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A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_vox\\_evangelica.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php)

## *Epictetus (and the New Testament)*

Peter Oakes

[p.39]

### INTRODUCTION

Quite a substantial number of those who heard the Gospel as it spread around the first-century Mediterranean would almost certainly have regarded the whole idea of the atonement as nonsensical: how could something important, moral sin, be in any sense dealt with by something utterly unimportant such as death? Furthermore, they would have regarded the resurrection as not only incredible but immoral.

In 1912, E. V. Arnold wrote in Hastings' *Encyclopaedia*:

The study of the discourses of Epictetus is an indispensable starting-point for a true understanding of the teaching of St. Paul. Better than any work of antiquity they reveal to us the inner thoughts of the social circles to which the Apostle chiefly addressed himself.<sup>1</sup>

Arnold surely overstates the case. On the other hand however, if, as we will argue below, Epictetus provides about the best window into the kind of first-century Stoic world-view which will have lain prominently in the background of many of the people to whom the Gospel came and who constituted an important part of the early Church, then the importance of understanding Epictetus' teaching extends beyond Paul's letters to most of the New Testament.

The brackets in the title of this article are to signal the danger of jumping straight into seeking to compare Epictetus with the New Testament. Documents clearly need to be read as a whole, in their context, and the significance of the parts only deduced once the argument of the whole has been grasped. If instead we jump straight into comparison with the New Testament, we will probably address the document with an agenda other than its own, leading to an analysis of the ideas of the document using an inappropriate, and hence distorting grid. In fact, this problem is inherent in any attempt to compare, in a general way, two networks of views which have differing structures. The same questions will be asked of *different* systems of ideas—questions which may not actually be central to one (or either) system and which hence produce an inappropriate grid through which to analyse it. The problem seems to be there

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<sup>1</sup> I J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), Vol. V, 323f. Citations and translations of Epictetus are from W. A. Oldfather (ed.). *Epictetus: The Discourses as Reported by Arrian, the Manual, and Fragments*. Greek Text and English Translation, 2 Vols., Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1925/1928). Among important studies on Epictetus are Adolf Bonhöffer, *Epiktet and das Neue Testament* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1911); idem., *ZNW* 13 (1912), 281-92; *Epiktet and die Stoa: Untersuchungen zur stoischen Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1890); R. Bultmann, 'Das religiöse Moment in der ethischen Unterweisung des Epiktet, and das Neue Testament', *ZNW* 13 (1912), 97-110, 177-91; Gabriel Germain, *Epictète et la spiritualité stoïcienne* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1964); P. E. More, *Hellenistic Philosophies*. The Greek Tradition Vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1923); Max Pohlenz, *Die Stoa: Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959, 2nd edn. [there are several edns., incl. 1972]); F. H. Sandbach, *The Stoics* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975); D. S. Sharp, *Epictetus and the New Testament* (London, 1914); H. Schenkl, *Epicteti Dissertationes* (Leipzig, 1916 edn., includes verbal index). Thanks are due to Allan Girdwood and to Dr Tom Wright for their comments while working on this paper.

even when, as E. P. Sanders does with his 'pattern of religion',<sup>2</sup> the methodology has been carefully thought through.

A viable solution to this methodological difficulty would seem to be

[p.40]

the following: first, to seek to understand what are the central concerns, and hence the main agenda, of the network of views represented by a document or group of documents; second, to analyse the views on the basis of that agenda; third, to ask how an adherent of those views would react in the concrete situation of, say, hearing the Gospel or reading one of Paul's letters (taking into account, in the latter case, the reader's new position as a Christian). We will attempt to sketch the results of such an approach for the case of Epictetus, the late first-/early second-century slave turned philosophical teacher.

### THE NATURE OF THE MATERIAL

Epictetus was expelled from Rome by Domitian with the other philosophers, in about AD 90, and settled at Nicopolis, where he ran a school.<sup>3</sup> The material that we have on Epictetus is generally derived from this school. Apart from a limited number of probable fragments, our material consists of Arrian's *Discourses* and his *Encheiridion*, which is a distillation of them (including other, lost discourses). The *Discourses* seem to be notes taken down verbatim, in shorthand,<sup>4</sup> in Epictetus' philosophy classes. There appears to be no overall order in the way in which the 95 discourses, collected in 4 books, are arranged. This raises the issue of the collection of discourses possibly being better studied as a collection of documents rather than as one (which also raises the question of the interaction between Arrian's thought and Epictetus', a question on which it would be difficult to make progress). Studies of individual discourses would indeed be valuable (e.g. *Diss.* 3.22, 'On the calling of a Cynic'). However, in a limited and tightly focussed corpus such as Epictetus', it seems possible and wise first to attempt an analysis of the argumentative thrust of that corpus as a whole.

The text-critical situation is, to a New Testament scholar, very unusual. All manuscripts of the discourses have been shown to depend on one, *Cod. Bodleianus Misc. Graec. 251 s. xi/xii*.<sup>5</sup> Text criticism is thus only the weighing of suggested emendations to the many flaws in this manuscript. By contrast, the situation for the fragments and the *Encheiridion* is very complex, the most important question being which fragments to include. However, both because of the shortness of these relative to the discourses and because of the incomparable value of the discourses as apparently more or less a primary source, the fragments and the *Encheiridion* are a fair amount less important.

### APPROACHES

Studies on Epictetus in the past century usually fall into two categories. In each category, the writers have often analysed Epictetus on the basis of agendas which do not match the pattern of his central interests. Many

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<sup>2</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 17.

<sup>3</sup> See Oldfather, Introduction, I, x.

<sup>4</sup> Oldfather, Introduction, I, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Oldfather, Introduction, I, xxxii.

[p.41]

of them are valuable secondary studies of the relation between Epictetus and something else, but they are generally not the primary studies of Epictetus in his own terms on which such studies ought to depend.

### The Philosophers

The philosophers tend to describe Epictetus by his views on a series of perennial crucial concepts (especially characteristic Stoic ones, such as the question of Nature), under the standard headings of physics, ethics and logic and, in particular, by expounding the main idea which is seen as Epictetus' original contribution, that of the 3 fields (τόποι) of ethics. P. E. More provides a classic, excellently expounded example of this approach. However, his analytical framework, the three τόποι, even if it is original to Epictetus, seems not to be what is most important to him. One way in which this is shown is by the contrast between More's neat partitioning of terminology<sup>6</sup> and Epictetus' willingness to mix it together (e.g. *Diss.* 2.10<sup>7</sup>). It is also shown by More's lengthy discussion of a subject, that of the mechanism by which the reason could have a genuine role in giving or withholding assent,<sup>8</sup> which, while clearly of philosophical importance, seems not to be something which Epictetus expends much energy at all in seeking to communicate to his pupils. While such discussions are clearly important to the philosopher, they need to be a secondary activity, dependent on the results of a prior analysis of Epictetus on the basis of his own agenda. The same is, of course, true of discussion of topics of interest to the New Testament scholar.

### The New Testament Scholars

The first road frequently taken by New Testament scholars, unfortunately, is 'parrallelomania'.<sup>9</sup> D. Sharp's book<sup>10</sup> is of considerable value for the study of New Testament Greek, exhaustively discussing linguistic links with Epictetus (which is written in koine). However, his comparison of thought and teaching is conducted more or less only at the level of individual words and phrases. This can lead to gross misunderstanding. For example, Sharp sees a parallel between the biblical injunction not to covet, and Epictetus' saying, 'And what is the law of God? To guard what is his own, not to lay claim to what is not his own...' (*Diss.* 2.16.28).<sup>11</sup> In its context, Epictetus is clearly referring to a totally different issue than coveting (see below). A. Bonhöffer was a specialist Epictetus scholar and knew enough to avoid his long list of parallel snippets falling into Sharp's errors. Maybe his weakness is to fall into a gulf between small detailed parallels and an extremely broad brush-stroke comparison—Epictetus has a warm and pure religiousness,

[p.42]

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<sup>6</sup> More, *Hellenistic Philosophies*, 107f.

<sup>7</sup> Most notably if Arrian is faithful to his teacher's ideas in using the term, καθήκοντα to include elements of the 'first field'.

<sup>8</sup> More, *Hellenistic Philosophies*, 142ff.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. S. Sandmel, 'Parallelomania', *JBL* 81 (1962), 2-13

[[http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/parallelomania\\_sandmel.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/parallelomania_sandmel.pdf)].

<sup>10</sup> Sharp, *Epictetus and the New Testament*.

<sup>11</sup> Sharp, *Epictetus and the New Testament*, 115.

etc.<sup>12</sup> This led to him missing some rather major distinctions between Epictetus and the New Testament.

Not a man to baulk at indicating that someone has overlooked some major distinctions was Rudolph Bultmann. He particularly highlighted Epictetus' lack of place for history and lack of value for individuality.<sup>13</sup> Bultmann succeeds in working at the level of focussed but systematic ideas, avoiding Bönhoff's problems. However, he is still not giving the sort of general critical exposition of Epictetus which is needed as a basis for progress in New Testament studies, because (as well as the restrictions imposed by the length and topic of the article) his agenda is still not that of Epictetus. Instead, his agenda is comparison of religions—and, his tone would lead one to say, comparison of the *value* of religions. Such an agenda might be important to apologists but it does not seem to meet the current needs of New Testament studies.

### Salvation and Service

To seek to approach Epictetus in his own terms we must look at the nature of the discourses.

The discourses represent presumably typical material presented in Epictetus' personal contributions to his classes (as opposed to the reading of set texts by authors such as Chrysippus [see e.g. *Diss.* 1.4.5ff.]). What Epictetus intended his students to gain from attending these classes was neither particularly a knowledge of the writings of famous philosophers nor skill at debate. He intended primarily that they should gain personal salvation (see *Diss.* 2.17.29-38; 2.18.28f.; 2.19; 3.10.10). Almost all the content of the discourses is directed toward this end. Epictetus graphically describes man's plight, says what must be done, and shows what will be the results of doing so.

To talk of 'salvation' in the context of the teaching of someone like Epictetus may sound strange to New Testament scholars, particularly since Epictetus believes neither in reward after death nor in any sense of national salvation. However, it seems a commonplace to scholars of classical philosophy. D. W. Hamlyn writes that after Aristotle, 'Its [sc. philosophy's] aim became... more practical in the sense that a main aim of philosophers was to indicate the way toward attaining some kind of salvation'.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, F. H. Sandbach comments that first-century Stoic writers were 'preachers of a religion'.<sup>15</sup>

The σωζω/σωτηρία word group in Epictetus does not appear to correspond to that word group in the New Testament.<sup>16</sup> When the New Testament uses the group in a religious sense there is a subjective benefit to the one saved. Epictetus uses the group to refer to preservation of something and, in the important uses, the 'something' is effectively excellence of character, an objective good rather than a subjective benefit for the person involved. Socrates wanted ὦ Σῶσαι not

[p.43]

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<sup>12</sup> Bönhoff, *Epiktet and das Neue Testament*, 341ff.

<sup>13</sup> Bultmann, 'Moment', 182ff.

<sup>14</sup> D. W. Hamlyn, 'Greek Philosophy after Aristotle', D. J. O'Connor (ed.), *A Critical History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 63.

<sup>15</sup> Sandbach, *The Stoics*, 17.

<sup>16</sup> Sharp, *Epictetus and the New Testament*, 129f.

his body but ἐκεῖνο, ὃ τῷ δικαίῳ μὲν αὖξεται καὶ σώζεται, τῷ δ'ἀδίκῳ μειοῦται καὶ ἀπόλλυται. Epictetus concludes: τοῦτον [sc. Socrates] οὐκ ἔστι σώσαι αἰσχρῶς ἀλλ' ἀποθνήσκων σώζεται, οὐ φεύγων (*Diss.* 4.1.163-167). 'Saving' Socrates is preserving the man of honour that he is. A dead Socrates is still a man of honour. The σωτηρία here is not a subjective benefit for the now dead Socrates, but the objective preservation of the event of this honourable life. Epictetus' system does promise subjective benefits, but uses other word groups, such as 'freeing/freedom' to do so.<sup>17</sup> There is a plight with subjective and objective disbenefits, a means of escape and a subjectively and objectively beneficial state to be thus reached. Since these themes are Epictetus' principal concern, it seems best to describe Epictetus' system by using a plight-saving action-outcome model, i.e. a 'salvation' model.

A danger of this approach is that we might mis-read Epictetus as exclusively centred on the benefit of the individual human. If salvation is the main burden of his teaching, then a concept which surprisingly crops up as a key metaphysical idea, 'service'—of the Cosmos—underlies and permeates it throughout. 'Salvation' and 'Service' could perhaps be seen as two poles around which Epictetus' system revolves. However the main thrust of the discourses is around the former, so we will use that to structure our analysis.

We will give a brief description of Epictetus' teaching using a plight-salvation-outcome model, and then make some moves towards considering how it might relate to New Testament study.

## A BASIC EXPOSITION OF EPICTETUS TEACHING

### Man's Plight

People in general are not free. That is, they fail to achieve what they desire or to avoid what they wish to avoid. The results of this are various mental states which are unpleasant, such as pain and fear (*Diss.* 4.1.84ff.), or which are morally wrong, such as envy (*Diss.* 2.17.26). Furthermore there is a bad religious result: we blame the gods (*Diss.* 4.7.11), because they do not give us what we desire. This lack of freedom is irrespective of social status. If someone thinks they would be free and happy if they could only become Caesar's friend, let them ask someone who is already Caesar's friend whether they have slept better before or since becoming so (*Diss.* 4.1.47). Even if someone appears currently to be gaining all they desire, the appearance should be disregarded since all you are seeing is a slave whose master happens to be out of town (*Diss.* 4.1.58).

The reason why a person is not free is that he does not handle his sense-impressions (φαντασίαι) correctly. Objects and events make sense-impressions on us: over that we have no control. However, it is up to us

[p.44]

to make our judgments over how to interpret the sense-impressions. The crucial issue is over what objects are good, bad or indifferent (ἀδιάφορα). A sense-impression may hit us saying, 'Here is money, it is good', but we must make a judgment of whether it is good or not. Our

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<sup>17</sup> To complicate matters, freedom too is something which Epictetus can talk of being gained by death. However, freedom really is a subjective benefit, but its definition is so negative that the act of dying (instead of being enslaved) is an expression of it (see below).

mistake is to see external things such as money, health, or even the actual achievement of any action, as good and therefore set our desire on them.

Shall I not set my desire on health?—No, not at all, nor on anything else which is not your own. For that which is not in your power to acquire or to keep is none of yours. Keep far away from it not merely your hands, but above all your desire; otherwise you have delivered yourself into slavery. (*Diss.* 4.1.76f.)

The soul will always desire that which it thinks good and feel aversion to that which it thinks bad (*Diss.* 3.3.2). Having committed our desire and aversion to external things we are trapped, since we ultimately cannot control external things and therefore will fail to achieve our desires.

As well as indirectly, via thwarted desire, negative results flow directly from the mistaken handling of sense-impressions. Again there are both painful and immoral results. Striking among the painful results is pity (*Diss.* 2.17.26). One way in which this can arise is from a mistaken judgment about the state of our fellow-human. We think him unhappy because he is starving. But food is an external and therefore indifferent. If he is unhappy it is because his judgments about lack of food are incorrect (*Ench.* 16). However, Epictetus would still have us (insincerely) sympathise with him to comfort him, even groaning if necessary (*Ench.* 16). The direct moral result of mishandling sense-impressions is that people will fight over external things, because they regard them as goods.

### **The Saving Action**

The saving action, the whole aim of Epictetus' philosophy classes, is to learn to handle sense-impressions correctly, regarding as good only those things which for you are good, and vice versa. The way of deciding what things are good leads us into Theology.

The answer as to which are the good and bad things is that they are those which 'belong' to us: that is, which are under our control (*Diss.* 1.1). This control must be unconditional; all external things, for example our body, are excluded, and all that is left is our 'moral purpose', our *προαίρεσις*. Thus, in an unattributed quotation used by Epictetus:

The nature of the good as well as of the evil lies in a use of the impressions of the senses, but the things which lie outside the

[p.45]

moral purpose admit neither the nature of the evil, nor the nature of the good. (*Diss.* 2.1.4)

That this must be so follows from the providence of God:<sup>18</sup>

God made all mankind to be happy, to be serene. To this end He gave them resources, giving each man some things for his own, and others not for his own. The things that are subject to hindrance, deprivation, and compulsion are not a man's own, but those which cannot be hindered are his own. The true nature of the good and the evil, as was fitting for

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<sup>18</sup> Although Epictetus can refer to gods, his system works on the basis of one omnipotent God, often called 'Zeus' or 'Another', and identified with the Universe. On providence see below.

Him who watches over and protects us like a father, He gave to man to be among his own possessions. (*Diss.* 3.24.2f.)

The point may be proved again from the Stoic axiom<sup>19</sup> that it is impossible for one person's evil deed to harm another person: '...it is impossible that the man who has gone astray, is one person, while the man who suffers is another...' (*Diss.* 1.28.10).<sup>20</sup> ' "So-and-so threatens you... He is on the point of condemning you unjustly." Poor devil!' (the accuser not the accused, *Diss.* 3.18.9). It follows that one's definition of benefit and harm, and hence of good and bad, must be restricted to those things which only the person himself can control.

Further proof is that our faculty of understanding the use of external impressions is a fragment of God in us (this seems to be implied by *Diss.* 2.8.8ff.). We can deduce that this must be the sphere of what is good (though Epictetus' argument in this text is actually rather more complex than this).

The action to be taken—and Epictetus is insistent that one must act practically to train oneself in the ideas—is to practise in the events of each day from dawn to dusk thinking, 'Here is a rich man. That is indifferent. They will torture me. That is indifferent. My child has died. That is indifferent'.

...we ought also to exercise ourselves daily to meet the impressions of our senses, because these too put interrogations to us. So-and-so's son is dead. Answer, 'That lies outside the sphere of the moral purpose, it is not an evil'. (*Diss.* 3.8.1f.)

This should then be supported by daily self-examination, assessing how one has handled sense-impressions during the day and how one has behaved (*Diss.* 4.6.34f.). Behaviour in a general ethical sense is vital to the training. It is no use apparently correctly handling sense-impressions but being a bad father, mother, child, friend or citizen.

### **The Result—Freedom**

'I have been set free by God' (*Diss.* 4.7.17). Epictetus defies tyrants by his freedom. But what is this freedom? The bemused tyrant asks why he

[p.46]

is not able to lock Epictetus out of his palace. Epictetus replies, 'Because, if anyone will not receive me, I do not care to go in, but always I wish rather the thing which takes place. For I regard God's will as better than my will' (*Diss.* 4.7.20). Epictetus defines freedom as follows:

He is free who lives as he wills, who is subject neither to compulsion, nor hindrance, nor force, whose choices are unhampered, whose desires attain their end, whose aversions do not fall into what they would avoid. (*Diss.* 4.1.1)

The comparison of this definition with the above indicates the basically negative concept of freedom which Epictetus holds. The conclusion at the end of *Diss.* 4.1, the long discourse on freedom, is that 'freedom is not acquired by satisfying yourself with what you desire, but by destroying your desire' (*Diss.* 4.1.175). This must be qualified, since Epictetus does not want

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<sup>19</sup> Oldfather, Introduction, I, xx.

<sup>20</sup> See Oldfather, I, 180, n.1; II, 114, n.1.

you to destroy all your desires but only all those outside the moral purpose. Yet the freedom really is basically negative, as his quotation from Diogenes shows: 'The one sure way to secure freedom is to die cheerfully' (*Diss.* 4.1.30).

### **Happiness**

Εὐδαιμονία expresses the subjective happiness which comes from freedom. Happiness is only possible for the free, for '...happiness must already possess everything that it wants...' (*Diss.* 3.24.17). As well as being a happy one, the situation is a steady one, and you are serene. Since no external event is good or bad, no external event can ever disrupt your happiness. There is nothing left to fear, no pain (*Diss.* 4.1.81ff.).

### **After death**

There is no further reward after death. The free life itself is the only reward offered in Epictetus' system of salvation. Nothing else is needed (*Diss.* 3.24.51f.). Furthermore, Epictetus is opposed, at a very fundamental level, to any concept of personal survival after death. Two engines drive this opposition, each a metaphysical (or physical—the distinction seems hard to make in Stoicism<sup>21</sup>) concept. They are a very broad concept of the conservation of elements, and the concept of service.

At death, our whole being is dissolved into elements (*Diss.* 3.13.14f.).<sup>22</sup> The next move is the key one and is expressed in a wonderfully epigrammatic way:

τοῦτο θάνατος,  
μεταβολή... ἐκ τοῦ νῦν ὄντος  
οὐκ εἰς τὸ μὴ ὄν,  
ἀλλ' εἰς τὸ νῦν μὴ ὄν.

[p.47]

—Οὐκέτι οὖν ἔσομαι;

—Οὐκ ἔσει

ἀλλ' ἄλλο τι οὐδὲν ὁ κόσμος χρεῖαν ἔχει.

('...but something else will be, something different from that of which the universe now has need'<sup>23</sup>)

καὶ γὰρ σὺ ἐγένου οὐχ ὅτε σὺ ἠθέλησας, ἀλλ' ὅτε ὁ κόσμος χρεῖαν ἔσχευ. (*Diss.* 3.24.93f.)

When you die you do not become nothing, but your elements are remade into new things. You personally do not continue. If you did, it would be to the universe's disadvantage because you were what it needed at specifically the present time; in the future it will need other creatures constituted from your elements. If you personally continued, the Universe would be lumbered with what it no longer needed and deprived of the new things it did need.

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<sup>21</sup> See Julia Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley, L.A. and Oxford, 1992), 3.

<sup>22</sup> He basically follows Zeno, it seems, in seeing the soul as body. See More, *Hellenistic Philosophies*, 76f. However this works out, it ought not, for a pantheist, to contradict the idea of a fragment of God in us.

<sup>23</sup> Oldfather, II, 215, here seems preferable to Germain's '—Tu ne serais plus, mais <tu serais> quelque chose d'autre dont l'univers a besoin...' (*Épictète et la spiritualité stoïcienne*, 118) which seems to go too far beyond the Greek.

This is probably the most dramatic outworking of Epictetus' concept of service. The parts of the cosmos necessarily serve the whole, which is identified (but only very occasionally explicitly) with God: πάντα ὑπακούει τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ὑπηρετεῖ... (*Frag.* 3 [Stobaeus, IV.44, 66]).

### ***Ethics***

Reference has already been made to an ethical consequence of the salvific move itself. Someone who has come to regard his only good and evil, and hence his only sphere of desire and aversion, as being that of the moral purpose, will no longer fight with people over, say, wealth or power (*Diss.* 4.5.29ff.). In fact he will submit to others in these areas (*Diss.* 3.13.23). More generally, he will not do wrong because he knows that anyone who does wrong is *ipso facto* the loser, even if he gains a consulship by it, since the entire good you are seeking is in the realm of the 'moral purpose'.

A fertile field for translational misunderstanding ought, however, to be tackled here. 'Moral purpose' is the translation which Oldfather (with support from Sandbach<sup>24</sup>) uses for προαίρεσις. This suggests a more direct link to ethics than is really the case. P. E. More simply translates it as 'will,'<sup>25</sup> and Dragona-Monachou describes 'the basic sense of the term as essential or existential choice'.<sup>26</sup> Pinning the term down is actually very difficult. What we learn from *Diss.* 2.1.4 (quoted above), is that it is the thing in which our sole good and evil lies, and that it is very closely linked in some way with our handling of external impressions (cf. *Diss.* 2.22.29). Our basic calling is to improve our προαίρεσις by making right judgments about external things (*Diss.* 1.29.1-4).

While 'moral purpose' seems suspect as a translation of προαίρεσις, Oldfather can partially be defended if it is seen more as a paraphrase. Principally this is because excelling in the field of the προαίρεσις can only mean doing what is excellent morally—wither in Epictetus' terms

[p.48]

(choosing so as to be unhampered) or in terms he and we would share (e.g. choosing in a just way). Epictetus is concerned with what kind of προαίρεσις it is that you exercise. Secondly, the προαίρεσις is moral, because pursuit of it is fulfilling the profession of ourselves as rational, moral beings as opposed to say the profession of sheep (*Diss.* 2.9.4).

For Epictetus the basic moral good is the very act of confining your desire to the realm of the προαίρεσις. This conforms your will to God's (see below and *Diss.* 1.29.4) and it is to act in the way that is truly natural to you, i.e. conforms to your 'true nature—the reason, its judgments, its activities' (*Diss.* 4.11.33).

Epictetus seems to use the concept of what is natural in two distinct ways. In the text cited above he speaks of our nature (ἐκεῖνο ὃ πεφύκαμεν), the reason—in distinction from our body. This is confusing because it is clearly part of our nature to have a body and, elsewhere, Epictetus talks of things which are natural but which we may have to give up, such as society with others (*Diss.* 3.13.5). There thus appear to be two distinct uses of 'what is natural'. Oldfather attempts to escape this by using the phrase 'our true nature' for the former sense.

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<sup>24</sup> Sandbach, *The Stoics*, 165.

<sup>25</sup> More, *Hellenistic Philosophies*, 103, n.6, cf. 141.

<sup>26</sup> Myrto Dragona-Monachou, ' "Choice" in Aristotle and Epictetus', (Gk) *Philosophia* 8-9 (Athens, 1978-9), 265-310; Abstract in *The Philosopher's Index* (1980), 361.

This could perhaps be expressed more precisely as 'our nature in distinction from other animals'. However, Epictetus' actual terminology seems entangled. Sandbach generalises that the Stoics see the 'natural life' as being distinct from the 'moral life', being to do with use of indifferent things rather than with good things.<sup>27</sup> For Epictetus, while this is at least partially true as regards one of his uses of the term 'natural', it seems not to be an accurate reflection of the picture as a whole: the 'truly natural' life (life according to our true nature) actually is the moral life.

Another way he would express this idea of conforming to your true nature is that in doing this you fulfil the profession (the promise, ἐπαγγελία) of a human being, that is, of 'a rational mortal animal' (*Diss.* 2.9.1f. —note that part of our true nature is as mortal). A further way of expressing it is that 'your function in life (σου τὸ ἔργον)' is 'to be serene, to be unhampered, to be unhindered' (*Diss.* 4.4.22). That we should act 'according to our true nature, fulfil our 'promise', perform our 'function' is a moral axiom for Epictetus.

Flowing from the salvific move, but needing elaboration, is the area of handling ἄδιάφορα. The salvific move is that one is convinced that they are ἄδιάφορα, and one element of how to handle them stems directly from it, that is, that all external things should be viewed as opportunities for gaining some moral good. For example, although divination should be believed, it should never be feared since any external events of which it may bring news will be opportunities for gaining moral good (*Ench.* 18). The second element of handling ἄδιάφορα, the issue of one's general attitude to gaining, holding and using externals, requires elaboration. Epictetus avoids the extreme asceticism which some later adopted. Partly, he does this by giving our relationships with others (in family or

[p.49]

elsewhere) a serious position in his ethics. Mainly, he does it by applying his two main analogies for life. These are that of a banquet, at which the gods are the hosts, and that of a festival such as the Olympic Games, at which one is a spectator. The former especially is applied here: external things are like dishes set before us by the gods. We should therefore use them gratefully and with enjoyment (although the issue is confused by admiration for Diogenes who often declined to use them [*Ench.* 15; cf. *Diss.* 2.16.28]). However, we should never think of asking our hosts for dishes other than the ones they see as appropriate to set before us: that would be highly eccentric (*Frag.* 17 [Stobaeus, 111.4, 91]). Furthermore, as the dishes are passed round, we should neither long for a dish before it reaches us, nor hold onto it when it should be passed on (*Ench.* 15, etc. as above).

The analogy about dishes set before us displays again one of the key assumptions, that of the benevolent providence of God to the individual. This subject is an ambiguous one in Epictetus. He himself had chronically poor health (*Diss.* 4.1.151) and he repeatedly used examples of people who were externally disadvantaged but might be happy (*Diss.* 3.22.45ff.). His picture of Diogenes however, the ideal man, sees him as glowing with health despite a determined practical lack of desire for external things. Diogenes' health is a witness to mankind that living philosophically is successful (*Diss.* 3.22.86ff.). This is an aspect of the 'witness' concept and for this reason, Epictetus does place some value on health, an external. In this context he teaches that God provides for good people, his witnesses. He only stops

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<sup>27</sup> Sandbach, *The Stoics*, 31f.

providing when He no longer requires their service: this is a signal that they are going to die or maybe even ought to commit suicide.

Does a good man fear that food will fail him? ... Does God so neglect His own creatures, His servants, His witnesses, whom alone He uses as examples to the uninstructed, to prove that He both is, and governs the universe well, and does not neglect the affairs of men, and that no evil befalls a good man either in life or in death?—Yes, but what if He does not provide food?—Why, what else but that as a good general he had sounded the recall? (*Diss.* 3.26.27f.)

One might suspect circularity in this 'God provides or He doesn't provide and you die' scheme. In fact Bultmann sees Epictetus' view of providence as, at root, nothing more than a combination of 'teleologically-tinged Stoic determinism' and an awareness that thought is independent of events.<sup>28</sup> Epictetus believed all events to be the expression of the will of God (who was equated with matter). He described all events as showing benevolence. The key issue in deciding if Epictetus believed in what we would call benevolent providence is whether for Epictetus, 'benevolence' is simply a label which he attaches

[p.50]

to all events purely because they are what actually occurs, or he attaches the label to all events because he believes that the power causing events actually exercises a goodwill towards creatures. The answer seems to be that he believes there to be a real goodwill there (*Ench.* 31.1; *Frag.* 3 [Stobaeus IV.44.66]). Bultmann thus appears to be incorrect. Epictetus does seem to hold a real, if unusual, belief in providence—a belief that there is goodwill and specific control behind all events, even though they are wholly determined and God is identified with the Universe.

Epictetus' relational ethics principally arise out of the more general sense of his conception of what is natural rather than immediately from the salvific change of view. This works itself out in terms of what is natural to us as a human and in each of our relational roles: as mother, brother, daughter, or citizen, for example. Each creature has certain natural faculties (*δυνάμεις*) which it should exercise, and each role involves certain natural forms of behaviour. Thus if a man is brutal he is losing his position as a man (who has no natural faculty of brutality, *Diss.* 4.5.12) and adopting the position of, say, a wolf (who has). He is said to 'become' a wolf (*Diss.* 4.1.127). A father who does not care for his children is losing his position as a father since that act is natural to a father.

Your father has a certain function, and if he does not perform it, he has destroyed the father in him, the man who loves his offspring, the man of gentleness within him. (*Diss.* 3.18.5)

Epictetus can also base relational ethics on our fellow humans being, like us, offspring of Zeus (*Diss.* 1.13.4).

### ***Conformity to God's will***

Lead thou me on, O Zeus and Destiny,  
To that goal long ago to me assigned.

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<sup>28</sup> Bultmann, 'Moment', 179, my translation.

I'll follow and not falter; if my will  
Prove weak and craven, still I'll follow on. (*Ench.* 53)

This hymn by Cleanthes is a favourite of Epictetus' and points to the centre of his religious concern, namely to conform his will to God's. God, for Epictetus, is omnipotent and this is applied to give the result that whatever happens is God's will (*Frag.* 3 [Stobaeus IV.44, 66]). Conformity follows from the salvific change because that was that we restricted our desires to the area of 'the decision of our will'. If our only desires are in the realm of the will, we will, in any other realm, simply desire what happens (*Frag.* 4 [Stobaeus 11.8, 30]). Epictetus' aim, therefore, is that he 'should bring his own will into harmony with what happens' (*Diss.* 2.14.7).

This suggests complete passivity, but that would not be an accurate reflection of Epictetus' conception. In the first place, our acquiescence

[p.51]

is not quite passive anyway. We do act, causing external events (which must then be regarded as acts of the gods). This is most clear in our relational roles where the good man will be, say, a good citizen and may therefore need to go and fight in campaigns or may need to go and visit a powerful man to present a petition (*Diss.* 3.24.44). Yet the good man must not set his desire on any outcome of these actions, but simply seek to do the good actions themselves (*Diss.* 3.24.46). In the second place, there is suicide. Epictetus has no compunction about recommending suicide if one knows it is time to die. One knows it is time to die if conditions become such that there is no means of living in accordance with nature. When this happens, God is 'sounding the retreat' (*Diss.* 3.24.101). Thus in the case of suicide we do not simply desire what happens: we interpret a certain condition as a sign of what God wants to happen, and then bring it about ourselves.

Gabriel Germain writes, on suicide, 'Mais il le limite au cas où ce serait un déshonneur que d'accepter plus longtemps la vie. C'est qu'alors Dieu ne nous laisse pas d'autre issue pour conserver notre dignité d'être libre'.<sup>29</sup> One's first reaction is to doubt that Epictetus really does restrict the reasons merely to more or less moral ones. That indeed would be more consistent with Epictetus' system than what seems actually to be the case, that Epictetus sees a call to suicide in conditions being in some more general way unbearable—if things do not please you... if being exiled to Gyara seems like too much smoke... if you do not find it profitable... if conditions do not suit you (*Diss.* 1.24.19f; 1.25.18ff; 2.1.19f; 4.1.108). In fact, either idea is ultimately inconsistent with the system since, for Epictetus, no external circumstances whatever ought to have any ability to bear either on our moral actions or our happiness. On reflection however, Germain may be correct. Epictetus may be considering real, imperfect people who, at the stage of partial philosophical progress they have reached, can only tolerate a certain level of discomfort without doing a concrete immoral act to escape or losing their all-important αἰδώς, self-respect, hence their *digné d'être libre*.

A result of conformity with God's will will be thankfulness to Him for whatever happens—since it is in accord with our desire. We will be well-behaved, grateful guests at His banquet, cheerful, thankful spectators at His festival, enjoying the show and, when it is over, willingly leaving, with our hearts still singing His praises (*Diss.* 4.1.104ff.).

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<sup>29</sup> Germain, *Épictète et la spiritualité stoïcienne*, 114.

### **Witness**

What God wants is for all to be cheerful, thankful banqueters and spectators. Most people will not be persuaded to this position by rational argument, and it is foolish for the philosopher to try (see below). What the people need is to see examples: people who are cheerful, thankful spectators and can be seen as such. The prime

[p.52]

examples are Socrates and, of course, Diogenes (*Diss.* 4.1.159ff., 152ff.). Such people are sent by God (*Diss.* 3.22.23) and bear witness that His way, that of handling sense-impressions correctly, is the best and most beneficial way (*Diss.* 4.8.30ff.). God's Law (ὁ νόμος ὁ θεῖος)<sup>30</sup> is that people live this way, and that no other way brings happiness (*Diss.* 2.16.28; 4.3.10ff.; 3.24.42f.). Such people are witnesses for all God's programme, for His providence, for His existence.

## **EPICETUS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT**

### **Relevance to the First Century**

Epictetus was active half a century after the first Gentile mission, but he seems to stand in close continuity with the influential Stoic teachers of the first century, most notably his own teacher, Musonius Rufus.<sup>31</sup> This means that the substantial surviving body of Epictetus' teaching is important evidence for these views, maybe more important even than Seneca who, despite his earlier date, is in various ways somewhat compromised as a philosopher.

### **Popularity**

Despite his youth as a slave, in our material Epictetus does not seem to be a philosopher who taught the general populace. Of course, the nature of material itself is that it is schoolroom dialogue and not street-corner argument or preaching. Nonetheless, there seem to be enough indications in the material to suggest that Epictetus did not engage in popular teaching. In fact Epictetus suggests that it is folly to seek to teach the masses. It is 'ineffectual and tedious... the very thing which Zeus himself has been unable to accomplish' (*Diss.* 4.6.3, 5ff.). He does, however, want them to learn (*Diss.* 4.11.22f.) and argues that this must be done by example of how one lives among them: '...make no display to the laymen of your philosophic principles, but let them see the results which come from these principles when digested' (*Ench.* 46). The overall impression however, is that the masses did not understand or practise Stoic teaching.<sup>32</sup>

The primary influence which Epictetus and first-century Stoic teachers had, seems to have been with the wealthy. The references which suggest the social status of students of Epictetus point to them being from wealthy families and destined for government office (e.g. *Diss.* 4.1.144f.). Reference is also made to a Stoic whom Epictetus respects who held senior government posts, Agrippinus, who was proconsul of Crete and Cyrenaica during the reign of Claudius (*Diss.* 1.1.28; 1.2.12; *Frag.* 21; *Frag.* 22[?]<sup>33</sup>). These things, together with the career of Seneca, suggest that Stoicism had a substantial impact on the

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<sup>30</sup> The vocabulary varies: *Diss.* 4.3.10ff. speaks of ἐντολῶν, νόμοι and διατάγματα.

<sup>31</sup> Oldfather, Introduction, I, viii.

<sup>32</sup> Of general sociological interest is Epictetus' comment that the multitude... say, "Only the free can be educated" (*Diss.* 2.1.22).

<sup>33</sup> See Oldfather, II, 467, n.2.

[p.53]

more powerful sections of Roman society.<sup>34</sup> Epictetus' students seem to be from Greece but to have a Roman orientation. It may be that in Greece and the surrounding areas, Stoicism would have been particularly influential among the powerful classes in Roman colonies.

However, the influence was limited to quite an extent. The comments which Epictetus makes on 'lay-people' encompass rich as well as poor. With the exception of the few professed Stoics Epictetus refers to, all the examples of government officials he uses are negative: they are people who do not practise Stoic teaching and therefore suffer. Given the points Epictetus is seeking to get across, this seems didactically fairly inevitable. But one cannot escape the impression that Epictetus sees the powerful generally as not practising good philosophy. Another detail is that Epictetus expects a philosopher to be mocked—by people from all social groups: if you are a philosopher you will '...be despised by a paltry slave, be laughed to scorn by those who meet you, in everything get the worst of it, in office, in honour, in court' (*Diss.* 3.15.11; 2.14.29; 3.8.7). However, even philosophical ideas scarcely applied in life may still form part of a world-view, perhaps being especially likely to break out when an alternative world-view, such as the Christian one, was presented to the educated Romano-Greek mind. And maybe even the less powerful would hold elements of such views, possibly in imitation of the more successful, or as material from pieces of extempore philosophy, from their lords and masters, of which they had been on the receiving end.

### **Epictetus and the Gospel Events**

We have tried to sketch the main lines of Epictetus' thought. Many details have been omitted, some of which relate in an interesting way to New Testament ideas. Some elements which one might expect as main lines are not in the picture either, but this is because they are either absent or peripheral for Epictetus. For the New Testament scholar, the most notable one is eschatology. Epictetus makes a couple of off-hand references which seem to show that he accepts the traditional Stoic view of a cycle of history whose recurring terminus is a conflagration which Zeus alone survives (*Diss.* 3.13.5; 2.1.18). However, this is never expounded at any length at all. It appears of little interest to Epictetus, and his system would fit a variety of ideas about history—although not a New Testament one.

It seems that a good number of people in the first-century, especially among the more Romanised upper classes would have held (although generally without letting them fully direct their lives) some views related to those of Epictetus. This raises various important issues on how New Testament ideas would have been received by Epictetus. To indicate the kind of issues involved, we could briefly ask, in conclusion, how

[p.54]

Epictetus might have reacted to some of the main lines of the preaching of the Gospel.

*Jesus died for our sins.* If one is saying that Jesus died for our sins in the sense of taking the punishment for our sins instead of us, this shows philosophical incompetence. No-one can suffer in any way as a result of be another's sin. (This is axiomatic.) Furthermore, punishment

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Sandbach, *The Stoics*, 16.

cannot be transferred because it is intrinsic to the sinful act: the punishment for the man who beats his slave (*Diss.* 4.1.120; cf. 3.24.42f.). Finally, death (even on a cross) cannot be the punishment for moral sin since the act and the penalty cannot lie in different realms (*Diss.* 3.18.5<sup>35</sup>). In this case the sin lies in the realm of the moral choice, and the penalty, death, in the realm of indifferent things. Epictetus might then add that, whatever his intention, Jesus certainly did not succeed in dying for Christians' sins; they still suffer the penalty of their sins: they fear, envy, pity, have unfulfilled desires. What would have given Epictetus pause for thought would have been the extent to which Christians were free from some of these. He seems to have witnessed among them a level of freedom from fear (*Diss.* 4.7.5f.—evidence of persecution at the end of the first century). Paul and Silas' behaviour in prison would also have struck him: they acted like Socrates—Paul, like Socrates (*Diss.* 4.4.22) even wrote hymns down as well as singing them.

Jesus rose from the dead. This is immoral. Jesus' dying indicated that Universe no longer had need of him. His elements should have been used in forming new creatures which were what the Universe now needed. His resurrection robbed the Universe of these necessary new creatures.

*Jesus will return at the Eschaton to judge, meting out reward and punishment.* Again, there is no resurrection, especially of the body, and therefore, there is no-one to judge and no eternal life to give. There is no *Eschaton*. The world cycles on through the fire to begin again as it did before. To suggest that there is an eschatological reward is foolish also because, as above, it is not possible for the act to be in one sphere (moral choice) and the reward to be in another (eternal life). Anyway, it is an idea like yearning for nursemaids when we are grown men (*Diss.* 3.24.51ff.). The prize of moral endeavour is to succeed in living the moral life and to enjoy the freedom that that brings—as at the Olympics, the runners receive only the wreath that signifies that they ran well. To suggest that there is some more tangible prize for which one might strain toward the finishing-line is like imagining that to the winners of the Olympic games they awarded not wreaths but consulships.

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<sup>35</sup> Oldfather, II, 114, n.1.