Chapter 11

"Everyone has a price at which he sells himself": Epictetus and Kant on self-respect

Melissa Merritt

1. Introduction

My aim here is to open an inquiry into the significance of Epictetus for Kant, focusing chiefly on one text: Part One of the 1793 *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone*. There, I will argue, Kant draws upon a distinctive conception of self-respect that drives Epictetus's pedagogical practice.

Epictetus's *Discourses* ostensibly record his conversations with students, mostly young men from wealthy families across the Roman empire, whom Epictetus, himself a former slave, often chidingly addresses as "slave!", *andrapodon*.[1] But we do not tend to think of Kant as a pedagogical philosopher: his first concerns lie in moral theory; and when he does turn to practical questions about moral progress, he has nothing like the direct and arresting manner of Epictetus. Yet Kant was preoccupied with fundamentally pedagogical questions that originated in eighteenth-century debates about the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, the determination or calling of the human being.[2] How is the human being called to develop virtue in the face of the corruption that we invariably inflict upon ourselves in the course of our development? Kant famously refers to this corruption as the "radical evil in human nature", and proposes that it commonly expresses itself in a certain self-deception that, if it is not itself to be deemed malice (*Bosheit*), certainly "deserves at least the name of unworthiness [Nichtswürdigkeit]" (*Rel* 6:38). He concludes this line of thought thus:

[1] On historical context and the composition of the *Discourses*, see Long (2002), and Dobbin's Introduction in Epictetus (1998).
[2] On the historical background to this debate, see Kuehn (2009), and Brandt (2007), who takes account of its neo-Stoic framing.

> A member of the English parliament exclaimed in the heat of debate: 'Everyone has his price, for which he sells himself.' If this is true (and each may settle this for himself), if nowhere is a virtue which no level of temptation can overthrow, if whether the good or evil spirit wins us over only depends on which bids the most and affords the promptest pay-off, then what the Apostle says might indeed hold true of human beings universally, 'There is no distinction here, they are all under sin—there is none righteous (in the spirit of the law), no, not one'. (*Rel* 6:38-9)

Kant is evidently thinking of William Wyndham's contribution to a 1734 parliamentary debate: "It is an old Maxim, that every Man has his Price, if you can but come up to it"—though the line is often misattributed to Horace Walpole.[3] I first wish to draw attention to the pedagogical spirit of Kant's passage, evident not only in its deployment of ringing lines but more importantly in the injunction that each consider the matter for himself. Indeed, that very injunction suggests that he is thinking of the distinctive pedagogical practice of Epictetus, who delivers a similar zinger in *Discourse* 1.2.

A recurring scene in the *Discourses* involves people asking Epictetus, or another Stoic teacher, for advice about what to do; the response invariably take some form of retorting that 'this is a question you can only answer for yourself'. Later, we will consider the philosophical grounds for this reply, which lie in the Stoic theory of rational agency. For now I simply point out that Epictetus adduces that background at the start of *Discourse* 1.2, where he observes that our actions express commitment to views about what is reasonable to do and endure, which vary widely. He then imagines a household slave who finds it "reasonable to hold a chamber-pot, since he only considers that, if he does not, he will be

[3] Wyndham expresses both hope that the "old maxim" may not hold as a universal proposition, and fear that it yet "too generally holds true". See *The History and Proceedings of the House of Commons: Volume 8, 1733-1734*, Seventh Session, 13 March 1734 (http://www.british-history.ac.uk/commons-hist-proceedings/vol8/pp137-209), accessed 4 April 2022.

beaten and deprived of food, whereas if he does hold it, nothing harsh or painful will occur to him" (1.2.8). But someone else will find it unendurable—ἀφόρητον, "not to be borne"—either to do such a thing, or have it done for one (1.2.9). Epictetus continues:

> If you ask me, then, 'Shall I hold the pot or not?', I will tell you that getting food is preferable to being deprived of it, and being whipped is worse than not being whipped. So if you compare your interests by these criteria [εἰ τούτοις παραμετρεῖς τὰ σαυτοῦ], then go ahead and hold the pot. 'But it would not be worthy of me.' That is an additional consideration which you alone bring to the question, not me [τοῦτο σὲ δεῖ συνεισφέρειν εἰς τὴν σκέψιν, οὐκ ἐμέ]. You are the one who knows yourself, at what price you sell yourself. For different people sell themselves at different prices. (1.2.10-11).

A more literal translation of the underlined phrase will help to bring out Epictetus's point: *if you measure what is yours in this way* — the extent of your sphere, and thus what belongs or is proper to you — then go ahead and hold the pot. His response to the student who replies that pot-holding would be unworthy of him is ironic: *oh, so what then is your price?* He is goading the student to consider what he is worth to himself, which he flags as an issue no one else can settle for one.

But self-estimation is subject to cheap avowals, like the student who so easily dismisses pot-holding as beneath him. Epictetus's aim is to raise the question, to the student, of his possible self-deception—one that lies in the possible tension between what he avows about his own worth, and how he concretely commits himself in action. Again, the moral-psychological principles at work here will be examined later. My immediate concern is to identify the pedagogical strategy. Epictetus deploys what I will hereafter refer to as *the*

zinger—the supposition, in effect, that everyone has his price. The zinger is administered as a stimulus to confront the possible hollowness in how we blithely think of ourselves. But the zinger, on its own, may leave the one who can take its medicine dejected and unmotivated. Epictetus indicates its complement when he gestures to Socrates at the end of the dialogue, one whom context invites us to think of as *having no price* (1.2.33), and who, by Epictetus's further characterisation, acts "as one convinced of his kinship to the gods" (1.9.22). Thus, and following Kamtekar (1998:152-5) in the main, I propose that Epictetus's pedagogical strategy has two sides: the jolting side, to expose self-deception and practical inconsistency; and the uplifting side, to arouse our sense of kinship with the divine insofar as we are rational.

My aim is to show how Kant draws on Epictetus's pedagogical strategy in the *Religion*, and in this context identify their kindred conceptions of self-respect and its role in our development. I focus first on Epictetus, expositing his understanding of the zinger, and the conception of self-respect that drives our development towards virtue. I then consider how the two sides of Epictetus's pedagogical strategy figure in Kant's *Religion*. But the common ground must be assessed in light of a significant systematic difference: Kant is committed to a metaphysical dualism that simply does not figure in Stoicism, and which underwrites his conception of a genuinely moral disposition. I conclude by reflecting on why Epictetus — as a Stoic arguably on the limits of his tradition — may have been especially provocative for Kant.

2. Epictetus: rational agency and human development

For Epictetus, to sell oneself is to give oneself up; what exactly this means is best understood in relation to its contrast class, a normative conception of "keeping" or "preserving" oneself. To work through these issues, we need to consider the essential Stoic background on rational

agency, and the significance of natural teleology for their view of human development. These are enormous (and complexly intertwined) issues in their own right; for present purposes we must make do with an economical sketch.

Stoics take the agency of human beings who have acquired reason (i.e. "rational agency") to be a species of the agency that is attributed to animals generally. It may be misleading to speak of a genus-species relation, since Stoics suppose that the mentality of a human being is thoroughly transformed by the acquisition of reason.[4] As a result, impulse (*hormē*)—the psychic state sufficient to produce action—is fundamentally different in non-rational animals and pre-rational human beings than it is in us. Our impulses are "rational", in the sense that they require the resources of a rational mind: they are products of assent to complex proposition-like items (*axiōmata*), the schematic content of which is that things are a certain way and it is fitting for me to do such-and-such. Behind every action is a taking-to-be-appropriate: that is the constitutive principle of rational agency. There is no one term for this taking-to-be-appropriate, and it lies outside of our scope to canvas the range.[5] But its status as a constitutive principle—at work in every expression of rational agency—has been well established by others, and is interpretively uncontroversial.[6]

Epictetus nods to this principle at the outset of *Discourse* 1.2, reformulating it as a taking-to-be-reasonable or -unreasonable, *eulogon* or *alogon*. To understand his point, let us begin by observing that "appropriate" is a relative notion: there is no absolute "appropriate", but only an appropriate *for* x—a thought here completed in the first-person, it is appropriate *for me*. This thought might in turn admit of completion in a further way: it is appropriate for me *as* a certain sort of person. The title of *Discourse* 1.2 is "how someone may preserve his

[4] On the acquisition of reason, see e.g. Frede (1994).
[5] E.g."appropriate" (καθήκει) and "thought fitting" (οἴονται δεῖν); for discussion see Brennan (1998).
[6] See especially the ground-breaking Inwood (1985); also Brennan (1998). More recently, Inwood (2022) argues that Epictetus develops a conception of rationality that makes such self-consciousness internal to it; however, I take the point to be implicit in Stoic rational psychology all along.

proper character [τὸ κατὰ πρόσωπον] in everything"—the key term of which, *prosōpon* or "face", draws on the usage that originates in the theatre, referring to character or role.

Epictetus alludes to Panaetius' theory of practical identities, which Cicero presents in *De Officiis* (1.107-115), distinguishing four types of role (*persona*). Two we come into by natural endowment: the common role arising from our having "a share in reason" and thereby "standing over" all other animals; and the specific roles arising from individually contingent talents of body and mind. Third are roles we come into by chance or circumstance (e.g. born into nobility, or slavery); and fourth are the careers and other pursuits we choose for ourselves. Yet in framing the entire discussion in terms of what people take to be reasonable and unreasonable, Epictetus signals the primacy of the first role. Thus in Epictetus's variation, everything we do is the result of our taking to be appropriate to us *as* rational—although these "takings" are often misguided.[7]

The crucial philosophical point is that the determination of the action as the thing to do—the source of the impulse, which again Stoics understand to be sufficient for action—is not separate from some estimation of oneself as that to which it is appropriate. Now, we are aiming to understand Epictetus's conception of what it is to sell oneself. For Epictetus, as we will see, we sell ourselves when we fail to give this self-estimating dimension of practical thought the right sort of care. To unpack that idea, we need to look further into what is distinctive of Epictetus's account, in relation to the Stoic tradition.

While Epictetus accepts the traditional conception of rational impulse as the psychic state that is sufficient for action, and is the product of assent to *axiōmata*, he takes this assent to be the function of *prohairesis*, volition or choice. *Prohairesis* is an Aristotelian term that is not otherwise prominent in the Stoic tradition; and Epictetus's use of it differs from

[7] Epictetus takes the great variability in what people consider reasonable as a sign that "we need education" to bring our takings-to-be-reasonable "into conformity with nature" (1.2.6), which for a Stoic is the source of any normative standard.

Aristotle's in ways that reflect the profound differences in their views about human psychology. For Aristotle, *prohairesis* is one faculty of mind among others, exercised episodically, in the act of deliberation.[8] Stoics by contrast are committed to the thoroughgoing rationality of human mentality: systematically, this is the basis on which we get the constitutive principle of rational agency—i.e. that we are moved by a taking-to-be-appropriate, not desires or feelings conceived as issuing from some non-rational part of us. Thus for Epictetus, *prohairesis* is exercised every time we act; and every taking-to-be-appropriate (and so every action) bears within it some estimation of oneself as the one to whom the action is appropriate. In this setting, *prohairesis* is not one faculty among others: for Epictetus, it just is the self we might sell or give up, should we fail to exercise this power in the relevant self-preserving way.[9]

To unpack that last thought, we must limn the essential features of the natural-teleological framework of Stoic ethics. I noted that Stoics take rational agency to be a species of the agency that is attributed to animals generally: for an animal does not reach its developmental end through a mere process of growth, but rather must *do* certain things—perform appropriate actions, *kathēkonta*, or *officia* in Cicero's Latin (*Fin.* 3.20)—in order to realise fully as a creature of a certain kind. Thus the Stoic conception of "appropriate" action is explained, in the first place, as completion-promoting action. And, taking the universe to be governed by a wise and providential god, Stoics suppose that animals are predisposed, in the ways they are created, to act in the appropriate ways. This is most basically achieved by orienting each animal to its own constitution: "Every animal, as soon as it is born, is concerned with itself and takes care to preserve itself. It favours its constitution and whatever preserves its constitution, whereas it recoils from its destruction and whatever appears to

[8] For discussion see Long (2002:213-4).
[9] See also Long (2002:211-4) and Frede (2011:45-6) on how Epictetus's conception of *prohairesis* compares to Aristotle's.

promote its destruction" (*Fin.* 3.16). This affinity is itself only possible if the animal has some *awareness of* its constitution (*sensum ... sui*, *Fin.* 3.16). This *sensus sui* is the basis of an affective orientation, a readiness to find appropriate the actions and objects that preserve it in its constitution. As we are essentially rational animals, human appropriate action must ultimately issue from a sense of what is appropriate to one as rational.[10]

Return again to the Stoic view that a taking-to-be-appropriate is the cause of any rational impulse. Epictetus understands this taking-to-be-appropriate as an exercise of *prohairesis*, and claims that *prohairesis* is by nature free (*to phusei eleutheron*, *D.* 1.19.7): "not even Zeus can conquer my *prohairesis*" (1.1.23). But these last points require clarification. Properly formulated, his view is that choice can never be hindered by anything *external*. Another person can hinder my going for a walk, by preventing me from moving my legs; but he cannot hinder my assent, the determination of choice that is the source of rational impulse (4.1.72-73). For while we receive *prohairesis* from Zeus—he thereby endows us with "part of" himself (1.1.12)—its use is up to us. This is what makes it truly our own, while the other element of our endowment, the body that is subject to external hindrance and constraint, is not (1.25.3; see also 1.1.32). Yet this constitutive fact about *prohairesis* gives rise to a normative principle for human action, framed as a command from Zeus. And it is the only real guidance that Epictetus can give to him who asks what he should do: "guard by every means the things that are your own; do not aim at [μὴ ἐφίεσο] the things that are not" (1.25.4; see also 2.16.27-8). For *prohairesis*, as something free by nature, can only hinder itself (1.19.7-8).

[10] What is appropriate to one as rational must be among the things "that people whose minds are not altogether perverted can see by virtue of their common starting-points [τὰς κοινὰς ἀφορμὰς]" (*D.* 3.6.8).

> And how do you hinder yourself? When you earnestly occupy yourself with things that are not your own, you lose[11] what is your own [ὅταν περὶ τὰ μὴ σαυτοῦ σπουδάςῃς, τὰ σαυτοῦ ἀπώλεσας]. (1.25.4; see also 2.16.11)

The things that are not our own are external to choice. The only thing internal to choice is the manner of its use. There is a way of using *prohairesis* that degrades and destroys it ("earnestly occupying" ourselves with externals), and a way that guards and saves it.

The mind-body dualism that Epictetus invokes here does not rest on a metaphysical dualism that distinguishes two orders of being each governed by distinct kinds of law; it also in no way entails a psychological dualism distinguishing rational and non-rational parts of the soul or elements of our mentality.[12] Epictetus lays more stress on this mind-body distinction than most other Stoics, perhaps apart from Seneca.[13] At any rate, Epictetus is not saying that our bodies and other externals should not matter to us:[14] he is saying that we should not misvalue externals — enthral ourselves and "marvel over" them (*thaumazein*, see *D.* 2.16.11 and 1.29.3). Externals are nevertheless that with which we are immediately engaged, when we act:

> What, then, are externals? Materials for choice [ὕλαι τῇ προαιρέσει], by engaging with which it obtains its proper good or evil. (1.29.2)

The point is to distinguish a way of exercising *prohairesis* that preserves it as it is by nature, from a way of using *prohairesis* that degrades it. But since, either way, we are engaged with

[11] Or "utterly destroy": *apollumi* could have either sense.
[12] For discussion of the first point, see Annas (1992), and of the second, see Inwood (2005, especially pp. 33-41).
[13] See Long (2017) and Brennan (2009) for discussion.
[14] Certain high-minded students will miss this important point; they need to be taught differently: see *D.* (1.9.11).

externals, the lesson concerns *how* to exercise *prohairesis*, and not *what* we should choose. Notably, at no point in the chamber-pot passage does Epictetus say that pot-holding is an inherently degrading thing to do.[15]

So Epictetus demurs, I think, on the matter of there being inherently self-degrading actions. More precisely, however, he does not think that actions are bodily performances. For if we suppose that your action comes from *you*, then it must consist simply in the exercise of *prohairesis*. And it is built into the providential-teleological framework that Zeus, in giving us *prohairesis*, must thereby endow us with an inborn affinity for actions that preserve it, and repulsion from actions that degrade it. Thus a self-preserving exercise of *prohairesis* can be thought of as a certain *way* of exercising it—i.e. with the appropriate affective orientation. Recall the divine command, *guard by every means the things that are your own*; Epictetus follows by pointing to what these means are: "your trustworthiness" or faithfulness, "your self-respect" (τὸ πιστὸν σόν, τὸ αἰδῆμον σόν, *D.* 1.25.4).[16] Epictetus points here to what *disposes us* to exercise *prohairesis* in the relevantly self-preserving way.[17] And we do not put Zeus's command into practice by refusing to care for our bodies: we will bathe and eat. But if we are making progress, then we will do these things in a certain way: "as someone faithful and self-respecting [ὡς πιστός, ὡς αἰδήμων]" (1.4.19).

We can now say what it is to sell oneself: namely, to exercise *prohairesis* in a way that degrades it. The opposite—to "keep" oneself, in effect—is to exercise *prohairesis* in a way that preserves it as it is meant to be by nature. Hence Epictetus exhorts:

[15] Consider also *D.* 3.26.23. Contrast Seneca, who appears to laud the young Spartan who, captured and war and sold as a slave, preferred to smash his own skull rather than hold the pot for his master (Ep 77.14-15); cf. Plutarch, *Moralia* 234C ("Sayings of the Spartans" §38).
[16] I will return to the question of the translation of these terms.
[17] The available English translations take *to piston son, to aidēmon son* as appositive for "what is your own". But Epictetus has said that *prohairesis* is one's own: if that is *what* one guards, then trustworthiness and self-respect would indicate means by which one guards it.

> [God] has delivered yourself into your own keeping, and says, 'I had no one more trustworthy [πιστότερόν] than you: keep [φύλασσε] him for me in the way he was born by nature to be—self-respecting [αἰδήμονα], trustworthy [πιστόν], high-minded [ὑψηλόν], undaunted, unimpassioned, imperturbable.' And after that, don't you want to keep him so? (*D*. 2.8.22-23)

The natural-teleological context of the Stoic theory of action, which has a conception of self-preservation at its centre, helps us register Epictetus's contrast between selling or giving oneself up, and keeping or preserving oneself, which we do through developing as we should. Inasmuch as we fail to act in this self-preserving way, we become—as he likes to say—like sheep or donkeys, or wild beasts (1.29.21; 4.5.21). We even become like corpses (1.9.19). Indeed, it is not inapt to say that the preservation of one's personhood is at stake.

Let me recapitulate our basic moves before we return to Epictetus's pedagogical practice. We outlined the Stoic conception of rational agency, identifying a self-consciousness internal to its expression in any act of choice. Against this background, and the natural-teleological framework of the Stoic account of action, we drew attention to Epictetus's distinction between exercising choice in, respectively, self-degrading and self-preserving ways. We saw that he often glosses the latter in terms of notions of trustworthiness or faithfulness, and self-respect. These issues were all addressed to deepen our understanding of Epictetus's pedagogical practice, which I proposed has two facets: a jolting side exposing a certain kind of practical inconsistency and self-deception, and an uplifting side engaging a sense of kinship with the divine insofar as one is rational. Now we will look briefly at some of the examples in *Discourses* 1.2 to see this pedagogical method at work, and in that context fill out our understanding of what it is to exercise choice in the relevant degrading and preserving ways.

2.1 Pedagogical practice in *Discourse* 1.2

The interpretation of *Discourse* 1.2 would ideally work through its complete series of examples: here we are able to consider only two, beyond the famous exchange about chamber-pot-holding, which jointly illustrate the two dimensions of Epictetus's pedagogical practice. Both concern Roman senators under tyrants.

In the first, the senator Florus is "wondering whether to enter Nero's festival"; he is expected to act a part in a tragedy (*D.* 1.2.16), which he evidently regards as demeaning. Nero being Nero, it can be taken as given that he is likely to be executed if he doesn't participate (1.1.16). Florus asks Agrippinus, a fellow senator and a Stoic, what he should do. Agrippinus's reply consists chiefly of the question: "what is it you ask me?" (1.2.15). A doctrinal answer is possible, that life is preferable to death, pleasure to pain (1.2.15)—just as, in the chamber-pot episode, it can be said that getting food is preferable to not getting food, and so on (1.2.10). But really, Agrippinus implies, you ask me something that only you can settle for yourself. The reason for this goes back to the nature of *prohairesis*. If Florus acts in the tragedy, he must take it to be the thing to do—and thus must set a certain value on himself, as the one to whom such an action is appropriate. And yet he is outraged: this is degrading! Florus wants to moan, one senator to another, about the humiliating conditions under which they serve, and yet is poised to suppose it reasonable that he act in the tragedy. Agrippinus doesn't "even consider" taking a role in Nero's tragedy (1.2.13): his example is the jolt by which Florus might recognise his own inconsistency, and be moved by it.

Epictetus often puts his point here in other terms: by acting a certain way, we dehumanise ourselves—making ourselves like stones or jugs or brutes. He complains that people are preoccupied with the deadening of their bodies, and take little concern for the deadening of their souls: he calls this deadening "petrifaction" (*D.* 1.5.3-5). Someone who

cannot spot a contradiction is badly off; but he who "notices and is unmoved and does not progress: he is still more wretched. His sense of self-respect [τὸ αἰδῆμον] and of shame [ἐντρεπτικὸν] have been excised, and his reasoning power has been—I won't say cut away—but brutalised [ἀποτεθηρίωται]" (1.5.8-9).

Epictetus's point about "petrifaction" is illustrated in the second example, which involves Helvidius Priscus, a Stoic senator like Agrippinus, and Vespasian, a tyrant like Nero—only a somewhat conflicted one, giving the example its comedic power. Vespasian needs Priscus out of the way to pursue some agenda in the senate, and so warns him not to enter the senate on the given day. Back and forth, Vespasian makes recommendations to Priscus about how he should behave if he is to save his own skin, and Priscus replies that he must do what is required of him as a senator, darkly mocking Vespasian to do what is required of him as a tyrant:

> 'Well then, enter, but keep quiet.' 'Do not ask me for my opinion, and I will keep quiet.' 'But I must ask you for your opinion.' 'And I must answer what seems to me right.' 'Yes, but if you speak, I will kill you.' 'When did I ever say that I was immortal? You do your part, and I mine. It is yours to put me to death, mine to die without flinching […].' (*D.* 1.2.20-1)

But Priscus stands out: nearly any other senator would have obsequiously nodded along with Vespasian's request to stay home—nor would Vespasian have needed to worry should such a one turn up, "knowing that he would either sit like a jug or, if he did speak, would say only what he knew Caesar wanted to hear, and would pile on more besides" (1.2.23-4). He

wouldn't present himself *as* a human being, but as a jug or a parrot or an actor delivering lines.[18] He would be numb to his own inconsistency, "petrified".

The examples also help fill out our understanding of Epictetus's account of what it is to exercise choice in the relevant self-preserving way—*as* a trustworthy or faithful person (ὡς πιστός), *as* a self-respecting person (ὡς αἰδήμων). The Stoic senators are certainly presented as trustworthy: their avowals can be trusted to manifest in the concrete commitments of choice. You know exactly what you will get with them! But *pistos* can also be rendered "faithful", which more closely suits the portrayal of Socrates "as one convinced of his kinship to the gods" (*D*. 1.9.22). I will return to this point in §4. The other term, *aidēmōn*, is the adjective cognate with *aidōs*: reverence, awe, respect—standardly for the opinion of others. An *aidēmōn* person is actively disposed to *aidōs*, and thus standardly concerned not to offend or arouse the censure of others. This is how we get "modest" as a common rendering of *aidēmōn* in translations of Epictetus. But Epictetus invokes this term in the context of thinking about the constitutive principle of rational agency. In this light, exercising choice *hos aidēmōn* is to do so in a way that brings the self-conscious dimension of practical thought into active consideration, as an expression of care for one's rational personhood or character (i.e. *prosōpon*).

Next I aim to reveal how Epictetus's conception of self-respect, and the pedagogical practice that it drives, figure in Kant's *Religion*. But let me make an immediate comparative point here. Epictetus supposes that someone can entirely destroy the affective orientation that guides the appropriate exercise of *prohairesis*—i.e. that which disposes us to abhorrence at practical inconsistency, and possible satisfaction in the expression and development of consistent character. Certainly it is germane to the providential context of Stoic thought to

[18] Epictetus says that "to meet someone properly, as a person, one must become acquainted with his judgments and show him one's own judgments in turn" (3.9.12; cf. 3.2.11-12): this normally requires genuine speech, which neither parrots, nor actors playing a part, have (see Assaturian, 2022).

suppose that these resources should not, in any ready-to-hand case, have become *completely* destroyed: as a teacher, Epictetus aims to stimulate this affective orientation, give it a bit of a workout—that's the point of the zinger. But he does seem to suppose that a person *can* completely destroy it, over time, through the misuse of choice.[19] Next we will see that Kant rejects this possibility, as incompatible with the providential natural teleology that *he also* accepts in the *Religion*.

3. Kant

To make a case for Epictetus's relevance to Kant in the *Religion*, I must first address a broader issue about the relevance of Stoic providential natural teleology to this work.[20] Kant opens the *Religion* with a nod to a longstanding German debate about human progress: he points first to the position he in later work calls "moral *terrorism*" (*SF* 7:81.10)—the view of the human race in constant decline into greater and greater evil (*Rel* 6:18); then he turns to the "opposite heroic opinion", associated with pedagogically-oriented Enlightenment moralists, that the human race is ever developing gradually towards the good (*Rel* 6:19.21-6:20.17)—a view which he elsewhere calls "*eudaimonism*" or "*chiliasm*" (*SF* 7:81.11-12), to indicate an account of human development that has, at least on the long view, a happy ending. Kant there rejects terrorism, taking it to entail that the human race would have already destroyed itself (*SF* 7:81.1-17), and the position is not considered further in the *Religion*. But his relation to the second position, what I will call progress-eudaimonism, is more complicated. On the one hand, he supposes that the sheer "multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human *deeds* parades before us" gives us grounds to doubt the view.[21] On the other hand, these optimistic "moralists, from Seneca to Rousseau" take there to be an

[19] See n11.
[20] My account of this point distils aspects of Merritt (2021a, 2024, and forthcoming-a).
[21] This is Kant's point in the second paragraph of §III (6:32.34-6:34.17), where he refers to the view as "chiliasm".

"ethical predisposition to good in us" the development of which "nature itself" promotes (6:20.14-15)[22]; they presuppose the providential natural teleology of the Stoic tradition, whereby rational and non-rational animals alike are supposed to be endowed with affective orientations compelling or otherwise promoting appropriate, or completion-promoting, action. And Kant's own argument in the *Religion* presupposes as much.

Thus Kant takes as given, in the first step of his argument, "the original predisposition to good in human nature" (6:26)—hereafter abbreviated OPG. The OPG consists of three elements, which *together* comprise the orientation *to good*, a telos here understood as developmental completion.[23] Each element, moreover, is explained as an affective orientation. The first, the "predisposition to *animality*", is a readiness to find fitting those actions that preserve one "as a *living* being", which includes our affinity for human community (6:26.5-6, 26.12-18). Second, the predisposition "to *humanity*"—to the human being as both living and also rational (6:26.8-9)—is explained as an affinity for action that develops the powers of one's own agency, especially as this is enhanced by comparative recognition in a social context (6:27.4-9). Third, the predisposition "to his own *personality*" is Kantian moral feeling, the endowed readiness to act simply from one's recognition of what morality requires (6:27.27-32). Given the teleological framing of the account, we may think of this third element as the affective orientation internal to practical reason in us (see 6:26.10-11).

Like most philosophers who weighed in on human progress in eighteenth-century Germany, Kant draws on a providential natural-teleological conceptual framework rooted in the Stoic tradition.[24] Stoics also suppose that any human being invariably corrupts herself—makes herself *bad*—just as soon as she comes into reason; and in the *Religion*, Kant explains

[22] My references to the Academy edition of Kant's works typically include the line-numbers, as here.
[23] E.g. in the fashion of Seneca, *Ep.* 124.
[24] See Brandt (2007) and Merritt (2024).

"radical evil" in quite similar terms.[25] But where Stoic accounts of human development are typically concerned with how we progress when we develop *according to nature*—leaving this corruption, the perversion of nature's starting points, out of the story[26]—Kant supposes that any viable account of human development must incorporate radical evil. That is why the OPG is immediately followed by his account of radical evil as a corruption that we each invariably bring upon ourselves in the course of our development, and ultimately endemic in way we situate ourselves, socially and politically, in the world.[27] Yet at the same time, radical evil is not necessary, inasmuch as it can and should be overcome (6:37.15-17).[28] What Kant offers, then, is an account of human development that draws on Stoic providential natural teleology, and yet acknowledges radical evil—and from there aims to show how progress-eudaimonism can still be endorsed. Since our progress hangs in the balance, the argument must be pedagogical in spirit.

I will focus here on the section of *Religion* Part One (§III) where Kant outlines his core account of radical evil, and concludes by deploying the zinger. The section is titled "The human being is by nature evil" (6:32.11): the idea is that radical evil is a species characteristic (6:32.16-17), and not that it is writ in us in the way we are created—for then we would not be responsible for it, and it could not then be evil, i.e. *böse*.[29] Hence the "ground" of radical evil cannot lie "in the sensuous nature of the human being", inasmuch as this is a fact about how we are created (6:34.18-6:35.9). We can only bring radical evil upon ourselves; and yet it cannot consist in a corruption, much less extirpation, of the principle by which free choice is possible, on Kant's view, i.e. the moral law. For that would involve supposing that we have the capacity to dehumanise ourselves in ways obliterating any possibility of recovering the

[25] See Merritt (2021a).
[26] See e.g. Cicero (*Fin.* 3.16-24) for an example.
[27] The latter is more a theme of *Religion* Part 3, which must be sidelined here.
[28] On this point see especially Anderson-Gold (2001).
[29] See Kant's distinction between *böse* and *übel*, which invokes Stoic axiology, at *KpV* (5:59-60).

developmental path to good—a *reductio* on the OPG, and the providential-teleological framework on which it draws. Radical evil can only result from an act of free choice, which Kant then outlines as follows.

Human beings act on two fundamentally distinct incentives, drawing respectively from what is animal and what is rational about us. Yet there must be one governing principle of one's will, if one is to be the *source* of one's actions (6:23-5, esp. 6:25.5-7). With that in mind,[30] Kant first explains radical evil as the disposition by which one takes satisfaction of the first sort of incentive, self-love, as the condition under which one would comply with the moral law, the principle of our rational personality (6:36.19-33). This is our default practical commitment from the first act of free choice (6:38.1-3): *why?* The human being who has just come into the use of reason will have plenty of practice acting—pre-rationally—from the incentive of self-love, oriented by an uncorrupted predisposition to animality. But this human being could not have had practice acting from the incentive of morality, as this requires the resources of self-conscious rationality. Yet the law, as the principle constitutive of reason in its practical exercise, "imposes itself on him irresistibly owing to his moral predisposition" (6:36.3-4). Thus the human being cannot help but to exercise choice, from the first, in such a way as to bring on this corruption. The overcoming of this corruption, Kant then indicates, would consist in the overthrow of this default order, so that the incentive of morality is thereafter "the supreme condition of the satisfaction" of self-love (6:36.31), which he later characterises as a "*revolution* in the disposition of the human being" and a "change of heart" (6:47.24-28).

These are familiar ideas, which scarcely acknowledge the providential-teleological conceptual framework of Kant's account. But we know that the premise of Kant's account—the OPG—comes directly out of that conceptual framework. And Kant also says that *radical*

[30] Kant explicitly recalls this material from the preamble at 6:36.19.

evil corrupts the OPG (6:43.19-20). The human being is *turned away* from the telos, the good: i.e. the completion of our essentially rational nature in a specifically human way. Thus perverted, we will take to be appropriate (*zweckmäßig*) ways of acting that are in fact inappropriate (*zweckwidrig*); we will be attached to our own faults, and indisposed to recognise them as such. This is why Kant dwells on the vices that "can be grafted" onto the first two elements of the OPG (6:26.18-19, 6:27.12-15, 6:27.21-22): the energy of the corrupted rootstock is diverted to an alien end.[31] But the third element is, in itself, incorruptible and thus takes no vicious graft (6:27.36-37). Now, Kant aims to incorporate radical evil into an account of human development, while maintaining his grip on the providential natural teleology admitted from the start: the result is that we must *remain* endowed with the resources needed to overcome radical evil. That footing, from which we might again find the path to progress, is the incorruptible predisposition to personality. Here we can see why Kant would refuse to follow Epictetus in countenancing the possibility of *utterly destroying* our endowed affinity for our own rational personhood. We cannot suppose its annihilation to be possible, without losing our grip on the providential-teleological conceptual framework of the whole account.

Moreover, when we recognise that radical evil is the corruption of a providentially endowed affective orientation (the OPG), we are poised to make better sense of Kant's language of "the heart" that recurs in this context—e.g. when he suggests that radical evil might "be named perversity *of the heart*" (6:37.22, emphasis altered). He continues with the stunning remark that radical evil yields "an *evil heart*" that yet "can coexist with a will that is in the abstract good" (*ein im Allgemeinen guter Wille*, 6:37.23-24). When a human being comes into the use of reason, she becomes a fledgling person, subject to imputation—a status

[31] I discuss the grafting metaphor, and Kant's understanding of this attachment as an obstacle to progress, from different angles in both Merritt (2021a) and (2021b).

that, elevating her above mere things, also entails some consciousness of the moral law, the principle of this personality. So the moral law, as we noted, figures even in the corrupted evaluative outlook of radical evil: thus the corrupted human being will take any available opportunity to support an idea of herself as giving the law primary consideration, when instead everything she does answers ultimately to another interest (6:38.6-33).[32] This self-deception obscures a practical inconsistency—in effect, one between thin avowal (the claims of a will good "in the abstract"), and the commitments manifest in the actual exercise of choice. Formally, that is the way that Florus is conflicted, too, and presumably also the student who dismisses pot-holding as beneath him. Here, too, Kant administers the zinger—"everyone has his price"—inviting each to consider the matter for himself (6:38.35-37).[33] It is a goad to recognise, and be appropriately moved by, this practical inconsistency.

What about the uplifting side of Epictetus's pedagogical practice? Recall his exhortation to exercise *prohairesis* in a way that preserves us as we are meant to be by nature, self-respecting [αἰδήμονα] and trustworthy [πιστόν] (*D.* 2.8.23)—or likewise that we exercise *prohairesis* "as someone faithful and self-respecting [ὡς πιστός, ὡς αἰδήμων]" (1.4.19). I first want to return to this conception of self-respect. Now, I have proposed that the OPG is an affective orientation in the Stoic tradition, and have pointed out that Kant takes the predisposition to personality, which is none other than Kantian moral feeling, to be an incorruptible element of it. In his Doctrine of Virtue, Kant emphasises that moral feeling is a providential endowment: a given resource that makes possible our developmental progress to

[32] Papish (2018) argues that radical evil fundamentally expresses itself in self-deception.
[33] The passage, quoted in §1 above, concludes with a line from Paul (Romans 3:10). Paul, having distinguished lawfulness of disposition from conformity to law in outward deed, suggests that Jews (who have been entrusted with divine law) may be no better off than Greeks (who have not been), if we are all "under sin". This antecedent, he proposes, might be asserted on the authority of the Hebrew bible: indeed, the text that Kant quotes is Paul's rendering of Psalms 14 and 53, driving here to a surprising condition. Although we speak of an inward perversity of disposition, we yet share it in common: "All have turned aside, together they have become worthless [ἠχρεώθησαν]; no one does good, not even one" (Romans 3:12). The Pauline zinger foreshadows the socially-focused discussion of radical evil in *Religion* Part Three, which we are unable to examine here (see also n27).

good. Hence there can be no duty to *acquire* moral feeling; our obligation is rather to "*cultivate* it and to strengthen it through wonder at its inscrutable source" (*MS* 6:399, 399-400). Now, this remark about wonder is important: it puts us on the brink of Kant's most important departure from Epictetus. But let us follow the common path a few steps further. One element of moral feeling is self-respect, which Kant glosses *reverentia* (6:402). This may seem puzzling, if we think of respect as recognition of personhood as such, independent of merit. But Kant here echoes the Stoic thought that we are, in virtue of our rational power, raised above the rest of nature and have a unique vocation as a result.[34] This *reverentia* is the esteem for one's rational personhood, unavoidably compelled by the moral law within us (6:402-3). It is not how we recognise that an action is morally required; it is rather the mode of our attraction to such actions, our affinity for them as properly our own.

Now recall Epictetus's view that we exercise choice in a way that degrades it when we "marvel" at externals. He never quite makes the complementary claim, that we exercise choice in a way that preserves it if we marvel at our own rational nature. But he arguably implies as much when he characterises Socrates as one who acts in a way that expresses conviction of his kinship, as a rational being, with the gods. Kant makes a similar point—evoking again this sense of wonder—in another pedagogical passage from *Religion* Part One, the counterpoint to the zinger with which we began:

> [T]here is one thing in our soul which, if we hold it properly in view, we cannot cease regarding with the highest astonishment, and for which admiration [*Bewunderung*] is legitimate and uplifting as well. And that is the original moral predisposition in us, as such.—What is this in us (<u>one can ask oneself</u>) whereby we, beings ever dependent on nature through so many needs, are at the same time <u>elevated so far above it in the idea</u>

[34] See, similarly, Sensen (2011:143, 155-7) on dignity.

> of an original predisposition (in us), that we would hold the whole of nature as nothing, and ourselves unworthy of existence, were we to pursue the enjoyment of nature—though this alone can make our life desirable—in defiance of a law through which reason commands us compellingly, without however promising or threatening anything thereby? (6:49; my underscore)[35]

He refers here to our predisposition to personality, which he says "proclaims divine origin" (6:50.1). Again it consists of our readiness to be moved simply by what morality, the law of our rational nature, requires of us. There is indeed something astonishing in the very idea of "rational *natural* beings",[36] creatures that could be *so moved*—even to do what is at odds with everything they require as natural beings. Yet this is not just hard to fathom: it at the same time holds our attention, or ought to, as Kant indicates by invoking wonder or admiration (*Bewunderung*). *Bewunderung*, like respect, is the feeling of rationality recognising itself. Kant canonically invokes it in contexts where the appearance of the rational order of nature is at stake (e.g. Anth 7:261).[37] But this object of wonder is our being endowed with the predisposition to personality, an affective orientation towards our supersensible personhood.

Here we come to the central systematic difference. What Epictetus presents as the command of Zeus, to exercise choice in what we can plausibly call a person-preserving way, does not invoke an affective orientation towards one's *supersensible* personhood. The idea just does not exist in Stoic thought. Let us briefly conclude with some reflections about the significance of Epictetus for Kant, having reached this result.

4. Conclusion

[35] And similarly *MS* (6:483).
[36] Formulation from *MS* (6:379).
[37] Also *KpV* (5:161-2), *KU* (5:187, 5:299, 5:365, 5:482n), EE (20:216).

Epictetus, I argued, opposes *selling* oneself to *keeping* or *preserving* oneself. His account of the latter turns on a certain way of exercising choice: namely, guided by the affective orientation internal to *prohairesis*. He consistently characterises this affective orientation in terms of trustworthiness and self-respect—e.g. that one exercise choice "as someone faithful and self-respecting [ὡς πιστός, ὡς αἰδήμων]" (*D.* 1.4.19). Sometimes the characterisation involves other modifiers: but these two are almost always involved, as if in fixed incantation. With his examples, Epictetus explains both as a kind of affinity for practical consistency, demonstrating the aptness of the standard rendering of *pistos* in terms of trustworthiness: you know what you will get with this sort of person, because her avowals are consistent with how she concretely commits herself in action. But it may also be rendered in terms of *faithfulness*, which better suits Epictetus's gesture to "Socrates and his kind" (1.2.33) as manifesting the standard in question. Of course, Stoics took the sage to as rare as the phoenix:[38] and so we may suppose that "Socrates and his kind" are not right at hand for inspection. So it seems a certain faith in the reality of this standard is required, if we are to exercise choice in the relevantly person-preserving way.

Perhaps Epictetus, like Kant after him, just takes a good look around: our badness is everywhere, in such endless—and perhaps ultimately somewhat boring—variety. Perhaps, then, the only applicable advice is to *raise* one's price. And so Epictetus exhorts, perhaps tongue-in-cheek:

> Only consider at what price you sell your *prohairesis*. If nothing else, man, at least don't sell it cheap. (*D.* 1.2.33) [39]

[38] Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Fate* (199.19-20) at LS (61N).
[39] Emily Hulme and Tyler Paytas each suggested (in conversation) that there may be nothing ironic in this advice. Hulme pointed to a story Seneca tells of Pastor, "a distinguished Roman knight" whose son was decapitated by Caligula on account of his beautiful hair; afterwards, Caligula invites Pastor to dine with him, and drink a toast. So "the unhappy man drank the toast through gritted teeth, just as if he were drinking his son's blood" (*Ira* 2.33.3-4) — for he *had another son*. This might illustrate, she suggested, what it is to sell

We register the irony, of course: surely his lesson all along has been that one ought not sell oneself at any price. But now we might wonder if this is genuinely possible, by his lights. Yes, there is "Socrates and his kind". He has also just told a story about a wrestler, who, afflicted with a deadly disease of his genitals, refused to "cut off this part, and once again enter the gymnasium" (1.2.23-24): he rejected such surgery as unendurable for him "as a *man* [ὡς ἀνήρ] — one who had performed and been acclaimed at the Olympic games, who was at home in such a place, not just rubbed down at Bato's wrestling school" (1.2.26). And so he died. That's practical consistency; but one may be tempted to doubt that it is quite on the same standard as Socrates.

For Kant, Epictetus's wrestler could only weakly suggest the idea of acting as one who has *no price*. For Kant, such a possibility—and the moral disposition itself—requires not just that one act in a person-preserving way; it requires an idea of *supersensible* personhood that simply does not figure for any Stoic, Epictetus included. Yet perhaps this is another way in which Kant takes up Stoic thought in the spirit of rendering it consistent with its best insights. For Kant himself accepts a providential-teleological premise that would have been quite recognisable to any Stoic for his own account of human development; Kant only suggests that an argument that proceeds in this way must also show how the endemically corrupted human being remains equipped to regain the developmental path to good. Contra Epictetus, it is not possible to degrade into annihilation our endowed orientation to our own personality. Yet for Kant, the standard governing this development is not quite the rational personhood in virtue of which we are elevated above wild beasts and sheep; it is rather that in virtue of which we are elevated above nature *full stop*. Of course, to invoke the conceptual

---

oneself at a *high* price. But Epictetus suggests that what matters is the state of mind in which one does such a thing, be it pot-holding or drinking a toast with Caligula. Pastor is not drinking the toast to flatter Caligula, but to save his other son; and, it seems to me, he acts with a peculiar self-mastery.

resources required for this thought is also to relinquish any position in the Stoic tradition as such. Yet Kant may have been interested in Epictetus as a philosopher at the limits of that tradition, one able to give the notion of *having no price* a genuine sense — even if not quite the sense that Kant himself supposes is reflected in the idea of a genuine moral disposition.[40]

[40] Versions of the paper were delivered at various venues: the philosophy seminar of the Universities of Turin and Milan (2022); as the Gwen Nettlefold Lecture at the University of Tasmania (2023); and at the *Kant and Stoic Ethics* workshop at UNSW (2023) — thanks to the audience members for their questions and comments. I would particularly like to thank Stefano Bacin, Dirk Baltzly, David Bronstein, Alix Cohen, Emily Hulme, Brad Inwood, Jacob Klein, Michael Vazquez, Timothy O'Leary, Tyler Paytas, Will Taylor, and Markos Valaris.