

The three stoic ideals



Although Epictetus's Handbook consists of only fifty-three points, it manages to convey clearly the main ideas of Stoicism and how to act based on those principles. Despite the fact that reading all of the points in the Handbook is important in order to get a precise picture of Stoicism, simply by looking at the way in which Epictetus talks about familial relations one can get a relatively good picture of what he wants from students of Stoicism. By looking at the passages in which familial relations are detailed, one can find guidelines to three of Epictetus's most important Stoic ideals (which at times overlap): how important it is to live in accordance with nature, through self-knowledge (knowledge of one's limits and finitude) and through self-control or authority over oneself. First, two scenarios that Epictetus outlines in his Handbook tie into the important Stoic theme of how to live in accordance with nature. Epictetus writes: " Appropriate actions are in general measured by relationships. He is a father: that entails taking care of him, yielding to him in everything, putting up with him when he abuses you or strikes you." (Epictetus 20) He goes on to say that even if the father is a bad father, the child should preserve this relationship with him, because the child's natural tie is not to a good father, but to a father. (Epictetus 21) Because nature has determined how father and child should act towards each other, the child should pursue actions appropriate to him or her as a child, despite the actions of the father. This example of how to pursue familial relations ties in with the Handbook's overarching theme of living with nature and determining what kinds of actions are and are not in one's power. What the Stoic should do is aim to act in the way that nature dictates he should, but not be disappointed when the outcome of those actions do not satisfy—as in the case with the son being a good son but the father not being a good

father. A way to look at this is to look at a marksman aiming for a target. The goal is to hit the middle of the target, but this is not totally under the control of the marksman: his fingers could sweat and slip, the gun could aim high or low because of some internal fault, or the gun could misfire completely. All the marksman can do is shoot well, not produce perfect results; if the marksman shoots well, no matter what the outcome of the shot, he or she can view the shot with success. Similarly, a son can carry out what nature demands of him in his relationship with his father, and whether or not the outcome is positive (a good relationship), the son was still successful. The actions one undertakes should be motivated by what is demanded by nature of one's relationships, not by how other people act. However, living in tune with nature (as the example with the father/son relationship tells Stoics to do) requires a Stoic to focus on two other things. The first of these is acknowledging mankind's finitude and limits, which requires paying attention to the world in which one's actions take place. Epictetus focuses on this with a few examples of familial relations, the first of which is one of his more morbid-seeming examples: at one point, he states, " If you kiss your child or your wife, say that you are kissing a human being; for when it dies, you will not be upset." (Epictetus 12) Through this example, Epictetus tries to firmly ground the Stoic in the reality of the world around him or her and the way nature operates. This is not an optimistic outlook on life: there is no mention of an afterlife or immortality; there is no guarantee against sudden illness or death or misfortune. Instead, Epictetus demands that his followers face the irrefutable fact that the way nature operates is not always the way one wishes it would: loved ones will die eventually, and in the end there is nothing one can do to prevent it. Limitation is the nature of human life.

Moreover, it is important for followers of Stoicism to realize that this acknowledgement of the finitude of humans is an unflinching truth for everyone; nature does not deviate from the order of causes and effects. The importance of this truth Epictetus further emphasizes when he states: “Someone else’s child is dead, or his wife. There is no one who would not say, ‘It’s the lot of a human being.’ But when one’s own dies, immediately it is, ‘Alas! Poor me!’” (Epictetus 18-19) Loss is a neutral occurrence for everyone because everyone must face it; it is not a horrible thing for one person alone, and if it is, it is because that person failed to realize it might ever happen to him or her. It is one’s perception of the finitude that makes it horrible, not the actual limitation itself—a concept Epictetus reiterates later when he says: “What upsets people is not things themselves but their judgments about the things.” (Epictetus 13) In order not to be miserable because of disappointed hopes caused by bad judgments, we must face the true nature of mankind and of nature. If that was all there was to it, however, Stoicism could be quite simple: it is easy to bemoan the unfairness of life—perhaps too easy. What Stoicism demands, based on the realization of one’s own finitude and limitations, is a certain set of actions. It is this set of actions with which two other examples of familial relations in the Handbook deal. The first consists of someone is on a boat that has anchored in a port; that person is free to wander off of the boat and around the island to get food and water, but he must always keep his mind on the boat and the fact that it will inevitably leave at some point. He must keep his attention on the boat so that he may hear when the captain calls him to come back; when the captain does, no matter what the person on the island is doing, he must “let all those other things go so that [he] will not be tied up and thrown on the ship

like livestock.” (Epictetus 13) This is how to live life in a dignified fashion: whenever death comes — as it will inevitably — one must be ready to drop everything without turning back, no matter if it’s a wife or child. If one does not, one will be tied up and thrown into the inevitable like livestock, losing dignity in what should have been a neutral situation. This is an important idea for Epictetus: struggling with or worrying about situations one cannot control is pointless and robs people of human dignity. Since death is something that will happen no matter what and cannot be controlled, nothing should stop a Stoic from facing it, not even his or her family. What one must do is align one’s will with what nature asks by complying obediently when death calls, not by demanding that nature fit its actions to what one wants by struggling and fighting against death. The second example Epictetus offers details something equally important. He states, quite bluntly: “ You are foolish if you want your children and your wife and your friends to live forever, since you are wanting things to be up to you that are not up to you, and things to be yours that are not yours.” (Epictetus 15) This assertion is basically a reiteration of the principle that it is important to acknowledge and accept the way in which nature operates. However, Epictetus goes on to say that: “ A person’s master is something who has power over what he wants or does not want, either to obtain it or to take it away. Whoever wants to be free, therefore, let him not want or avoid anything that is up to others. Otherwise he will necessarily be a slave.” (Epictetus 15) This is one of the most important points Epictetus makes: he is telling his readers exactly what it means to be free; the only way one can be free is to be free of desires, since those are dependent on beings other than oneself. Later in the book, Epictetus reiterates this by asking

indignantly: “ If someone turned your body over to just any person who happened to meet you, you would be angry.” (Epictetus 19) But people are not ashamed, he notes, when they allow someone else to be their master by determining their emotions and desires and aversions (Epictetus 19). Even though one cannot be master of nature and what it imposes, one can always be master of one’s own mind, desires, and judgments, and when one gives those away to someone else by desiring something only the other person can give, one allows the other person to determine one’s happiness and allows them to become master of one’s mind. The only vestige of absolute freedom is that of a person’s mind, and desires that depend on other people to fulfill render one a slave. The only way to avoid this is to avoid desiring things beyond one’s own absolute power to obtain. This relates directly to the first sentence of the Handbook, which states: “ Some things are up to us and some are not up to us. Our opinions are up to us, and our impulses, desires, and aversions — in short, whatever is our own doing...If you think that only what is yours is yours, and that what is not your own is...you will not do a single thing unwillingly.” (Epictetus 11) These last two examples answer the question: when one finally realizes that human life is limited no matter what, when one has finally realized that there are many things not in one’s power but in nature’s, in what ways should one take action? Epictetus demonstrates that when the power is not in one’s hands but in the workings of nature, the one thing that is in one’s power is the ability to adapt oneself to all that comes about and not give into fruitless worry and desire, and in this way not spend one’s life miserable and unhappy because of frustrated hopes. In another one of his books, the Discourses, Epictetus states that controlling one’s passions in light of one’s limitations is “ the most urgent...

for these [the passions] are produced in no other way than by the disappointment of our desires, and the incurring of our aversions. It is this that introduces disturbances, tumults, misfortunes, and calamities; and causes sorrow, lamentation, and envy; and renders us envious and jealous, and thus incapable of listening to reason.” (Aurelius 183). While it is not possible to get a complete picture of what Epictetus wanted from his Stoic followers just by looking at familial relationships in the Handbook, a very rough outline can be made of what Epictetus considered to be some of the most important points of his philosophy. Living in accordance with nature seems to be the overarching principle through which his philosophy dictates the actions of its followers, and the only way to live in accordance with nature is through both self-knowledge (realization of the finitude of humanity) and self-control (basing actions on self-knowledge, dignity, and freedom).