ones who live with beautiful women – pay for the ability to look down on wealth and power and those very women whom they adore and get? (Epictetus; 137)

For you can be sure that there is nothing more susceptible to influence than the human mind. You need only will something, and it happens; the correction is made. Conversely, you need only nod off, and things are ruined. For both ruin and salvation have their source within you. (Pg. 140)

Hence challenging circumstances are to be seen not merely as compatible with divine providence but as God-given opportunities for us to overcome and thereby display the mental and moral strength that constitutes human happiness. (Pg. 169)

Properly rational persons will make it their policy always to have the right (that is to say, rational) intentions, and they will identify their happiness with these intentions, irrespective of what events outside their control do to promote or frustrate them. In this way, persons will be in accordance both with their specifically rational nature and with God or the divine course of events. (Pg. 183)

Generally speaking, Epictetus speaks as though everything outside the minds complete control is absolutely 'nothing to us'. This is not to say that he gives that assessment to the 'use' of material things, or that he thinks we should be negligent in regard to our health and external circumstances. That is certainly not his view, which is rather to avoid assigning any vestige of unconditional value to things that are 'not up to us'. (Pg. 184)

What is divine law? To cherish your own, not to lay claim to what doesn't belong to you, but to use what is given and not to long for what is not given. And when something is removed, to give it up easily and immediately, grateful for the time you had the use of it-unless you would rather cry for your nurse and your mummy! (2.16.28) (Epictetus Pg. 188)

Philosophical *eudaimonia* is a condition in which a person of excellent character is living optimally well, flourishing, doing admirably, and steadily enjoying the best mindset that is available to human beings. The Stoics in particular took the complete attainment of such a condition to be well-nigh impossible, yet so worth striving for that no human being who grasped its attractions would wish to settle for less. (Pg. 193)

How can I put the resources God has given to me to proper use? He gets to tranquility as the content of happiness not by privileging this mental state per se, but because he takes it to be both the most subjectively satisfying condition available to us and also the condition that will best enable us to perform our social functions in a world governed by a benevolent deity. (Pg. 194)

He is not suggesting that happiness is a prize over which we are engaged in a contest with other people. Rather, the competition is with our individual selves, where what is at stake is our capacity to make the

best use of every circumstance and to turn even unfavorable situations to good and robust effect. (Pg. 196)

He argues that our identity is so irreducible social, both globally and locally, that we cannot achieve our own good unless we see ourselves as integral parts of the world in general and of our society in particular. (Pg. 201)

We are not accountable for how our parents and other relatives behave. In that respect they are of no concern to us and to our own integrity. If, however, we allow their treatment of us to become a matter of concern, we are liable to jeopardize the integrity that is one of our most valuable possessions. (Pg. 238)

How people act, especially when crucial choices have to be made, reveals their sense of values and thereby the value they assign to themselves. (Pg. 239)

Stoic comforters, then, will allow for shocks, but they will take prolonged distress and other passions to be self-inflicted, deriving not from events directly but from people's misjudgments about the harm or benefit they are experiencing or expect to experience. (Pg. 254)

This collection of passages I labeled as 'goals' because they clearly and concisely sum up important Stoic concepts. Internalizing them and putting them into daily practice would be (in my view anyway) a worthwhile 'goal.'

#7. NATURE

What he wants to emphasize is a duality in our human constitution that gives us the option of deciding whether we shall be godlike (by identifying with our minds) or merely animal (by identifying with our bodies). (Pg. 158)

Epictetus supports the Stoic doctrines that human beings start their lives with the same self-preservative impulses as other animals, and that rationality, the property that defines our species, takes many years to develop. (Pg. 173)

But God introduced the human being to be a student of himself and his works, and not merely a student but also an interpreter of these things. Therefore it is wrong for a human being to begin and end where non-rational animals do; he should rather begin where they do and end where nature had ended in our case. (Pg. 174)

To live 'in accordance with nature' is to play one's specific part within the structure of the cosmic plan. (Pg. 174)

What primarily distinguishes us from other animals is our capacity to reflect on everything we experience and to interpret it as contributors to God's providential government. (Pg. 175)

As infants, we too begin our lives, just like the other animals, by trying to make ourselves at home in our environment, and so we naturally assign positive value to everything that promotes this sense of belonging and negative value to the opposite. But as we mature and our minds develop, we gradually

recognize that there is much more to our human nature than drives for bodily well-being or security and for association with our own kind. (Pg. 183)

It is our 'profession', as human beings, to transcend the brute behavior of non-rational animals, and we do so by conforming to our rational nature. That requires us to treat ourselves in a manner analogous to the way craftsmen cultivate their professions. (Pg. 225)

Overriding everything else is the human 'profession' not to act like a wild or domestic animal, and, in addition to that, our individual pursuits set us standards to live up to, whether as craftsmen or athletes or philosophers and so forth (3.23.2-6) (Pg. 240)

When studying Chris Fischer's "Stoicism on Fire" podcast, I distinctly remember taking notes on anger. He said something to the effect that when humans loose their temper they are acting more like animals then rational humans. Long and Epictetus' passages pointing out how humans are similar but then diverge from animals (because we are able to reflect on everything and are students Gods works) was a great expansion of what my brain was processing from the podcast..

#8. PROHAIREISIS

The moral point of view is 'ours' and completely 'up to us'; material well-being, whether of our body or of anything else, is 'not ours' and 'not up to us'. Hence if happiness is to be completely up to us, it must be grounded in the former and not in the latter. (Pg. 185)

Epictetus confines prohairesis to humans and God; it is God's special gift of a rational, self-scrutinizing, and motivating factuality. (Pg. 211)

However, prohairesis, because it combines thought and desire, is the proper starting point for action in all cases where we need a rational decision procedure on the best means to achieve our goals. (Pg. 212)

In Epictetus prohairesis is at work throughout every person's waking life. It is the basis for everything that is 'us', our character, our judgments, our motivations; for whenever we want anything to try to do anything, we are always, however imperfectly, exercising our rational faculty; we are always motivated by reasons and by what we judge to be desirable or undesirable. (Pg. 214)

The natural or proper condition of prohairesis, then, is complete autonomy. Persons with this kinds of prohairesis desire nothing they cannot obtain and are averse to nothing they cannot avoid because they restrict their desires and aversions to those things that are entirely up to them; these are the only genuinely good and bad things that there area. (Pg. 217)

In order for something fully to depend on us, Epictetus claims, it must be the kind of thing that is in our power under all possible circumstances, including bodily paralysis or a tyrant's seizures of all our limbs. The only kinds of thing that qualify are the two mental functions of prohairesis, assent and impulse. (Pg. 219)

That external situation, taken by itself, is not 'one's own' because it falls outside one's volition. But genuinely free persons will accommodate themselves to it, whatever it is, with the understanding that it

cannot involve anything they do not want because their wants are determined by nothing outside themselves. (Pg. 222)

Consider simply at what price you sell your volition. If nothing else, friend, don't sell it for little... Because I lack talent, shall I give up practicing? I pray not. Epictetus will not be superior to Socrates, but if I am not too bad that is enough for me. For I shall not be Milo either, and yet I do not neglect my body; nor Croesus, and yet I do not neglect my property. In a word, we do not give up any practice because we despair of perfections. (1.2.33-7) (Pg. 240)

If I were to give a simple explanation of Stoicism to local folks at my favorite watering hole, I probably would start with prohairesis (volition or will). Dichotomy of control. Knowing what is up to us and what is not. Knowing that prohairesis is the only thing we have full control over is a cornerstone in practicing Stoicism, in my view.

#9. IMPRESSIONS

Human beings are naturally inclined to accept all impressions that appear true. Yet, because apparent truth is far from equivalent to actual truth, he takes the task of judging and interpreting impressions to be the critical test of human rationality, consistency, and moral character. (Pg. 214)

Anyone, irrespective of intention or moral character, may experience the sexual allure of a beautiful body, but what we do with that impression is up to us, meaning how we describe it to ourselves and what value we assign to the thing itself. Impressions as such are casual only in the sense that they make us aware of their objects; but by assenting to them, as in saying 'Here is something I want for myself', we surrender our own agency and put ourselves in the position of being 'conquered' or 'disturbed' or 'dazzled' by them. (Pg. 216)

Testing impressions and withholding judgment is something I continuously (I'm guessing most Stoic folks do as well!) practice and try to improve upon. When hearing just one side of a particular story (for example), I currently find myself naturally withholding judgment until I can wrestle with the impression further. This leads to me saying less silly things I regret at a later day, which then leads to overall less stress in my life, which leads me to be more comfortable for folks to be around, etc. A cause to a cause to a cause.