The Stoic Art of Living: Providence and the World

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Setting Up the Problem

- Resignation vs. volition. (Accepting vs. choosing.)
    - The faculty of choice (*prohairesis*) as the key to freedom.
    - "Someone is free if all that happens to him comes about in accordance with his choice, and no one else is able to hinder him." (Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.12, 9).
    - This freedom is the *opposite* of madness.
- Problem(s):
    - If there are genuinely bad things in the world, how could I *will* those things?
    - If the world could be better than it is, why should I accept/embrace it as it is?

The Derivative Nature of the Bad

- Socrates: No one chooses evil qua evil.
- Epictetus: "Just as a target isn't set up to be missed, so nothing that is bad by nature comes into being in the universe." (*Handbook* 27)
- Proclus: Two types of privation:
    - Privation of form (e.g., the absence of sight in a rock).
    - Privation of a good (e.g., blindness in a human).
- Simplicius: "A privation is a confusion or failure of the form."
    - Limping, as a failure of walking.
    - This is *unlike* the case of black and white.
- Failure to achieve any goal happens *involuntarily*.
    - The failure depends upon (derives its existence from) the target/goal.
    - The primary goal does <u>not</u> depend upon (derive its existence from) the failure.
- So, the bad has a derivative/parasitic existence, dependent upon the good.
- Applying this:
    - Are (apparent) harms to bodies bad, with respect to bodies?
    - Are (apparent) harms to bodies bad, with respect to souls?
        - Necessary vs. choiceworthy.
        - Medical treatments and exercise.
    - What about (apparent) harms to souls themselves?
        - "Falling away" from our proper nature is rooted in choice (*prohairesis*).
        - Encouraging vs. forcing.

Do the Gods Care?

- Providence.
  - Greek *pronoia* (*noein*, 'to perceive/know'; *nous*, 'intellect');
    Latin *providentia* (*videre*, 'to see/know').
  - Greek *kosmos*: an <u>ordered</u> whole.

- Providence for the world as a whole.
  - Basic principle: The cause must be more perfect than the effect.
    - If the parts are governed by nature, so too the whole.
    - The cosmos is a living being composed of living beings:
      - "a body made of bodies" (Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 5.8).
      - "an animal composed of animals" (Plato, *Timaeus*).
  - The "watchmaker" argument (in Cicero, a clockwork orrery; compare William Paley).
  - The shepherd who sees a ship for the first time?
  - Perpetuation of species.

- Providence for all individuals?
  - Disputed examples: The general, the statesman, the household manager.
  - What about the doctor? (Surgery, cautery.)
  - Epictetus: Start with plants → Human bodies → Rational souls. (*Discourses* 1.14)

A soldier's oath to Caesar	*Epictetus' oath to Zeus*
given wages	given all good things needful for life and above all, given the power of choice
swear to hold the safety of Caesar about all else	swear never to disobey, find fault with, or complain about anything granted to us by God
thus, holding Caesar in the highest honor	thus, we "hold *ourselves* in higher honor than all else"

Encore: Epictetus on Education (Discourses 1.12)

- Two equivalent questions:
    - How may I follow the Gods in everything?
    - How may I become free?
- Education is about learning what to want.
    - Examples: spelling, music.
    - "There would be no point in trying to gain knowledge of anything, if it could be adapted to fit everyone's individual tastes."
    - "True education consists primarily in this, in learning to wish that everything should come about just as it does."
- The person who wishes the contrary is already in prison.
- The status of a human being…
    - As a body, vastly inferior to the cosmos.
    - In terms of reason, "not at all inferior to the Gods."

> People ask, 'Have you ever seen the Gods you worship?
> How can you be sure they exist?'
>   Answers:
>   i. Just look around you.
>   ii. I've never seen my soul either. And yet I revere it.
> That's how I know the Gods exist and why I revere them —
> from having felt their power, over and over.
>
> – Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 12.28 (trans. Hays)

Readings & Resources

Epictetus

A truly superb translation of Epictetus' complete works, with helpful notes, is:

- Epictetus, *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, translated by Robin Hard. Oxford World's Classics, 2014.

If you only pursue one of the resources mentioned here, choose this one!

Seneca

Seneca's essay *On Providence* offers another perspective on some of these issues. This essay is especially interesting for the way Seneca begins from more everyday Roman social values and gradually shifts to more radical Stoic views near the end. There are many translations; a public domain version (listed in the table of contents by its Latin title, *De Providentia*) is:

- https://archive.org/details/moralessayswithe01seneuoft/page/2/mode/2up

Marcus Aurelius

For Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, there are many translations available. I don't have a particularly strong preference, but one readable version is:

- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, translated by Gregory Hays. Modern Library, 2002.

Cicero

The Roman orator and essayist offers an extended treatment of Stoic arguments for the existence of the Gods, and the good ordering of the world, in book II of *On the Nature of the Gods* (often called by its Latin title, *De Natura Deorum*). Again, there are many translations; here is a good one in the public domain:

- https://archive.org/details/L268CiceroXIXDeNaturaDeorum/page/n149/mode/2up

Simplicius

Simplicius' commentary on Epictetus's *Handbook* has been translated in two volumes. Most of the material from before the coffee break is discussed at much greater length in Simplicius' very long passages commenting on chapters 8, 27, and 31 of Epictetus. His extended discussion of chapter 1 of Epictetus' text is also highly relevant.

- Simplicius, *On Epictetus Handbook 1–26*, translated by Tad Brennan and Charles Brittain. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014 [originally Duckworth, 2002].

- Simplicius, *On Epictetus Handbook 27–53*, translated by Tad Brennan and Charles Brittain. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014 [originally Duckworth, 2002].

These translations also include the full text of Epictetus' *Handbook* (though not the *Discourses*, since that's not what Simplicius is commenting on here).