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## Modifying what you say to yourself: The therapeutic philosophy of Epictetus

Christoph Kraiker

■ *The therapeutic technique of Epictetus consist in replacing one kind of (irrational) self-talk with another, more sensible kind. This is based on the philosophical distinction between things that are in our power and things that are not. The only thing that is in our power is assenting to whatever happens. All that happens is caused by an omnipotent and benevolent deity and therefore good. Here, Epictetus' view differs from Rational-Emotive-Therapy, in other aspects they have much in common.*

The stoic philosopher Epictetus is counted among the precursors of those cognitive therapists that aim at changing the way we talk to ourselves. However, he also differs in important aspects from contemporary approaches. In this address I will outline the psychological assumptions Epictetus works from and classify several varieties of "basic errors" he makes responsible for unhappiness (almost like Albert Ellis). His therapeutic technique can be thought of as systematically employed autosuggestions, both on verbal and imaginative levels.

### I

First I would like to give you some background on Epictetus, then I'll explain why he is relevant for a symposium on suggestion and suggestibility.

Epictetus was a late stoic philosopher who lived from about 50 to 130 after Christ. Born in Asia Minor, he was brought to Rome while still a young boy and was sold as a slave to Epaphroditus, a friend of the emperor Nero. There, it is told, he was beaten so severely that he remained crippled and lame for life. Later he was set free and studied philosophy with the stoic philosopher Musonius Rufus. Around 90 - 94 he was expelled from Rome and Italy together with all the other philosophers by the Emperor Domitian who was about to introduce some kind of oriental despotism and did not want any opposition around. Epictetus went to Nikopolis in Greece and there established a philosophical school of his own which attracted many students and provided for a growing reputation. Late in life he seems to have returned to Rome, but we are not sure about that.

Epictetus himself wrote nothing as far as we know. What we have are notes of lectures, discussions and conversations collected by his disciple, the historian Flavius Arrianus. These were published under the title "Diatribes" in eight books of which four and a few fragments have survived. Arrianus later compiled a summary of Epictetus' philosophy - the well-known Enchiridion or Handbook.

The Enchiridion is what made Epictetus famous. It is easy to get - there are several translations around - easy to carry and quite short for a book that tells you the true and right way of living. It has about 30 to 35 pages. The diatribes, on the other hand, are just that: diatribes, difficult to read, difficult to understand and difficult to get. As far as I know, the only complete English edition is that of Loeb classical library from the years 1925 and 1928. There is also a translation in paperback which I, however, haven't seen so I don't know if it has the complete text or not.

The Enchiridion has been popular throughout the centuries and is one of the classical western guide-books for the soul, together with "Ways to Oneself" by the emperor Marcus Aurelius, "The Consolation of Philosophy" by Boethius, "The Guide out of Errors" by Al Ghazali, or "The Imitation of Christ" by Thomas a Kempis. In our times and for our circles it was rediscovered, so to speak, by Albert Ellis who based his Rational Emotive Therapy (RET) on certain principles derived from the teachings of Epictetus. The sentence he quotes most frequently is one known to us all, and that is:

(E 5)<sup>9</sup>

*Men are disturbed not by the things which happen, but by their opinions about the things.*

I will take this as a starting point and it will get us quickly to the topic of suggestion.

This translation is similar to all others I know, German or English, and in two ways it is significantly misleading. First of all, here the Enchiridion does not talk about opinions. The term it uses is dogmata, and this is much stronger: it means statements of fundamental convictions, just like the word "dogmas".

Second, it does not talk about things or events or happenings. The term it uses is pragmata, and pragmata are acts, things being done. I'll come back to that later, but for now let me return to the statements of fundamental convictions. It is easy to change your opinions, but it is not at all easy to change your dogmata or dogmas. But since erroneous fundamental convictions are the sole source of human suffering, the aim of a philosophical education, or psychotherapy, is to change those convictions, and as this is not easy, it is not enough to listen to your philosopher or therapist, you also need rigorous training. This training is called askesis (as in "ascetic") and it has two aspects: One which nowadays we would call behavioral (since wrong convictions lead to behavior which becomes habitual) and one aimed at those convictions themselves, the cognitive aspect.

Today I will ignore the behavioral part of the training and concentrate on the more

<sup>9</sup> (E with a number) indicates the chapter of the Enchiridion, (Dia with numbers) indicates book and chapter of the Diatribes, (fragments with a number) indicates, well, fragments.

fundamental, cognitive aspect. A basic assumption of Epictetus seems to be that those convictions manifest themselves as things you say to yourself in certain situations, real situations or expected situations. This way of talking to yourself becomes habitual and has to be replaced by other, more rational ways.

(Fragments 16)

*One ought to know that it is not easy for a man to acquire a fixed judgement, unless he should day by day state and hear the same principles, and at the same time apply them to his life.*

This sounds like Coué, or Donald Meichenbaum, or Autogenic Training. In a nutshell, Epictetus holds that people become unhappy, worried and disturbed by irrational self-suggestions, and his therapy (askesis) consists in exercises that replace those by rational ones. And this is, of course, why he belongs in this symposium.

## II

In the Enchiridion and the Diatribes we find numerous exercises which follow a similar pattern: Don't say this, instead say that, together with reasons why. I am going to present to you several examples, but first I have to introduce some key concepts which have to be understood in order to understand what he teaches.

The Enchiridion starts with an essential distinction:

(E 1)

*Of things some are in our power, and others are not.*

This is one of the numerous formulations that try to express the distinction between what we do and what happens to us. Starting with Aristotle (as far as I know) and continuing throughout the Middle Ages until Descartes (and beyond) we find discussions of the difference between "actions" and "passions" (cf. Descartes' "De Passionibus Animae"), and in modern times Freud's idea of primary processes and secondary processes, or Skinner's categories of respondent and operant behavior each in their own way reflect that difference (to name just a few examples).

By definition, what is not in your power you can neither create nor prevent. It follows that, if you desire things which are not in your power or if you detest things which are not in your power, you will be unfortunate and unhappy. Thus, the ability to distinguish between what is and what is not in our power is of fundamental importance.

Another key concept is "phantasia". This has been translated as appearance, impression, perception, idea and so on. If you recall the A-B-C Model of RET, where A stands for the activating events, B for the (irrational) beliefs, and C for the Consequences (of whatever kind), then we might say that phantasia means the perception, imagination or expectation of activating events in this sense. The translation of George Long uses appearance, and you have to keep in mind that it actually means what I just explained.

## III

So we now are ready for the first and fundamental principle.

(E 1)

Practice saying to every disturbing appearance: you are an appearance, and in no manner what you appear to be. Then examine it by the rules which you possess, and by this first and chiefly, whether it relates to the things which are in our power or to the things which are not in our power: and if it relates to anything which is not in power, be ready to say, that it does not concern you.

For example:

(E 24)

Dont say: "I shall live unhonored and without reputation everywhere".

Is it then in your power to obtain the rank of a magistrate or to be invited to a reception?

By no means. How then can this be lack of honor?

"But I will be of no help to my friends"? What is help? They will not receive money from you, nor will you make them Roman Citizens. Who then told you that these are among the things which are in your power, and not in the power of others? And who can give to another what he has not himself?

"But my country, as far as it depends on me, also will be without my help" I ask again, what help do you mean? It will not have porticoes and baths through you: So what? After all, it doesn't get shoes from the smith nor weapons from the shoemaker.

What Epictetus tells us here is not to be unhappy because we are not famous, rich or powerful, because having or not having those qualities is outside our control. This corresponds to Ellis' irrational belief that you have to great and perfect to be happy. But he goes on:

(E 12)

If you intend to make progress, dont say: "If I neglect my affairs, I shall not have the means of living. Unless I punish my slave, he will be bad." For it is better to die of hunger and so to be released from grief and fear than to live in abundance with perturbation, and it is better for your slave to be bad than for you to be unhappy.

I'm afraid some of us may still prefer living in fear to dying of hunger, and the question is whether this is due to our lack of understanding, but for now I would like to draw your attention to another question which we have to ask of an appearance or "phantasia", and that is: what is it worth und whose worth is it?

(E 6)

Be not proud of any excellence which belongs to another: If a horse should proudly say: I am beautiful, one might endure it. But when you are elated and say: I have a beautiful horse, you are proud of some excellence which is in the horse.

(E 12)

Begin then from little things: Is the oil spilled? Is a little wine stolen? So what. Say to yourself: At such price is sold freedom from perturbation, at such price is sold tranquility.

(E 26)

When your neighbor's slave has broken his cup or anything else, you say: that is one of the things which happen. You must know, then, that when your cup also is broken, you ought to think as you did when your neighbors cup was broken.

This is meant to inoculate against the negative effects of daily hassles and corresponds to the irrational belief that things should be the way I want them to be.

(E 33)

If a man has reported to you that a certain person speaks ill of you, do not make any defense to what has been told, but say: that man did not know the rest of my faults, for otherwise he would not have mentioned these only.

... the idea being not getting upset at what other people think or say about you.

(E 44)

These statements are not consistent: "I am richer than you, therefore I am better than you.

I am more eloquent than you, therefore I am better than you". It is correct to say: "I am richer than you, therefore my possessions are greater than yours. I am more eloquent than you, therefore my speech is superior to yours". But you are neither possession nor speech.

(E 45)

Does a man bathe quickly? Dont say he bathes badly, but that he bathes quickly. All this is quite clear and I think most of us will find these suggestions quite reasonable. They represent, so to speak, the homely part of Epictetus' teaching. But let us return to the question of what is in our power and what is not. Recall that to desire or to detest things which are not in your power makes you unhappy. So what should we detest or what should we desire, in other words: what is in our power?

I'm afraid: very little. Nothing outside our body is in our power, and, unfortunately, our body itself is not in our power either. Epictetus says:

(E 1)

... not in our power are the body ...

or

(Dia I, 1)

This body is not thine own but only clay cunningly compounded.

Another good one is:

(Fragments 26)

You are a little soul, carrying around a corpse.

So, your body, and what happens to your body, should not be the object of your concern:

(E 2)

If you attempt to avoid disease or death or poverty, you will be unhappy.

(Dia III, 26)

You tremble and lie awake at night for fear the necessities of life will fail you.

*Wretch, are you so blind, and do you so fail to see the road to which lack of necessities of life leads? Where, indeed, does it lead. - Where also fever, or a stone that drops on your head, lead - to death.*

(E 5)

*We know that death is nothing terrible, for if it were it would have seemed so to Socrates; but the opinion that death is terrible, that is the terrible thing.*

Now, in our culture health, death, our family and their well-being are among those things that concern us most. We have heard Epictetus argue against the fear of death, and he also goes out of his way to liberate us from our concern for the kids, wives, husbands and parents. The person who has been convinced that it makes no sense to be anxious about the necessities of life still has something to worry about:

(Dia III, 26)

*You say: "Yes, but my family too will starve" - What then? Their starvation does not lead to some other end than yours (i.e. death), does it?*

Apparently the goal of this kind of training is to enable you to watch with equanimity while your children slowly die of hunger.

And it goes on:

(E 3)

*If you love an earthen vessel, say it is an earthen vessel which you love; for when it has been broken, you will not be disturbed. If you are kissing your child or wife, say that it is human being whom you are kissing, for when your wife or child dies, you will not be disturbed.*

(E 26)

*Is another man's child or wife dead? There is no one who would not say: "Such is the fate of man". Yet when a man's own child dies, immediately he cries: "Woe to me, how wretched I am" - But we must remember how we feel when we hear of the same misfortune befalling others.*

So, to summarize, we are not supposed to be concerned about our body and its health, our family and their well-being, our friends, the community, wealth, honor, oil, wine, horses, earthen vessels - in short: we are not supposed to be concerned about anything.

Now, hearing things like this is getting more and more depressing, and we are wondering what is left. There must be, according to Epictetus, something in our power. What is it? You will surprised:

(Dia I, 1)

*As was fitting, the gods have put under our control only the most excellent faculty of all and that which dominates the rest, namely the power to make correct use of appearances (phantasiai), but all the others they have not put under our control.*

And what is the correct use of the appearances? The exercise of "prohairesis" towards them, that is, to consent to them as they are. All what Epictetus teaches is summarized in the statement:

(E 8)

*Seek not that the things which happen should happen as you wish; but wish the things which happen to be as they are, and you will have a tranquil flow of life.*

Not only is there nothing in our power except the power to assent to what befalls us, it is also true that nothing belongs to us:

(E 11)

*Never say about anything, I have lost it, but say I have given it back. Is your child dead? It has been given back. Is your wife dead? She has been given back. Has your estate been taken from you? Has not this also been given back? But he who has taken it from me is a bad man. But what is it to you, by whose hands the giver demanded it back? So long as he may allow you, take care of it as a thing which belongs to another, as travelers do with their inn.*

#### IV

Let me add a few afterthoughts. Many suggestions formulated by Epictetus seem very reasonable to us and indeed of therapeutic value. But his fundamental Weltanschauung is completely alien to our own views of life, the universe and everything. According to Epictetus, everything is good as it is, because it was created by a good and omnipotent God who would not create anything bad. To the Deity everything belongs and we cannot change the course of creation. In the last analysis, there are no events, there are only acts of God, and this explains the use of the term *pragmata* (things being done) at the beginning. If we are unhappy about something, it is because we are mistaken. The goal of philosophy is to correct those mistakes, and this is in fact the only thing we can do, at least with a little help from our friends and by systematic *askesis*, that is, telling ourselves again and again the correct principles.

Evidently, this is far removed from the views of contemporary enlightened cognitive therapists as exemplified, say, by Albert Ellis. He certainly would not say that all things are good as they are. He would say that many things are pretty lousy, and that there is something but not much we can do about it, and that this is the reason why we should not get mad at us and the world.

So, there are some useful precepts to be extracted from Epictetus, but his philosophical basis seems to be incompatible with our own. However, strange as all this may seem to us, if we really took serious our own modern world-view, namely that the universe expands relentlessly according to fixed deterministic or probabilistic laws, then the very concept of having control over something would be meaningless, and to follow Epictetus would be the absolutely reasonable thing to do.

As we don't, let me end with a last quotation to take home

(E5)

*The uneducated person blames others for his own bad condition. He who has made some progress blames himself. And he who has complete understanding blames neither another, nor himself.*

## A note on the text

For this paper I mostly used: Epictetus: The Enchiridion. Transl. by George Long . Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books (1991).

The authoritative edition for an English-speaking audience is that published by Loeb Classical Library, Epictetus: The Discourses, with an English Translation by W.A. Oldfather. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., Vol. I; Book I-II (1925, reset and reprinted 1998), Vol.II; Book III-IV-Fragments-Encheiridion (1928).

However, here the translation of some of the key concepts seems to be inappropriate. proairesis is translated as moral purpose, but a better choice would be "assent" or "will", as in the translation of G. Long, and phantasia as external impression, but the term phantasia also covers expectations and imagined events. There is actually no good translation for this. I would prefer perception (leaving it open whether that would be an inner or outer perception), but Long's appearance is acceptable, too, even though a bit vague.

In German no complete edition is easily available. For the Enchiridion I prefer Epiktet: Handbüchlein der Ethik. Aus dem Griechischen übersetzt und mit Anmerkungen versehen von Ernst Neitzke. Stuttgart: Reclam 1958. There is another newer edition with the title "Handbüchlein der Moral", also published by Reclam (1992), which contains the Greek text and a translation by Kurt Steinmann which, however, in my opinion is inferior to that by Neitzke.

The quotations presented here are mostly taken from the translations by Long and Oldfather. In some cases I did change the text a bit, especially in cases where the translations seemed to be rather antiquated or inappropriate in other ways.

## Hitler, the master of mass hypnosis: Thoughts and feelings of a young Jewish woman while seeing and hearing Hitler talk at a Nazi rally

### Anonymous

■ *As a young student, the author, who is Jewish, heard and saw Hitler give a speech at a rally in Germany. She knew nothing about hypnosis, let alone mass hypnosis. (Since then she has become internally known for her research in, and practice of, hypnosis.) In this paper the author recalls what she thought and felt while listening to Hitler's harangues against the Jews; and how she defended herself (only partially successfully) against accepting those statements which she knew were false. She describes how inwardly she constantly felt pulled back and forth between agreeing and disagreeing with the statements Hitler made with such great hypnotic power.*

S ometime in the early 1930s, Hitler gave a talk in Munich, and I wanted to hear and see him. I was a student at the time at the University of Munich. This was going to be a big Nazi rally. It was dangerous for me to go to that rally because Jews were not supposed to be at Nazi rallies. Anyone of my Gentile fellow students who was a Nazi could have recognized me and might have known that I was Jewish. In this Nazi rally, I experienced mass hypnosis for the first time.

I knew that bad things could happen to me if I would go to that rally. Nazi students could have pulled me out of there and beaten me up at the Nazi headquarters. Still, I went.

At the rally, before Hitler came on stage, drums, horns, and other band instruments played the same four or five notes, in the same rhythm, over and over again. Hearing that is trance-inducing. Then Hitler came out and ranted and raved against the Jews. Among other things, he said that they were an evil, sub-human race, and should all be killed. (He and his Nazi henchmen later killed 6 million Jews in the death camps.) To my great surprise, I found myself thinking every few minutes: "He's right! That's how the Jews are!" and then pulling myself back and saying to myself, "No, of course he is not right. I am Jewish, and I know he isn't right." It was a horrible experience for me. Now, had I been a socialist, a communist, homosexual, gypsy, Seventh-day Adventist,