The Enchiridion

Epictetus

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EPICTETUS The Enchiridion

The Enchiridion

By

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CONTENTS

Note on the Text
Introduction
Selected Bibliography
The Enchiridion

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text of the second edition is a reprint of the first edition except for a few minor corrections in style, punctuation, and spelling, which have been revised to conform to current American usage.

The editorial staff of the publishers has added a few explanatory notes which are set in brackets and marked “Ed.”

O.P.

INTRODUCTION

The little book by Epictetus called _Enchiridion_ or “manual” has played a disproportionately large role in the rise of modern attitudes and modern philosophy. As soon as it had been translated into the vernacular languages, it became a bestseller among independent intellectuals, among anti-Christian thinkers, and among philosophers of a subjective cast. Montaigne had a copy of the _Enchiridion_ among his books. Pascal violently rejected the megalomaniac pride of the Stoic philosopher. Frederick the Great carried the book with him on all campaigns. It was a source of inspiration and encouragement to Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, in the serious illness which ended only

in his death; many pages of his diaries contain passages copied from the _Enchiridion_. It has been studied and widely quoted by Scottish philosophers like Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson who valued Stoic moral philosophy for its reconciliation of social dependency and personal independence.

That there was a rebirth of Stoicism in the centuries of rebirth which marked the emergence of the modern age was not mere chance. Philosophical, moral, and social conditions of the time united to cause it. Roman Stoicism had been developed in times of despotism as a philosophy of lonely and courageous souls who had recognized the redeeming power of philosophical reason in all the moral and social purposes of life. Philosophy as a way of life makes men free. It is the last ditch stand of liberty in a world of servitude. Many elements in the new age led to thought which had structural affinity with Roman Stoicism. Modern times had created the independent thinker, the free intellectual in a secular civilization. Modern times had destroyed medieval liberties and had established the new despotism of the absolute state supported by ecclesiastical authority. Modern philosophies continued the basic trend in Stoicism in making the subjective consciousness the foundation of philosophy. The Stoic emphasis on moral problems was also appealing in an era of rapid transition when all the values which had previously been taken for granted were questioned and reconsidered.

While it is interesting to observe how varied were the effects produced by this small volume, this epitome of the Stoic system of moral philosophy, these effects seem still more remarkable when we consider that it was not intended to be a philosophical treatise on Stoicism for students. It was, rather, to be a guide for the advanced

student of Stoicism to show him the best roads toward the goal of becoming a true philosopher. Thus Epictetus and his _Enchiridion_ have a unique position in Roman Stoicism. Seneca and Marcus Aurelius had selected Stoic philosophy as the most adequate system for expressing their existential problems of independence, solitude, and history. In this enterprise, Seneca made tremendous strides toward the insights of social psychology as a by-product of his consciousness of decadence (in this he was close to Nietzsche), but he was not primarily concerned with the unity of the Stoic system. Marcus Aurelius changed the philosophical doctrine into the regimen of the lonesome ruler. In contrast to both, Epictetus was teaching Stoic philosophy as a doctrine and as a way of life. The _Enchiridion_ is a summary of theoretical and applied Stoicism.

Epictetus was the son of a woman slave, born between 50 and 60 A.D. at Hieropolis in Phrygia. We do not know how he came to Rome. He was there as slave to one of Nero's distinguished freedmen who served as the Emperor's secretary. While still in service, Epictetus took courses with Musonius Rufus, the fashionable Stoic philosopher, who was impressed by the sincere and dynamic personality of the young slave and trained him to be a Stoic philosopher. Epictetus became a free man and began teaching philosophy on street corners, in the market, but he was not successful. During the rule of Domitian, Epictetus with many other philosophers was exiled from Rome, probably between 89 and 92 A.D. He went to Nicopolis, across Actium in Epirus, where he conducted his own school. He was so well regarded and highly esteemed that he established the reputation of the place as the town of Epictetus' school. Students came from Athens and Rome to attend his classes.

Private citizens came to ask his advice and guidance. Some of his students returned to their homes to enter the traditional careers to which they were socially obligated. Others assumed the philosophic way of life in order to escape into the sphere of Stoic freedom.

Among the students was a young Roman, Flavius Arrian, who took courses at Nicopolis when Epictetus was already old. Flavius, who was born in 108 A.D., was one of the intimates of Hadrian, who made him consul in 130 A.D. He probably studied with Epictetus between the years 123 and 126 A.D. The informal philosophical talks which Epictetus had with his students fascinated him. Needless to say there were also systematic courses in the fields of philosophy. But it was the informal discourses which convinced Arrian that he had finally discovered a Stoic Socrates or a Stoic Diogenes, who was not merely teaching a doctrine, but also living the truth. Arrian recorded many of the discourses and informal conversations of Epictetus with his intimate students. He took them down in shorthand in order not to lose the ineffable liveliness, grace, and wit of the beloved teacher. Arrian retired into private life after the death of Hadrian in 138 A.D. and dedicated himself to his literary work. He published his notes on Epictetus' teaching under the title: _Discourses in Four Books_. The _Enchiridion_, which was also arranged by Arrian, is a brief summary of the basic ideas of Stoic philosophy and an introduction to the techniques required to transform Stoic philosophy into a way of life.

Thus we do not have any original writings of Epictetus. Like G. H. Mead in recent times, he was completely dedicated to the human and intellectual problems of his students. He left it for them to preserve what they considered to be the lasting message of the teacher. In

contrast to Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus had no subjective approach to the Stoic doctrines. Moral philosophy was the center of his teaching, and epistemology was only instrumental. It is even permissible to say that he took physics or cosmology too lightly. If this is granted, we must admit that he is completely absorbed by the fundamentals of Stoic thought as presented in the _Enchiridion_. Epictetus' personality is totally integrated in the act of reasoning which establishes conformity with nature.

A remarkable difference between the _Discourses_ and the _Enchiridion_ should be mentioned. The _Discourses_ are a living image of the teacher in action; they present the process of philosophizing, not the finished product. They show the enthusiastic and sober, the realistic and pathetic moralist in constantly changing perspectives determined by the changing students with their various concerns, problems, and questions; his teachings, his formulations, have direct reference to the various life situations in which the students should apply and practice the master's Stoic teaching. No human situation is omitted; as a guide to conduct, philosophy has relevance for all. Whether the students have to attend a dinner party, whether they are among competitors in a stadium or in a swimming pool, whether they have to present themselves at court or in an office, whether they are in the company of their mothers and sisters or of girl friends, in all human situations the philosopher knows the correct advice for the philosophical apprentice. Thus, in the _Discourses_, Arrian presents the unique individuality of the philosopher and of his applied moral method in living contact with various students in concrete situations. Epictetus as teacher anticipates very modern educational methods in his regard for the structure of situations and

the changing perspectives in human relationships.

Nothing like this is revealed in the _Enchiridion_. Gone is the Stoic philosopher as living spirit. What remains is the living spirit of Stoicism. The _Enchiridion_ is a manual for the combat officer. This analogy should be taken seriously. The Roman Stoics coined the formula: _Vivere militare!_ (Life is being a soldier.) The student of philosophy is a private, the advancing Stoic is a non-commissioned officer, and the philosopher is the combat officer. For this reason all Roman Stoics apply metaphors and images derived from military life. Apprentice students of Stoicism are described as messengers, as scouts of God, as representatives of divine nature. The advancing student who is close to the goal of being a philosopher has the rank of an officer. He is already able to establish inner freedom and independence. He understands the basic Stoic truth of subjective consciousness, which is to distinguish what is in our power from what is not in our power. Not in our power are all the elements which constitute our environment, such as wealth, health, reputation, social prestige, power, the lives of those we love, and death. In our power are our thinking, our intentions, our desires, our decisions. These make it possible for us to control ourselves and to make of ourselves elements and parts of the universe of nature. This knowledge of ourselves makes us free in a world of dependencies. This superiority of our powers enables us to live in conformity with nature. The rational philosophy of control of Self and of adjustment to the Whole implies an asceticism of the emotional and the sensitive life. The philosopher must examine and control his passions, his love, his tenderness at all times in order always to be ready for the inevitable moment of farewell. The Stoics practiced a Jesuitism _avant la

lettre_. They were able to live in the world as if they did not live in it. To the Stoic, life is a military camp, a play on the stage, a banquet to which we are invited. The _Enchiridion_ briefly indicated the techniques which the philosopher should apply in acting well the diverse roles which God might assign to those whom he loves, the Stoic philosophers. From the rules of social conduct to the recommendations of sexual asceticism before marriage, and the method of true thinking, the advanced Stoic will find all principles of perfection and all precepts for realizing philosophical principles in his conduct in this tiny volume.

Thus the _Enchiridion_ was liberating for all intellectuals who learned from it that there are philosophical ways of self-redemption. From its time, the secular thinker could feel jubilant because he was not in need of a divine grace. Epictetus had taught him that philosophical reason could make him free and that he was capable of redeeming himself by sound reasoning.

In the Stoic distinctions of personality and world, of I and mine, of subjective consciousness and the world of objects, of freedom and dependence, we find implicit the basic elements of modern philosophies of rationalism and of objective idealism or pantheism. For this reason there is a continuous renascence of Stoicism from Descartes, Grotius, and Bishop Butler, to Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and Kant. In this long development in modern times, the tiny _Enchiridion_ of Epictetus played a remarkable part.

The translations of Epictetus and of all other Stoics had the widest effect on philosophers, theologians, and lay thinkers. They were studied by the clergy of the various Christian denominations, by the

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