

# The Art of Living

The Classical Manual on Virtue  
Happiness, and Effectiveness

A New Interpretation by Sharon Lebell



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## PROLOGUE

Part of Epictetus's enduring appeal and widespread influence is that he wasn't fussy about distinguishing between professional philosophers and ordinary people. He expressed his message clearly and zealously to all people interested in living a morally awake life.

Epictetus nevertheless staunchly believed in the necessity of training for the gradual refinement of personal character and behavior. Moral progress is not the natural province of the highborn, nor is it achieved by accident or luck, but by working on yourself—daily.

Epictetus would have had little patience for the aggressive position-taking and -defending and verbal pirouettes that unfortunately sometimes pass for "doing" philosophy in today's universities. As a master of succinct explanation, he would have been similarly suspicious of the murky verbiage found in academic, philosophical, and other dry texts. Inasmuch as he passionately denounced displays of cleverness for its own sake, he was committed to non-patronizing explanations of helpful ideas for living well. He considered himself successful when his ideas were easily grasped and *put to use* in someone's real life, where they could actually do some good elevating that person's character.

In keeping with the democratic and unstuffy spirit of Epictetus's doctrine, this volume encapsulates the great Stoic's key ideas and uses down-to-earth language and imagery suited to our ears

today. To present Epictetus's teachings in as straightforward and useful a manner as possible, I have done my share of selection, interpretation, and improvisation with the ideas contained in the *Enchiridion* and the *Discourses*, the only surviving documents that summarize Epictetus's philosophy. My aim has been to communicate the authentic spirit, but not necessarily the letter, of Epictetus. I have thus consulted the various translations of his teachings and then given fresh expression to what I think he would have said today.

Epictetus well understood the eloquence of action. He exhorted his students to shun mere clever theorizing in favor of actively applying his teachings to the concrete circumstances of daily life. Accordingly, I have tried to express the kernels of Epictetus's thought in an up-to-date, provocative way, one that will inspire readers not only to contemplate, but to make the small, successive changes that culminate in personal dignity and a meaningful, noble life.

## THE SPIRIT OF EPICTETUS

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How do I live a happy, fulfilling life?

How can I be a good person?

Answering these two questions was the single-minded passion of Epictetus, the great Stoic philosopher. Although his works are less well-known today, due to the decline of classical education, they have had enormous influence on leading thinkers on the art of living for almost two millennia.

Epictetus was born a slave about A.D. 55 in Hierapolis, Phrygia, in the eastern outreaches of the Roman Empire. His master was Epaphroditus, Nero's administrative secretary. From an early age, Epictetus exhibited superior intellectual talent, and Epaphroditus was so impressed that he sent the young man to Rome to study with the famous Stoic teacher, Gaius Musonius Rufus. Musonius Rufus's works, which survive in Greek, include arguments in favor of equal education for women and against the sexual double standard in marriage, and Epictetus's famous egalitarian spirit may have been nurtured under his tutelage. Epictetus became Musonius Rufus's most acclaimed student and was eventually freed from slavery.

Epictetus taught in Rome until A.D. 94, when the emperor Domitian, threatened by the growing influence of philosophers, banished him from Rome. He spent the rest of his life in exile in Nicopolis, on the northwest coast of Greece. There he established a philosophical school, and

spent his days delivering lectures on how to live with greater dignity and tranquility. Among his most distinguished students was the young Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, who eventually became ruler of the Roman Empire. He was also the author of the famous *Meditations*, whose Stoic roots were in Epictetus's moral doctrines.

Even though Epictetus was a brilliant master of logic and disputation, he didn't flaunt his exceptional rhetorical skill. His demeanor was that of a lighthearted, humble teacher urging his students to take the business of living wisely very seriously. Epictetus walked his talk: He lived modestly in a small hut and eschewed any interest in fame, fortune, and power. He died about A.D. 135, in Nicopolis.

Epictetus believed that the primary job of philosophy is to help ordinary people effectively meet the everyday challenges of daily life, and to deal with life's inevitable major losses, disappointments, and griefs. His was a moral teaching stripped of sentimentality, piousness, and metaphysical mumbo-jumbo. What remains is the West's first and best primer for living the best possible life.

While many readers have turned to Eastern sources for nonsectarian spiritual guidance, the West has had a vital, if overlooked, classic treasury of such helpful action-wisdom all along. One of the wittiest teachers who ever lived, Epictetus's teachings rank with those contained in the greatest

wisdom literature of human civilization. The *Discourses* could be thought of as the West's answer to Buddhism's *Dhammapada* or Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. Those who fault Western philosophy with being overly cerebral and inadequately addressing the nonrational dimensions of life may be surprised to learn that *The Art of Living* is actually a philosophy of inner freedom and tranquility, a way of life whose purpose is to lighten our hearts.

An unexpectedly East-West flavor enlivens *The Art of Living*. On the one hand, its style is irrefutably Western: It exalts reason and is full of stern, no-nonsense moral directives. On the other hand, a soft Easterly wind seems to blow when Epictetus discusses the nature of the universe. His depiction of Ultimate Reality, for instance, which he equates with Nature itself, is remarkably fluid and elusive: startlingly reminiscent of the Tao.

For Epictetus, a happy life and a virtuous life are synonymous. Happiness and personal fulfillment are the natural consequences of doing the right thing. Unlike many philosophers of his day, Epictetus was less concerned with seeking to understand the world than with identifying the specific steps to take in the pursuit of moral excellence. Part of his genius is his emphasis on moral *progress* over the seeking of moral *perfection*. With a keen understanding of how easily we human beings are diverted from living by our highest principles, he exhorts us to view the philosophical life as

a progression of steps that gradually approximates our cherished personal ideals.

Epictetus's notion of the good life is not a matter of following a laundry list of precepts, but of bringing our actions and desires into harmony with nature. The point is not to perform good deeds to win favor with the gods or the admiration of others, but to achieve inner serenity and thus enduring personal freedom. Goodness is an equal opportunity enterprise, available to *anyone* at any time: rich or poor, educated or simple. It is not the exclusive province of "spiritual professionals," such as monks, saints, or ascetics.

Epictetus advanced a conception of virtue that was simple, ordinary, and day-to-day in its expression. He favored a life lived steadily in accordance with the divine will over extraordinary, conspicuous, heroic displays of goodness. His prescription for the good life centered on three main themes: mastering your desires, performing your duties, and learning to think clearly about yourself and your relations within the larger community of humanity.

Epictetus recognized that everyday life is fraught with difficulties of varying degree. He spent his life outlining the path to happiness, fulfillment, and tranquility, no matter what one's circumstances happen to be. His teachings, when freed of their ancient cultural trappings, have an uncanny contemporary relevance. At times, his philosophy

sounds like the best of contemporary psychology. The Serenity Prayer, which epitomizes the recovery movement—"Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"—could easily be a sentence in this book. In fact, Epictetus's thought is one of the taproots of the modern psychology of self-management.

In other important ways, however, Epictetus is very traditional and uncontemporary. Whereas our society (practically, if not always explicitly) regards professional achievement, wealth, power, and fame as desirable and admirable, Epictetus views these as incidental and irrelevant to true happiness. What matters most is what sort of person you are becoming, what sort of life you are living.

## INVITATION TO THE MANUAL

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Epictetus was a lecturer who left no philosophical writings. Fortunately, the main points of his philosophy were preserved for future generations by his devoted pupil, the historian Flavius Arrian. Arrian painstakingly transcribed a large number of his teacher's lectures in Greek for a friend. These lectures, known as the *Discourses* (or *Diatribes*), were originally collected in eight books, but only four survive. Epictetus's lectures are among the major sources for our present-day understanding of Roman Stoic philosophy.

Epictetus's *Manual* (or *Enchiridion*) is a pithy set of excerpts selected from the *Discourses* that forms a concise summary of Epictetus's essential teachings. It was roughly modeled on military manuals of the day and thus shares some of the bold simplicity of such classics as *The Art of War*. (Soldiers even carried the *Manual* into battle.) Across centuries and cultures, world leaders, generals, and ordinary folk alike have relied on the *Manual* as their main guide to personal serenity and moral direction amid the trials of life.

## Know What You Can Control and What You Can't

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Happiness and freedom begin with a clear understanding of one principle: Some things are within our control, and some things are not. It is only after you have faced up to this fundamental rule and learned to distinguish between what you can and can't control that inner tranquility and outer effectiveness become possible.

Within our control are our own opinions, aspirations, desires, and the things that repel us. These areas are quite rightly our concern, because they are directly subject to our influence. We always have a choice about the contents and character of our inner lives.

Outside our control, however, are such things as what kind of body we have, whether we're born into wealth or strike it rich, how we are regarded by others, and our status in society. We must remember that those things are externals and are therefore not our concern. Trying to control or to change what we can't only results in torment.

Remember: The things within our power are naturally at our disposal, free from any restraint or hindrance; but those things outside our power are weak, dependent, or determined by the whims and actions of others. Remember, too, that if you think that you have free rein over things that are naturally beyond your control, or if you attempt to adopt the affairs of others as your own, your pursuits will be thwarted and you will become a frustrated, anxious, and fault-finding person.