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Epictetus and The Meaning of Life **A.A. Long**

Stoicism, the philosophy that Epictetus (c. 50-138 CE) professed and taught, did not investigate life's *meaning* as such, but Stoic philosophers offered a rich array of answers to the two main questions this modern expression is generally taken to raise: first, "Why is the world the way it is?" and second, "How can we live lives that are subjectively fulfilling and objectively worthwhile?" To the first question the Stoic response takes the world or "nature" to be an entirely physical structure, bodily through and through, providentially organized to provide the best possible life for rational beings; in this sense the world is defined as a universal city (*kosmopolis*) or the "habitation" of gods and humans. Answers to the second question elaborate on this cosmological thesis by positing that human beings are innately equipped (subject to appropriate education and training) to make the best of their lives in all situations they encounter, and by so doing contribute their own specific excellence as cosmic citizens to the world's rational organization.

These Stoic responses to the "meaning of life" question are distinctive because they combine theism with what has been called "objective naturalism" [Seachris 2013]. The principal divinity that Stoicism invokes is not, as god is typically construed, a supernatural or spiritual entity, but the physical power, equivalent to nature (*physis*), that permeates and determines all particular bodies, and provides the world as a whole with its causality and coherence. What Stoics ideally seek to connect with in their quest for a fulfilling life is the rationality embodied both in their own minds and in the divinely determined processes of their natural environment. They seek, in the words of the

great Stoic logician Chrysippus, to become self-aware “parts of the whole”, to live “according to nature”, and to deploy their “experience of natural events” in ways that are socially beneficent and personally gratifying.

The Stoic term that corresponds most closely to “meaning” of life is *telos*, to be translated by purpose, end, or goal. Like other ancient philosophers, Stoics built their ethical theories around elucidation of life’s *telos*; and like other philosophers again, they understood by that expression a human life’s ultimate objective, in striving for which everything else is, or should be, subordinate and no more than instrumental. The name for this ancient philosophical project, taken generally, was happiness or flourishing (*eudaimonia*), and it included subjective and objective components. Pleasure, self-satisfaction, good feelings, sense of achievement, friendship and love, public recognition, service to family and community – all of these could figure in ancient philosophers’ constituents of the *telos*, as they do in modern philosophers’ accounts of a meaningful life. What ancient philosophers, however, emphasized above all else in their ethics was quality of mind and character, captured collectively in the notion of virtue (*arete*) and correctness of reason and understanding (*orthos logos*). In Stoicism this ingredient of the *telos*, and thereby of life’s meaningfulness, was not only paramount but so decisive that nothing outside the self’s direct capacity to control, including pleasure and external success, was counted a necessary ingredient of the good life. The ideal Stoic was taken to be someone who, thanks entirely to cultivation of reason, would live optimally in any situation, even when subject to unjust punishment like Socrates, or like the Cynic Diogenes with no creature comforts. In Epictetus especially, to whom I now come, this focus on the mind and on self-empowerment became the central feature of the Stoic philosophy he presented to his students.

Born a Phrygian slave and emancipated as a youth at Rome during or soon after the imperial rule of Nero (AD 54-68), Epictetus made his mark as the philosophical teacher of young men in the resplendent city of Nicopolis in North Western Greece. One of his students named Arrian, who later became a distinguished administrator and author, made a record of Epictetus's lectures, and it is these *Discourses*, together with the summary of them known as the *Handbook*, that constitute what we refer to as the works of Epictetus himself. The main subject of this material is not an outline of Stoic theory (which Epictetus will have expounded to his students in other classes) but advice on the application of the philosophy to oneself and one's daily life. Epictetus interrogates his students in dialogical ways that we may liken to modern therapy and psychoanalysis, getting them to imagine and confront difficult situations concerning personal and family relationships, their fears and ambitions and, especially, challenges to integrity that they are likely to experience. Epictetus does not speak, in so many words, of a *meaningful* life, but his recorded work provides an in-depth showing of what such a life, according to Stoic values and Stoic world view, would involve.

Many of his characteristic thoughts and recommendations are encapsulated in the following text, which sums up the teaching of the *Handbook*:

How long will you [a representative student or reader] delay thinking yourself worthy of the best, and making reason your decisive principle in everything? You have received the doctrines you ought to endorse, and you have endorsed them. What sort of teacher, then, are you still waiting for, so you can transfer the correction of yourself to him? You are not a boy any more, but already a full-grown man. If you are negligent now and lazy and always procrastinating, and settling on the day after tomorrow and the next as when you will take yourself in hand, you will fail to see that you are making no progress but spending your entire life until you die as an ordinary person. Right now, then, think yourself worthy to live like a grown-up making

progress; and take your view of the best to be the rule that you never transgress. And whatever you encounter that is painful or pleasant or popular or unpopular, keep in mind that *now* is the contest, and here right now are the Olympic games, and that postponement is no longer an option, and that your progress is saved or ruined by a single day and a single action. That is how Socrates perfected himself, by attending to nothing except reason in everything he encountered. You yourself too, even though you are not yet Socrates, ought to live as someone one who wants to be a Socrates.

Epictetus does not presume that lives come endowed from the cradle with merit or rights simply in virtue of being human. His outlook is teleological through and through, but the felicitous ends that are built into human nature are achievable only and solely by the effort and commitment that individual persons exhibit on their own behalf. As Epictetus explains here, instruction in Stoic philosophy and assiduous practice of its precepts are essential to the project of making something of oneself. The students he is addressing are on the threshold of careers in such professions as military and government service, law, and education. The aim of the Stoicism he expounds is not to equip them to distinguish themselves in any career specifically, but to turn them into, what he quaintly calls “professional” human beings, and so be ready for anything that comes their way.

Reading this passage, then, as a recipe to confer meaning on one’s life, we can extract the following notions as necessary conditions that it requires of persons – maturity, sense of urgency, commitment, progress, self-assessment and self- monitoring, achievement, objective excellence, and narrative coherence. I list these notions without any intention of prioritizing one over another. Some of them, for instance maturity, achievement, and objective value or excellence, are regularly included in contemporary accounts of life’s meaning or conditions of meaningfulness (Woolf 2007). It is widely supposed that lives, to be meaningful, need aims and achievements beyond pleasure and basic

welfare (Luper 2014), aims and achievements that transcend the particular desires of individuals, and that meet standards of value that are generally accepted to be worthwhile.

Epictetus, however, would be misrepresented if we took him to be adumbrating criteria of meaningfulness that apply across the board, so to speak. His focus on reason and “the rule of the best” presupposes the theistic and psychological doctrines that I outlined in the first paragraph of this essay. He spells out those doctrines in the following passage taken from a discourse entitled *On providence* (1.6.14-22)

It is sufficient for non-rational animals to eat and drink and rest and procreate, and do everything that each kind of animal does. For us, on the other hand, to whom God has also given the power of attending to things, these animal activities are no longer sufficient, but unless we act appropriately

and systematically and in agreement with our individual nature and constitution, we shall no

longer attain our end. . . God introduced the human being to be a student of himself and his works, and not merely a student but also an *interpreter* of these things. Therefore it is wrong or shameful (*aischron*) for a human being to begin and end where the non-rational animals do. He should rather begin where they do and end where nature has ended in our case. Nature ended at studying and attending to things and a way of life in harmony with nature.

As we generally use the word “nature”, we have in mind states of affairs that are normal or regular, if not invariant. Epictetus buys into that usage when he enumerates the activities of eating, resting, and so forth. Human beings in virtue of being animals behave accordingly or naturally, and cannot live otherwise. It is as natural for us to eat and sleep as it is for other animals. We cannot choose these aspects of our human identity. They are a given. By contrast, the nature that Epictetus posits as distinctively human and divinely mandated is normative, not a given. Nothing in your basic animal make-up compels you to value reason and understanding above eating

and sleeping, and to become an interpreter of the world's significance and your place therein. What is at stake here, as Epictetus never tires of saying, is choice, volition, long-term purpose. We can opt out of our normative nature, and "end where the non-rational animals do". In that case, we also opt out of living a meaningful life, as he construes that here.

Earlier in this discourse, Epictetus prepares for his treatment of normative human nature by commenting on the teleology exemplified in the relation between light, colour, and vision, and in the efficacy of sexual attraction for procreation. Such natural signs of biological purposiveness give content to the interpretive role that Epictetus assigns to human beings as distinct from other animals. Plato and Aristotle had long ago traced the beginnings of philosophy to human interest in the investigation of nature. In Epictetus we come close to the idea of nature as a book, a semiotic system that is incumbent on us to study and respond to if we are to live up to our full human potential. On this construal, life does literally have a meaning, the meaning embodied in how we interpret the signs of natural or divine teleology.

We can flesh out this conception in its historical context by drawing a contrast with Epicureanism, which had been the principal rival philosophy from Stoicism's beginning, and is an unremitting target of Epictetus. The Epicurean universe is a purely mechanical structure of aimless atoms moving in infinite void. Taken universally the Epicurean world has no meaning because everything it contains, including gods and humans, exists as the outcome of matter in purposeless motion and not by design. Value is entirely a function of sensation and perception, with pleasure the foundation of good and pain of bad. Human life, according to Epicurus, has an objective *telos* in the sense that everyone naturally seeks pleasure and avoids pain.

Philosophy serves this hedonistic goal by identifying tranquility as its optimal state of mind, by undermining beliefs that stand in its way such as the badness of death and the desirability of wealth and social status, and by cultivating prudence as the mind-set appropriate to rationalizing one's desires so as to achieve a life that maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain. A quiet and simple life spent with friends and without political involvements is the Epicurean recommendation for fulfilling this goal. No further achievement is required to render life purposeful and fulfilling.

Epictetus challenges Epicurus by calling into question the consistency of his own life with a philosophy that situates all positive value in pleasurable sensation. "What is there in you that deliberates, that examines every detail, and that forms the judgment that the flesh itself is the leading constituent of our nature? Why do you light your lamp and toil for us and write so many books? Isn't it to prevent our ignorance of the truth?" (*Discourse* 1.20.18-19). As the founder of a highly successful philosophical school, Epicurus lived a life that could be judged philanthropic in its primary motivation and replete with meaning in the sense of having social and historical significance. It was a life, moreover, according to Epictetus, that displayed Epicurus's virtual Stoicism in its cultivation of rationality as the supreme human faculty. What it chiefly lacked, on his view, was the theistic underpinning of reason's supreme value for Stoics - value grounded not in reason's prudential efficacy (though it had that, of course) but in being the faculty to connect the inner trajectory of life with external events (be they favorable or otherwise), and thus provide a sense of homeliness and affinity in the world.

I choose the words homeliness and affinity to draw attention to one of Stoicism's most innovative and powerful concepts, expressed in Greek by the term *oikeiosis*. Drawing metaphorically on the notions of home and kin and ownership, *oikeiosis* expresses the affinity and sense

of belonging that living creatures feel naturally for themselves and their offspring. By extension, Stoics argued, with the development of reason human beings can and should (if they are to flourish) adapt themselves to feel at home in the world as such, taking that homeliness to refer to whatever circumstance they find themselves in. Underlying this project is the theism that I outlined at the beginning of this article. Holding that the world in its entirety is providentially governed and causally coherent, Stoics took it as axiomatic that one's particular spatio-temporal situation could not be otherwise than it is. What is up to us and entirely free from external determination is how we interpret and respond to our experience, moment by moment. Hence Epictetus tells his students to say "Bring on me now, O Zeus, whatever situation you will, for I have the means and the resources granted to me by yourself to bring honour to myself through whatever comes to pass" (*Discourse* 1.6.37). Another leading Roman Stoic, Seneca, expresses the same thought in the following way:

Let us keep our distance from fortune as much as we can. But the only way we can do that is through an understanding of ourselves and of nature. Let us know where we are headed and where we come from; what is good for us and what is bad; what to pursue and what to avoid; what reason is, which distinguishes objects of pursuit and avoidance, soothes the madness of our desires, and checks the savagery of our fears. (*Moral Letter* 82.6).

Epictetus, as we have seen, cajoles his students, urging them to think of themselves as Olympic athletes, readying for a contest, facing decisive challenges, teetering on the brink of absolute success or failure. His hyperbolic tone might seem to betoken an intensely elitist notion of a meaningful life, as if you have to compete and win in order for your life to be marked by any achievement worthy of note. This impression is not entirely wrong; for the Greek word *arete* that we often translate by "virtue" is better rendered by "excellence". In

denoting the goal of life, as *arete* does in Stoicism, superlative achievement is in question: you cannot exhibit *arete*, and simply be ordinary, such as being unhappy when things do not work out as you would have liked, and exultant when you win the lottery. But the extraordinariness that *arete* signifies has nothing to do with success in the sense of accomplishment marked by external criteria, like completing a work of art, or finding a cure for cancer, or winning an election. The best way to express Epictetus's main point is to think of yourself, your character and your emotional disposition as the objects of the challenge or competition. Prowess and progress, as he uses these words, apply to every situation, however humdrum, that calls for a deliberate response or social interaction. What is at issue may be simply one's reaction to an insult or a mundane disappointment, or it could be a situation calling for a decision that affects the lives of others. In all cases, the determining factor to count as a significant Stoic achievement is the appropriateness of the judgment, efforts and emotional affect persons display, especially in difficult circumstances. Another way to capture the relevance of this philosophy to notions of meaning is to say that the world, for a Stoic, makes sense to the extent that we take ourselves to be masters of our own fate.

Socrates' courage, resolution and equanimity conferred a meaning on his life that needs no commentary to count as exemplary. Epictetus describes it in sporting images that any modern reader will find appealing and germane to this book's topic: Socrates, he says, played the ball well, with the ball he had to deploy being the hemlock poison he was required to drink and the cheerful demeanor he chose to exhibit to his grieving friends (*Discourse* 2.5). Like his competitive language, it might seem as if exhibitionism is a necessary component of a meaningful life according to Epictetus since he repeatedly praises the way admirable persons show themselves, and treats displays of weakness or failure to live up to appropriate standards as shameful.

But the relevant audience of the display is not a set of external observers but the literary self that he is representing to his students. Its purpose is to confront and ask them how they would judge their own behavior if they were observing it in others. In a particularly effective discourse, he envisions a father who is so distraught by his daughter's sickness that he cannot bear to stay at her bedside (*Discourse* 1.11). Is he acting from love, the father is asked? Looking for sympathy, he retorts that he is acting "naturally". To which Epictetus responds that the father's abandonment of his child is completely contrary to the nature of love.

We are to understand that if the distraught father had supported the girl, that action would have been not only the ethically appropriate one but also an objectively significant response because it would have required him to overcome purely self-centered and gut reactions. Knowing at what emotional cost a person does the right thing may be sufficient to elevate actions from being merely ordinary into something we report with praise. Epictetus's subject matter focuses on mundane difficulties (for instance, illness, anxiety, anger, a lawsuit, disagreeable relatives) because these difficulties invite responses that fall within our control to handle thoughtfully rather than reactively and impulsively. Individual actions are hardly sufficient, taken by themselves, to provide a whole life with meaning, and we should not suppose that success at surmounting problems is a necessary criterion either. It looms so large in Epictetus because the essence of his Stoicism is autonomy, self-determination, and freedom from external constraint. One's actions, then, are meaningful in so far as they are what we deliberately and freely choose for ourselves. It is that intention that confers meaning on them.

Epictetus sets the bar for a meaningful life very high, but the height is relative to the personality and natural endowments of individuals. Only a few have the potentiality to become suitable

subjects for public recognition and eulogistic biography. What he takes to be more generally available to people is the achievement of self-knowledge and excellent performance of social role, as father, brother, wife, soldier, magistrate, etc. As he puts it: “Only consider at what price you sell your own will and choice, if for nothing else, that you not sell it cheap. But what is great and exceptional perhaps belongs to others, to Socrates, and those who resemble him” (*Discourse* 1.33).

How, then, in sum may we assess the interest of Epictetus for modern investigation of the meaning of life? For those who find meaning in their relationship to God, Epictetus will appeal through his conviction that the world’s ultimate cause is a supreme being who wishes us well and who has delegated to our minds a portion of its own rationality. Since, however, his Stoic divinity is immanent and present within the processes of life itself, the main thrust of his philosophy is quite compatible with the notion (Blackburn 2007, 190) that “there is sufficient meaning for human beings in the human world – the world of familiar, and even humdrum, doings and experiences.” Epictetus strongly endorses the need for an account of life’s meaning to “distinguish between the animal self and the rational self” (Metz 2013, 88). He would be less sympathetic to notions that the meaning of life requires “some decision about what we want our life as a whole to accomplish” (Luper 2014, 200). This would probably strike him as grandiose and insufficiently attentive to the episodic nature of day-to-day existence. Epictetus lays great stress on achievement, but what he urges his students to achieve is not fulfillment of a specific life plan (which can easily lapse into megalomania or lack of balance) but the disposition to aspire to be at their best at all times. That aspiration is his principal contribution to the meaning of life.

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