A Selection from the Discourses of Epictetus with the Encheiridion

Epictetus

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A SELECTION FROM THE DISCOURSES OF EPICTETUS WITH THE ENCHEIRIDION

TRANSLATED BY GEORGE LONG

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EPICTETUS.

Very little is known of the life of Epictetus. It is said that he was a native of Hierapolis in Phrygia, a town between the Maeander and a branch of the Maeander named the Lycus. Hierapolis is mentioned in the epistle of Paul to the people of Colossae (Coloss. iv., 13); from which it has been concluded that there was a Christian church in Hierapolis in the time of the apostle. The date of the birth of Epictetus is unknown. The only recorded fact of his early life is that he was a slave in Rome, and his master was Epaphroditus, a profligate freedman of the Emperor Nero. There is a story that the master broke his slave's leg by torturing him; but it is better to trust to the evidence of Simplicius, the commentator on the Encheiridion, or Manual, who says that Epictetus was weak in body and lame from an early age. It is not said how he became a slave; but it has been asserted in modern times that the parents sold the child. I have not, however, found any

authority for this statement.

It may be supposed that the young slave showed intelligence, for his master sent or permitted him to attend the lectures of C. Musonius Rufus, an eminent Stoic philosopher. It may seem strange that such a master should have wished to have his slave made into a philosopher; but Garnier, the author of a “Mémoire sur les Ouvrages d’Epictète,” explains this matter very well in a communication to Schweighaeuser. Garnier says: “Epictetus, born at Hierapolis of Phrygia of poor parents, was indebted apparently for the advantages of a good education to the whim, which was common at the end of the Republic and under the first emperors, among the great of Rome to reckon among their numerous slaves grammarians, poets, rhetoricians, and philosophers, in the same way as rich financiers in these later ages have been led to form at a great cost rich and numerous libraries. This supposition is the only one which can explain to us how a wretched child, born as poor as Irus, had received a good education, and how a rigid Stoic was the slave of Epaphroditus, one of the officers of the imperial guard. For we cannot suspect that it was through predilection for the Stoic doctrine, and for his own use, that the confidant and the minister of the debaucheries of Nero would have desired to possess such a slave.”

Some writers assume that Epictetus was manumitted by his master, but I can find no evidence for this statement. Epaphroditus accompanied Nero when he fled from Rome before his enemies, and he aided the miserable tyrant in killing himself. Domitian (Sueton., Domit. 14), afterwards put Epaphroditus to death for this service to Nero. We may conclude that Epictetus in some way obtained his freedom, and that he began to teach at Rome; but after the expulsion

of the philosophers from Rome by Domitian, A.D. 89, he retired to Nicopolis in Epirus, a city built by Augustus to commemorate the victory at Actium. Epictetus opened a school or lecture room at Nicopolis, where he taught till he was an old man. The time of his death is unknown. Epictetus was never married, as we learn from Lucian (Demonax, c. 55, torn, ii., ed. Hemsterh., p. 393). When Epictetus was finding fault with Demonax, and advising him to take a wife and beget children, for this also, as Epictetus said, was a philosopher's duty, to leave in place of himself another in the universe, Demonax refuted the doctrine by answering: Give me then, Epictetus, one of your own daughters. Simplicius says (Comment., c. 46, p. 432, ed. Schweigh.) that Epictetus lived alone a long time. At last he took a woman into his house as a nurse for a child, which one of Epictetus' friends was going to expose on account of his poverty, but Epictetus took the child and brought it up.

Epictetus wrote nothing; and all that we have under his name was written

Photius (Biblioth., 58) mentions among Arrian's works "Conversations with Epictetus," [Greek: Homiliai Epichtaeton], in twelve books. Upton thinks that this work is only another name for the Discourses, and that Photius has made the mistake of taking the Conversations to be a different work from the Discourses. Yet Photius has enumerated eight books of the Discourses and twelve books of the Conversations. Schweighaeuser observes that Photius had not seen these works of Arrian on Epictetus, for so he concludes from the brief notice of these works by Photius. The fact is that Photius does not say that he had read these books, as he generally does when he is speaking of the books which he enumerates in his

Bibliotheca. The conclusion is that we are not certain that there was a work of Arrian entitled “The Conversations of Epictetus.”

Upton remarks in a note on iii., 23 (p. 184, Trans.), that “there are many passages in these dissertations which are ambiguous or rather confused on account of the small questions, and because the matter is not expanded by oratorical copiousness, not to mention other causes.” The discourses of Epictetus, it is supposed, were spoken extempore, and so one thing after another would come into the thoughts of the speaker (Wolf). Schweighaeuser also observes in a note (ii., 336 of his edition) that the connection of the discourse is sometimes obscure through the omission of some words which are necessary to indicate the connection of the thoughts. The reader then will find that he cannot always understand Epictetus, if he does not read him very carefully, and some passages more than once. He must also think and reflect, or he will miss the meaning. I do not say that the book is worth all this trouble. Every man must judge for himself. But I should not have translated the book, if I had not thought it worth study; and I think that all books of this kind require careful reading, if they are worth reading at all.

G.L.

A SELECTION FROM THE DISCOURSES OF EPICTETUS.

OF THE THINGS WHICH ARE IN OUR POWER AND NOT IN OUR POWER.—Of all the faculties (except that which I shall soon mention), you will find not one which is capable of contemplating itself, and, consequently, not capable either of approving or

disapproving. How far does the grammatic art possess the contemplating power? As far as forming a judgment about what is written and spoken. And how far music? As far as judging about melody. Does either of them then contemplate itself? By no means. But when you must write something to your friend, grammar will tell you what words you should write; but whether you should write or not, grammar will not tell you. And so it is with music as to musical sounds; but whether you should sing at the present time and play on the lute, or do neither, music will not tell you. What faculty then will tell you? That which contemplates both itself and all other things. And what is this faculty? The rational faculty; for this is the only faculty that we have received which examines itself, what it is, and what power it has, and what is the value of this gift, and examines all other faculties: for what else is there which tells us that golden things are beautiful, for they do not say so themselves? Evidently it is the faculty which is capable of judging of appearances. What else judges of music, grammar, and the other faculties, proves their uses, and points out the occasions for using them? Nothing else.

What then should a man have in readiness in such circumstances? What else than this? What is mine, and what is not mine; and what is permitted to me, and what is not permitted to me. I must die. Must I then die lamenting? I must be put in chains. Must I then also lament? I must go into exile. Does any man then hinder me from going with smiles and cheerfulness and contentment? Tell me the secret which you possess. I will not, for this is in my power. But I will put you in chains. Man, what are you talking about? Me, in chains? You may fetter my leg, but my will not even Zeus himself can overpower. I will throw you into prison. My poor body, you mean. I will cut your

head off. When then have I told you that my head alone cannot be cut off? These are the things which philosophers should meditate on, which they should write daily, in which they should exercise themselves.

What then did Agrippinus say? He said, “I am not a hindrance to myself.” When it was reported to him that his trial was going on in the Senate, he said: “I hope it may turn out well; but it is the fifth hour of the day”—this was the time when he was used to exercise himself and then take the cold bath,—“let us go and take our exercise.” After he had taken his exercise, one comes and tells him, “You have been condemned.” “To banishment,” he replies, “or to death?” “To banishment.” “What about my property?” “It is not taken from you.” “Let us go to Aricia then,” he said, “and dine.”

HOW A MAN ON EVERY OCCASION CAN MAINTAIN HIS PROPER CHARACTER.—To the rational animal only is the irrational intolerable; but that which is rational is tolerable. Blows are not naturally intolerable. How is that? See how the Lacedaemonians endure whipping when they have learned that whipping is consistent with reason. To hang yourself is not intolerable. When then you have the opinion that it is rational, you go and hang yourself. In short, if we observe, we shall find that the animal man is pained by nothing so much as by that which is irrational; and, on the contrary, attracted to nothing so much as to that which is rational.

Only consider at what price you sell your own will: if for no other reason, at least for this, that you sell it not for a small sum. But that which is great and superior perhaps belongs to Socrates and such as are like him. Why then, if we are naturally such, are not a very great

number of us like him? Is it true then that all horses become swift, that all dogs are skilled in tracking footprints? What then, since I am naturally dull, shall I, for this reason, take no pains? I hope not. Epictetus is not superior to Socrates; but if he is not inferior, this is enough for me; for I shall never be a Milo, and yet I do not neglect my body; nor shall I be a Croesus, and yet I do not neglect my property; nor, in a word, do we neglect looking after anything because we despair of reaching the highest degree.

HOW A MAN SHOULD PROCEED FROM THE PRINCIPLE OF GOD BEING THE FATHER OF ALL MEN TO THE REST.—If a man should be able to assent to this doctrine as he ought, that we are all sprung from God in an especial manner, and that God is the father both of men and of gods, I suppose that he would never have any ignoble or mean thoughts about himself. But if Cæsar (the emperor) should adopt you, no one could endure your arrogance; and if you know that you are the son of Zeus, will you not be elated? Yet we do not so; but since these two things are mingled in the generation of man, body in common with the animals, and reason and intelligence in common with the gods, many incline to this kinship, which is miserable and mortal; and some few to that which is divine and happy. Since then it is of necessity that every man uses everything according to the opinion which he has about it, those, the few, who think that they are formed for fidelity and modesty and a sure use of appearances have no mean or ignoble thoughts about themselves; but with the many it is quite the contrary. For they say, What am I? A poor, miserable man, with my wretched bit of flesh. Wretched, indeed; but you possess something better than your bit of flesh. Why then do you neglect that which is better, and why do you attach

yourself to this?

Through this kinship with the flesh, some of us inclining to it become like wolves, faithless and treacherous and mischievous; some become like lions, savage and bestial and untamed; but the greater part of us become foxes, and other worse animals. For what else is a slanderer and malignant man than a fox, or some other more wretched and meaner animal? See then and take care that you do not become some one of these miserable things.

OF PROGRESS OR IMPROVEMENT.—He who is making progress, having learned from philosophers that desire means the desire of good things, and aversion means aversion from bad things; having learned too that happiness and tranquillity are not attainable by man otherwise than by not failing to obtain what he desires, and not falling into that which he would avoid; such a man takes from himself desire altogether and confers it, but he employs his aversion only on things which are dependent on his will. For if he attempts to avoid anything independent of his will, he knows that sometimes he will fall in with something which he wishes to avoid, and he will be unhappy. Now if virtue promises good fortune and tranquillity and happiness, certainly also the progress towards virtue is progress towards each of these things. For it is always true that to whatever point the perfecting of anything leads us, progress is an approach towards this point.

How then do we admit that virtue is such as I have said, and yet seek progress in other things and make a display of it? What is the product of virtue? Tranquillity. Who then makes improvement? Is it he who has read many books of Chrysippus? But does virtue consist in

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