A FIELD GUIDE TO A HAPPY LIFE

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53 BRIEF LESSONS FOR LIVING

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To my wife, Jennifer, whose love and support are making it easy to live a happy life.

BASIC
BOOKS

PART I

BETTING ON THE PHILOSOPHER-SLAVE

I.1

EPICTETUS AND ME

My life changed instantly, and for the better, in the fall of 2014.[1] At least, an important, impactful, and positive change began then, and is continuing now. The trigger was my first reading of a philosopher I had never heard of, despite the fact that he was a household name for eighteen centuries or thereabout: Epictetus. The words in questions were,

> I have to die. If it is now, well then I die now; if later, then now I will take my lunch, since the hour for lunch has arrived—and dying I will tend to later.[2]

It blew my mind. Who the heck was this first-century guy who in two sentences displayed both a delightful sense of humor and a no-nonsense attitude toward life, and death? We don't really know much about him. Not even his real name. "Epíktetos" (ἐπίκτητος) in Greek simply means "acquired," since he was a slave, born around the year 55 in Hierapolis (modern-day Pamukkale, in western Turkey). He was bought by Epaphroditos, a wealthy freedman and secretary to the emperor Nero.

Sometime after moving to Rome, Epictetus began to study Stoic philosophy with the most prestigious teacher of the time, Musonius Rufus. That may have helped him on the occasion of a defining episode in his life, when he became crippled. Origen tells

us how Epictetus handled it:

> Might you not, then, take Epictetus, who, when his master was twisting his leg, said, smiling and unmoved, "You will break my leg;" and when it was broken, he added, "Did I not tell you that you would break it?"[3]

Eventually Epictetus obtained his freedom and began to teach philosophy in Rome. At first, it didn't go too well. Referring to an episode that happened to him while he was expounding philosophy in the streets of the imperial capital, he recounted to one of his students,

> You run the risk of [someone] saying, "What business is that of yours, sir? What are you to me?" Pester him further, and he is liable to punch you in the nose. I myself was once keen for this sort of discourse, until I met with just such a reception.[4]

Apparently, he wasn't annoying just to people in the street. Like many other Stoics before and after him, he had a dangerous tendency to speak truth to power, so the emperor Domitian exiled him in the year 93. Undaunted, he moved to Nicopolis, in northwestern Greece, and established a school there. It became the most renowned place to learn philosophy in the entire Mediterranean, and a later emperor, Hadrian, stopped by to visit and pay his regards to the famous teacher.

Epictetus, just like his role model, Socrates, did not write anything down, focusing instead on teaching and talking to his many students. Thankfully, one of them was Arrian of Nicomedia, who later became a public servant, military commander, historian, and philosopher in his own right. The only two sets of teachings we have from Epictetus are Arrian's notes, collected in four books of *Discourses* (half of which are unfortunately lost) and a short handbook, or manual, known as the *Enchiridion*.

Epictetus lived a simple life, unmarried and owning few things. In his old age he adopted a friend's child, who would have otherwise been "exposed" to death, and raised him with the help of a woman. He died around 135 CE, approximately eighty years old—a remarkable age for the time, or any time, really.[5]

Back to my own discovery of Epictetus. I was positively stunned. Why had I never come across his writings before? Or even his name (such as it is)? I was fairly well acquainted with the other major Stoics, particularly Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, but Epictetus didn't come up even during my graduate studies in philosophy! His star may have been eclipsed among modern professional philosophers, occupied as they too often are in precisely the sort of logical hairsplitting that the sage from Hierapolis disdained.[6] But his influence has been constant throughout the centuries, and continues to grow.

Not only did the writings and teachings of Epictetus, and in particular his handbook, influence the last of the Roman Stoics, the emperor Marcus Aurelius, but the *Enchiridion* was translated and updated by Christians throughout the Middle Ages, and used as a manual of spiritual exercises by monks in monasteries. The first printed edition, translated in Latin, was the work of Angelo Poliziano in 1479, who dedicated it to the Medici of Florence. The book arguably reached its popular height in the period 1550 to 1750, between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The first English translation (based on a French original) was by James Sandford in 1567. The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci translated it in Chinese in the early seventeenth century. John Harvard bequeathed a copy to his newly founded college in 1638, and Adam Smith, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson all had copies in their personal libraries.

But Epictetus's manual appears in unexpected places throughout history. Shakespeare has Hamlet declaim, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Act 2, Scene 2), which is a slight paraphrase of *Enchiridion* 5. Epictetus is also mentioned in François Rabelais's *Pantagruel*; in *The Life and Opinions*

of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman by Laurence Sterne; in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce; and he is paraphrased by John Milton.

More recently, David Mamet and William H. Macy, who introduced the acting method known as practical aesthetics, list Epictetus among their sources. And so does Albert Ellis, the founder of rational emotive behavior therapy, the forerunner of cognitive behavioral therapy, the most successful evidence-based modern type of psychotherapy.

The 1998 novel *A Man in Full*, by Tom Wolfe, features a character whose life (in prison) is turned around by reading the *Enchiridion*. James (Bond) Stockdale, a fighter pilot who served and was captured in Vietnam, received the Medal of Honor, and later ran as vice president of the United States in 1992, tells us in his memoir that Epictetus saved his life during his years of imprisonment, torture, and solitary confinement in the infamous "Hanoi Hilton."

And have you heard of the Serenity Prayer? It was written in the early part of the twentieth century by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and is commonly adopted by twelve-step organizations like Alcoholics Anonymous. It goes like this:

> God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
> Courage to change the things I can,
> And wisdom to know the difference.

The same idea is also found in Solomon ibn Gabirol, an eleventh-century Jewish philosopher, as well as in Shantideva, an eighth-century Buddhist scholar. The earliest known version of it is from the very beginning of the *Enchiridion*, as we shall see shortly.

Arrian, the student of Epictetus to whom we owe both the *Enchiridion* and the *Discourses*, wrote to his friend Lucius Gellius,

> When [Epictetus] was speaking, he plainly had no other aim than

> to move the minds of those who were listening toward what is best.... When Epictetus himself was speaking, the listener was compelled to feel just what Epictetus wanted him to feel.[7]

The world is a better place because Arrian preserved Epictetus's teachings. Countless have benefited from his insights into how the cosmos work and how to behave toward others. More broadly, the endurance of Stoicism across the millennia is a testimony to the basic pragmatism of its doctrines and to the usefulness of adopting Stoic philosophy as our compass to live a eudaemonic life, a life worth living.

I'm sure Arrian sought to preserve Epictetus's words in part out of respect, love even, for his master. Nineteen centuries later, it is the same respect and (indirect) love that move me to propose this Field Guide, an attempt to update the *Enchiridion* and, with it, the entire Stoic system. My hope being that countless more people may benefit from the power of this philosophy to change lives for the better.

Some people will reasonably disagree with my proposed updates, just as the ancient Stoics disagreed among themselves about what was and was not entailed by their philosophy. Naturally, even this current version will eventually be made obsolete and in need of further changes by the continuous expansion of human understanding. Which is what the Stoics themselves predicted and welcomed.

One thing that hasn't changed much, though, is human nature itself, which is why words written for and by people who lived two millennia ago still resonate so clearly with us today. Those people did not have smartphones and social media, airplanes and atomic weapons. But they loved, hoped, feared, lived, and died pretty much like we do today. And so long as those basic facts about humanity stay true, Stoicism will remain one of our most powerful tools for enduring life's inevitable setbacks and for enjoying more deeply life's many gifts—if we use humility and wisdom as our guides.

I.3

STOICISM 101

The story of Stoicism begins near the closing of the fourth century BCE, when a Phoenician merchant by the name of Zeno of Citium loses everything in a shipwreck and arrives at Athens. Diogenes Laertius tells us what happened next:[1]

> [Zeno] was shipwrecked on a voyage from Phoenicia to Piraeus with a cargo of purple. He went up into Athens and sat down in a bookseller's shop, being then a man of thirty. As he went on reading the second book of Xenophon's Memorabilia, he was so pleased that he inquired where men like Socrates were to be found. Crates passed by in the nick of time, so the bookseller pointed to him and said, "Follow yonder man." From that day he became Crates's pupil.

Xenophon's *Memorabilia* is a book about the life of Socrates, and Crates of Thebes was a prominent Cynic philosopher. That word, "Cynic," did not mean what it means today (neither did "Stoic," for that matter), but rather indicated a philosophy dedicated to a minimalist lifestyle and the cultivation of virtue, or the excellence of one's moral character. Zeno studied with Crates and a number of other philosophers, eventually deciding, around 300 BCE, to begin teaching on his own. He purposely chose to teach in an open space lined by columns, just off the main Athenian