

Scott Aikin & William O. Stephens

EPICTETUS'S *ENCHEIRIDION*



**A NEW TRANSLATION AND
GUIDE TO STOIC ETHICS**

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Scott Aikin and William O. Stephens

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First Excerpt [498 words from Preface]

With this translation and commentary, we are out to accomplish several overlapping objectives. First, we want to show how Epictetus's *Encheiridion* is part of a larger story of a philosophical school's inception, development and reception in the ancient world and beyond. Much of that story is about the Stoic tradition that antedates Epictetus with philosophers like Socrates and Diogenes, who were inspirations to the later Stoics. We turn to focus on Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrysippus as they formulated the core ideas of their school. We also believe an under-appreciated figure, Musonius Rufus, deserves focused attention for his story, given his role in Epictetus's introduction to the Porch. Furthermore, we wish to highlight the starkness and clarity that define the Stoic programme, which we believe is best served by discussing Cicero's catalogue of Stoic paradoxes (with one we add for good measure). Our remarks on these set the stage for a picture of Epictetus the philosopher and the story of his *Encheiridion*, compiled and distributed by his student Arrian. We trace the high points of the *Encheiridion*'s influence on philosophy and literature in the Western tradition to its contemporary impact.

Our translation is inspired by the thought that the *Encheiridion* was written in Koinē Greek, the accessible language of everyday people, not the technical Greek of the philosophers. Consequently, the translation aims in like fashion to meet progressors and readers where they are.

Our commentaries on the chapters are posited on the view that Stoic philosophical practice is underwritten by one reasoning to and endorsing precepts about the nature of the world and what is good. Consequently, we have endeavoured to provide maximally argumentative interpretations of each chapter, providing whatever background considerations or suppressed reasons one needs to see what is intellectually compelling about Epictetus's case. Moreover, we often pause to note the points in the progress of the *Encheiridion* where new complications arise or questions demand answers. One take-away is that we see the *Encheiridion* as a developmental work, one with exercises and arguments for progressively more advanced students in later chapters, along with challenges for these advanced progressors to address in light of their progress. That is, new kinds of challenges for practitioners of Stoic philosophy will arise because of their improvement as philosophers. We will call these instances *progressors' temptations*; they are difficulties Epictetus is particularly intent on observing and answering towards the end of the *Encheiridion*.

We conclude this *Guide* with a collection of what we take to be the most widely posed and most challenging objections to Stoicism generally and Epictetus's statement of it specifically. Many are old problems for the philosophy, familiar to and addressed in different ways by the ancients.

Others are newer but equally troubling challenges informed by developments in logic, physics, psychology and critical reflections on contemporary culture. To each objection, we present what we think the most promising Stoic responses are. We hope this work shows that Stoicism is a living philosophical tradition well worth critically defending and developing.

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Second Excerpt [560 words from pp. 22–23]

Six themes constitute the core of Stoicism. First, Stoics stress the necessity of self-control. Second, Stoics insist on seeing things as they are. Third, living according to nature is vital to Stoics. Fourth, your virtue depends on doing your duties, which are defined by your roles. Fifth, having virtue depends on knowing. Sixth, Stoicism is an aspirationalist ethics. Let's explicate each theme in turn.

1.4.1 Self-control

If you cannot control yourself, the Stoics reason, you have no hope of controlling anything in your life. If you do not master your desires, your desires will master you. If you do not improve yourself, it is unreasonable to think that others will improve you. Freedom, paradoxically, comes from mastering yourself. Failure to work on yourself, on making progress towards your self-mastery, will inevitably result in inertia, failure to progress towards freedom. Complacency will serve only to strengthen the chains of dependency on unreliable, fickle frills. Complacency hardens the bonds enslaving you to dangerous desires, namely, desires for and about things not up to you.

One danger of desiring what is not up to you is that you thereby enslave yourself to whoever or whatever controls those things. You make yourself a puppet on the strings manipulated by a puppet-master who can all too easily coerce you. A worse danger of desiring what is not up to you is that it fools you into desiring the wrong things. Physical beauty, physical gratification, wealth, fame and power over others are not things that can win self-respect. Without self-respect, happiness is impossible. Stoics are convinced that you only respect people who are decent, kind, fair, generous, helpful, strong, loyal and loving. Thus, you can gain self-respect only by becoming good, grateful, just, temperate and wise. Virtues are up to you to cultivate. Virtues are up to you to *want*. By contrast, wanting things that are not virtues inevitably leads to compromising your moral integrity for shiny baubles and fleeting frills and thrills. Fancy flowers wilt. Luxurious rugs fade. Priceless vases shatter. Mansions crumble. Fortunes are stolen. Applause dies out. Virtues are the true treasures that can last a lifetime.

1.4.2 See things as they are

Stoics are uncompromising realists. One bit of realism is the crucial division between the things that are up to you and the things that are not up to you. We term this 'the Fundamental Divide' in the commentary to underscore its enormous, continentally enormous, import. For greater precision, we can distinguish (a) things completely up to you, (b) things you have some power to affect but that also depend on causal factors that are not up to you and (c) things not at all up to

you. Our minds are up to us and belong to group (a). We are responsible only for what is up to us and we are completely responsible for what is up to us. The minds of others are not up to us, but, in the right circumstances, it is not unreasonable to try to influence others even though we know that ultimately they make up their own minds. Thus, the minds of others belong to group (b). Epictetus knows full well that it is up to him to try to impart wisdom to his students; he can try to teach them. But whether and what they learn is ultimately up to them, not him.

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Third Excerpt [576 words from pp. 25, 27–29]

1.4.4 Know your roles, do your duties

The Stoics believe that we are what we do. Our myriad activities collectively constitute our personal identity. Our activities flow from our roles. We each have many roles. Some roles we are born into and have our whole lives. Others we choose and have for mere minutes or hours. Others we retain for years, whether others assign them to us or we choose them for ourselves.

... The role of social beings necessitates associating with, collaborating with and peacefully abiding with the other members of our community. Like all ancient philosophers, Stoics believe that human beings are social and political animals. Our natural gregariousness rules out eremitism. Bellicose behaviour directly conflicts with human nature's norm of peaceable harmony. Concord is the basis of justice and social well-being. So, our role as citizens of the local community requires us to be lawful, courteous, help our neighbours in need, contribute to the good of the whole, preserve communal bonds and protect our community from threats. Our role as cosmopolitan 'citizens of the cosmos' requires us to affiliate with all rational beings everywhere in the universe, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality, political party, socio-economic class, gender, sexual orientation, religion or species. ...

1.4.5 Virtue depends on knowing

Whether an act is virtuous or not depends on what we know about the situation and what we are supposed to do. For example, if someone does something that seems very brave, but she did not know about the danger, that ignorance undercuts our evaluation of that person's action as properly brave. ... Furthermore, our knowledge that something is the right thing must be the reason why we do it, too, for our actions to be virtuous. So, if someone were to know that repaying a debt is right, but they are motivated to repay only by threat of force, their repayment, though rightly done and alongside knowledge that one should do it, is nevertheless not virtuous, either. This is because that knowledge of what's right to do must be part of why one does what is right. Knowledge is an essential part of being a good person, and it's not just ethical knowledge that is required for this, but knowledge of the world and how it works. Given our roles as people on whom others depend and who must effectively manage our tasks in the world, we must have a wide knowledge of how things work and what to expect. So, part of our duties to ourselves and others is to have knowledge. ...

1.4.6 Stoicism as aspirationalism

One way to understand aspirationalism in ethics is to see it in the context of its denial. Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher and ethicist, proposed that the principle *ought implies can* binds moral theories. That means that any rule or norm of action should be one that people can reasonably be expected to follow. So, ethics is not only practical but practicable. In contrast, aspirationalism demands of us more than we might reasonably be able to do. Its principle is *ought implies aspire to*. The aspirationalist view puts the highest good out of our reach, a perfection we can only strive towards. Aspirationalism posits an ethical North Star as our point of orientation but something we may never reach. (To continue the analogy, the principle of *ought implies can* makes the ultimate goal more like the North Pole, which not only is orienting but reachable.)

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