

**SELECTED DISCOURSES -
THE WISDOM OF EPICTETUS
THE STOIC CLASSIC**

EPICTETUS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

**SELECTED DISCOURSES –
THE WISDOM OF
EPICTETUS**

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This edition first published 2024

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Is Available:

ISBN 9780857089953 (hardback)

ISBN 9780857089960 (ePub)

ISBN 9780857089977 (ePDF)

Set in 12/16pt, NewBaskervilleStd by Straive, Chennai, India.

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INTRODUCTION

TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

Along with Marcus Aurelius and Seneca the Younger, Epictetus makes up the trio of Stoic philosophers who are widely read today.

Whereas Marcus and Seneca were powerful and rich men of the world who sometimes struggled to live up to their Stoic ideals, Epictetus was a different beast: a professional philosopher and Stoic teacher who had been born enslaved.

Epictetus taught philosophical theory, logic, and physics at the school he founded, but most of his teachings (at least those that have come down to us in the *Enchiridion* and *Discourses*) are about character development and self-improvement. His students were trained in philosophical method, but had real-life issues and worried about their futures. Epictetus would give his formal academic lectures in the mornings, but the afternoons were reserved for more free-flowing talks about what it means to live a virtuous and successful life. His students had the same goal of mental freedom and peace of mind that you and I have today.

INTRODUCTION

It may be interesting to delve into the times in which Epictetus lived, but it's his insights into human nature that are the real topic of this volume. They remain inspiring because they are based on reason, and lie outside any requirement for faith or belief.

Epictetus believed in a universe of cause and effect. Our decisions and actions have consequences that we can't change. But we also have choice or volition to act in a way that creates our futures.

He tried to show how many of the common ethical ideas of his day, such as the pursuit of power, glory, and wealth, were dead ends if they led to the giving up of one's principles and the subsequent erosion of internal peace.

Through deploying reason, we could guard our emotions and instincts and gain control over the part of our lives that was in our scope to do so. Pursuing that which was not controllable was a fool's game that could only lead to anxiety or disappointment; in short, a wasted life.

If today you hear someone saying, 'She is philosophical about it', it means that whatever event has happened to that person, it is not being allowed to affect their underlying self. Epictetus taught his students how to remain the same (literally have integrity, like a stone), regardless of externals. That is of course a huge challenge, given that it's human nature to be blown about by the winds of emotion. Yet it is really the only thing that guarantees mental freedom and peace of mind.

Epictetus never sought to have his ideas published in his lifetime, but one of his students, Arrian (Flavius Arrianus, 86–160 CE), dutifully recorded his more accessible teachings in the *Discourses* (*Diatriba*). These were published not long after Epictetus died, so we can have some confidence that they are an accurate rendering

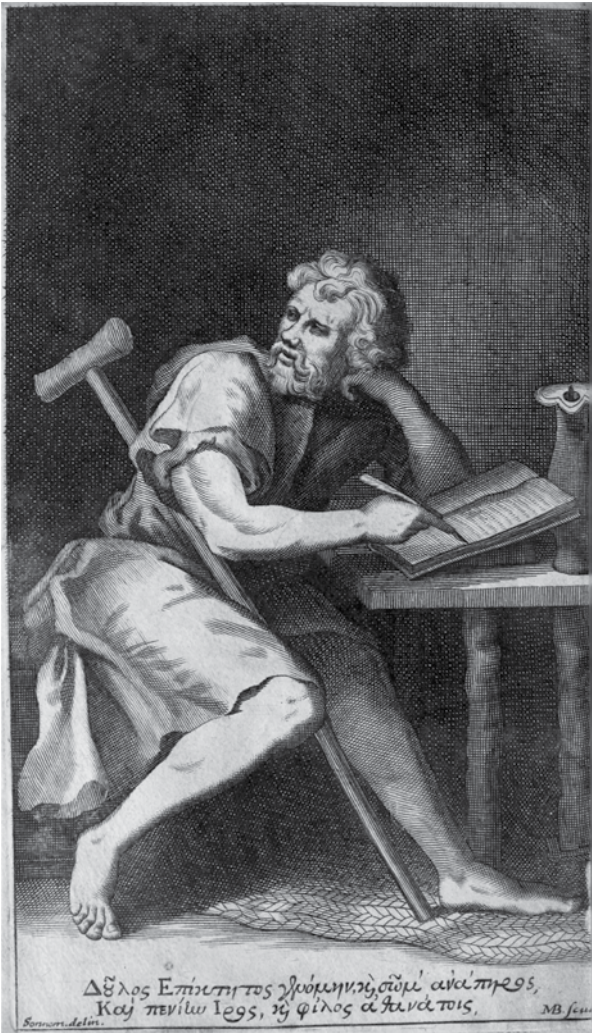


Image: Imaginary portrait of Epictetus from the frontispiece to Edward Ivison's Latin version of the *Enchiridion* (*Epicteti Enchiridion Latinis versibus adumbratum*). Printed in Oxford in 1715.

of his thinking and his style of speaking and teaching. Xenophon helped immortalize Socrates by writing up some of his *Dialogues* and giving an account of his death. Similarly, it's only because of Arrian that we can learn from Epictetus today.

The native language of Epictetus was *Koine*, or common Greek, and Arrian's *Discourses* (of which four volumes from an original eight survive) were set down in Greek. Arrian also produced a kind of executive summary of the *Discourses* in the *Enchiridion* (Manual or Handbook). This Capstone Classics volume includes the *Enchiridion* along with selected chapters from the *Discourses* that relate to peace of mind and mental freedom.

EPICTETUS: LIFE AND INFLUENCES

Epictetus was born around 55 CE in Hierapolis (now Pamukkale in Turkey), a Greek-speaking city within the Roman Empire.

His mother was a slave, and as a result he grew up enslaved himself. At some point he moved to Rome, and worked in the household of Tiberius Claudius Epaphroditus, a freedman (former slave) who had become wealthy and who was a personal secretary to Emperor Nero.

Despite his very humble beginnings, Epictetus was brought into the proximity of power and influence. If he did not witness it first-hand, he would have been given accounts of people who had given up their integrity to win favour from the Emperor, or who forgot their ethics in order to avoid some fate like public shame, execution, bankruptcy, or exile.

Despite his status Epictetus had a fair amount of freedom, and was allowed to attend classes by Musonius Rufus, one of the great Stoic teachers of the day. That said, he did not get the