



# Epictetus

Born: C. A.D. 50, in Hierapolis, Phrygia,  
Died: C. A.D. 125, in Nicopolis, Epirus

**Major Works:** Discourses, Enchiridion

**Major Ideas:**

- Only bodies exist, but bodies are combinations of two fundamental principles, *logos*, a rational principle, and *physis*, a creative principle.
- God is nature: Logos, the rational principle, accounts for the order and unity of the universe; nature is thus intelligent and intelligible.
- Because God is nature, the universe as a whole is the best possible.
- Human beings, as opposed to plants and animals, have logos as their individual governing principle.
- Logos also defines the goal of life as virtue; the life of virtue is a life lived according to reason: It is the life of a philosopher.
- Reason distinguishes between things that are and things that are not under one's control; externals, like reputation, wealth, and power are not under one's control; desire, aversion, and opinion are.
- The virtuous individual finds freedom in limiting his or her desires to those things under one's control and accepting all other externals as indifferent.

Epictetus was born a slave in Hierapolis in Phrygia. At some point in his early life, he was brought to Rome. His master, Epaphroditus, was Nero's administrative secretary. Epaphroditus apparently recognized Epictetus's talent because he sent him to study with a celebrated teacher, Musonius Rufus. Musonius Rufus was a Stoic and Epictetus became his most famous student, surpassing the fame of his teacher.

Epictetus was eventually freed from slavery, perhaps on the death of his master. In A.D. 94, the emperor Domitian ordered all philosophers to leave Rome, and Epictetus went into exile in Nicopolis, a somewhat barren and isolated place, where he lived simply, in a hut with only a mattress for furniture. He formed a school and spent his days lecturing young men from Rome and elsewhere in the empire on the art of living. It is reported that late in life he adopted a child that was about to be abandoned by its parents.

The purpose of philosophy for Epictetus, as for most Greek philosophers, was to teach the nature of the world and virtue. But Epictetus, more than most, focused on the moral life. One of his favorite exemplars was Socrates.

The teaching of Epictetus has been described, on the one hand, as warm and noble, and, on the other hand, as harsh and cold. There is a story told of Epictetus, which, while it may or may not be authentic, may help to illustrate his reputation as a man and teacher. Epictetus was lame. As the story goes, his master one day took hold of Epictetus's leg and began to twist it. Epictetus said: "You're going to break it"; the master persisted in twisting and the leg broke. Epictetus commented simply: "I told you so."

Stoicism was one of the most influential schools of thought in the Hellenistic world. The school takes its name from the Greek word for the Porch, the place in Athens where Zeno, the founder of the school, first began to teach around 300 B.C. Cleanthes and then Chrysippus succeeded Zeno as head of the school. Chrysippus is famous as a logician and credited with developing and systematizing the Stoic philosophy. But while Chrysippus and his successors, Panetius and Posidonius among them, wrote prodigiously and reportedly with great sophistication, we possess almost none of their work. Our understanding of Stoicism relies therefore on the secondhand references of other philosophers and historians and the writings of three men who lived almost 400 years after the school began: Seneca, whom Nero ordered to kill himself while Epictetus was in Rome, Epictetus, and Epictetus's student, Marcus Aurelius.

Epictetus was primarily a lecturer, not a writer. One of his students, Arrian, made copious notes of Epictetus's lectures for a friend. He claimed to have transcribed the teacher "word for word." Four of Arrian's eight books of notes survive in the Discourses. The Enchiridion is a manual of excerpts from the Discourses compiled by Arrian.

The need to distinguish between what is and what is not within an individual's control is the central feature of Stoic philosophy. It is also the main object of Epictetus's teaching. Epictetus saw himself as educating young men to live a life of virtue. For Epictetus, the virtuous life combines knowledge and practice, truth and freedom. One understands what is in one's control by understanding the nature of the world and the human individual. Then, by training one's desires and aversions to accommodate that truth, one achieves freedom. Freedom is not the power to do anything one pleases; freedom is found in understanding the limits of one's power and accepting them. Accepting limits is what preserves choice; in yielding to desire for things not in one's control, one gives up freedom.

The Stoics, like most Greek philosophers, saw the universe as an ordered whole. But they differed from other philosophers in their claim that God and nature are one. Because they claimed that only bodies exist, at first it seems that the Stoics were materialists. But bodies, for the Stoics, are not simply material objects. Instead they are combinations of logos, a rational principle, and physis, or nature. These two concepts represent aspects of a fundamental unity. They also describe a kind of hierarchy in nature. Nature as a whole is rationally ordered, but not everything in nature is rational. As the rational principle permeating the world, logos refers to its intelligibility. The universe is intelligible because it is governed by laws. Plants and animals, for example, exhibit the order and coherence of an

intelligible world; in other words, they exhibit a governing principle; they have distinctive natures. But as individuals they do not have rationality as their governing principle. Human beings, by contrast, do have rationality as their governing principle.

Logos, then, refers to the rational principle governing the universe and it also refers to the governing principle in human individuals, that is, in particular, to their power to see connections, understand laws, and use language.

Like most Greek philosophers, the Stoics divided philosophy into three parts: logic, physics, and ethics. The Stoics in particular were concerned to show that each of the disciplines follows from and supports the other two. The logos that governs the physical world is the same as that which orders speech and thought, the subject matter of logic. The rational governing principle in each human individual allows him or her to achieve knowledge of the physical world and of the life of virtue. And this individual rational principle is also what each individual shares with God. The world is intelligent and intelligible. As such, it is God. And, as such, it is the best world possible.

Epictetus is generally acknowledged as the most orthodox of the later Stoics. At times he speaks as if God could be above or beyond nature--but this is also true of earlier writers and does not necessarily indicate a departure from the Stoic view of God and the world as one. More importantly, Epictetus is not concerned with elaborating physical or logical theories. His focus is entirely practical; he is important to the tradition because in Epictetus philosophy comes to life.

For the Stoic, the life of virtue is the life of the philosopher. Epictetus is often cited as the individual who came closest to realizing the Stoic ideal, an ideal many criticized as impossible to achieve. He lived simply, eschewing those things that are "not under our control," as he described them--body, property, reputation, command. He chose Nicopolis as the site of his school in order that his students, too, might have few temptations and distractions. His innovation was to change the emphasis of moral teaching from achievement of the ideal to progress toward the life of virtue.

The rational principle in the person determines the first requirement of a virtuous life: The ability to understand the nature of the world requires the individual to exercise his understanding, that is, his rationality. The point of understanding is twofold. First, in common with most Greeks, the Stoics saw the perfection of nature as the life of virtue: To be virtuous, the individual must let reason be her guide. But secondly, understanding nature as a whole is to understand the world as the best possible world. From this point of view, to wish things were otherwise represents a failure of reason that sets the individual against the logos of the universe, rather than bringing him or her into harmony with it.

It is this sense of the world as the best possible, together with the individual's rational nature, that defines the Stoic sense of value. To be rational is to understand the difference between things that are in one's power and things that are not. Only those things in one's power affect an individual's moral worth, that is, whether he or she is good or bad. Everything else is indifferent. In particular, the individual cannot choose external circumstances; he or she

can only choose a response to them. The life of virtue is therefore open to everyone, rich or poor, slave or free. It is the only life that is prosperous.

The point is that what counts for the Stoic is the individual's choice or intent, not the result of an action. It is this distinction that perhaps accounts for the differing evaluations of Stoic ethics in general and Epictetus in particular. The virtuous individual will pursue the good actively in the world. She will, thus, try to save a child's life. However, if her efforts fail, she will also accept the result. She will not regret or mourn the loss. This may strike us as strange, unnatural, or lacking in compassion. But it is consistent with the Stoic conviction that the world as a whole is rational and the best possible. Moreover, it is consistent with the acceptance of reason as sovereign. For, after the event, the only thing in one's power is one's attitude toward it, that is, acceptance or rejection. Epictetus emphasized that what really frightens and dismays people is not external events themselves, but rather the way we think about them. How we think about something after the fact, for instance the loss of a loved one, is in our power, but changing the fact is not.

The life of virtue is finally the life of freedom. It is achieved by forming good habits. Epictetus himself impressed his contemporaries with his humor and serenity. He was not vain or condescending. On his death, he was described as a "friend of the immortals."

### **Further Reading**

Long, A. A. Hellenistic Philosophy. London: Duck-worth, 1974; New York: Scribner, 1974. A survey of the three main schools of Hellenistic thought: Epicureanism, Skepticism, and Stoicism. The chapters on Stoicism contain a thorough and sophisticated discussion of fundamental Stoic ideas, with frequent references to Epictetus.

Meredith, Anthony. "Later Philosophy." In The Oxford History of the Classical World. Edited by John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Includes a short but very clear introduction to Epictetus's thought and places him in the context of his contemporaries.

Xenakis, Iason. Epictetus, Philosopher-Therapist. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969. The first book-length study of Epictetus in English. Xenakis reviews in detail the major elements of Epictetus's ethical teachings.

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