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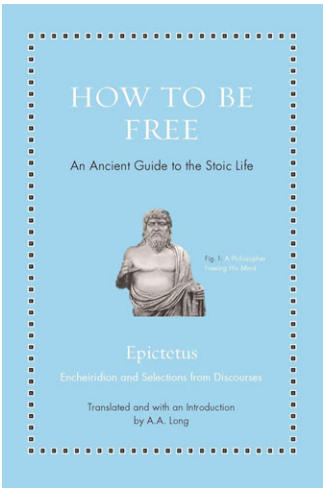
Book Review

How to be Free: an Ancient Guide to the Stoic Life. Epictetus: *Encheiridion* and Selections from *Discourses*

Long (A.A.) (ed., trans.) Pp. 1+173. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Cased, £13.99, US$16.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-17771-7

John Godwin
Independent Scholar, UK
Email: drjohngodwin187@gmail.com



This book is part of the 'Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers' series and offers us the recipe for freedom as composed by the Greek ex-slave Epictetus (AD55-135). The Greek text is printed facing Long's own translation, after a lengthy and helpful introduction setting Epictetus in his political and philosophical milieu. Long reminds us that Epictetus' readers would never be politically free under imperial rule, which makes the move away from the political thinking of Plato and Aristotle towards *souci de soi* eminently understandable. If you wish to be free, Epictetus tells us, you have to discern those things which are 'up to you' and those which are 'up to other people', to pursue the former and regard the latter as accidents to be dealt with: discernment requires wisdom and so (as the Stoic dictum had it) only the wise are free. Seen in this light, freedom is in the mind rather than delivered by circumstances: slaves had no control over their lives, but could be mentally free, while their masters might well be enslaved to their appetites and fears.

One problem here, which Long faces (xxxviii-xliii) head on, is the apparent self-centredness of this ethical philosophy, which (in Epictetus' text) can make the pursuit of inner peace sound like the creed of a narcissistic pachyderm: if your father abuses you, 'don't make a fuss' (*Ench*. 30), tell yourself when you kiss your wife or child that you are kissing a human being: 'then, if one of them dies, you will not be troubled' (*Ench*.3). Epictetus tells us (*Ench*.33) to avoid laughter and don't make any attempt to amuse others. You may verbally sympathise with people in misfortune but do not take their sufferings to heart (*Ench*.16) since they should not be grieving over matters of no consequence. Be abstemious in food, drink and sex and avoid carousing with non-philosophers. Don't go to the games often: if you do go, avoid any excitement. If you find yourself daydreaming of some potential pleasure, remind yourself how you will beat yourself up after enjoying it (*Ench*. 34) while you will feel 'joy and self-satisfaction if you abstain'. Long sensibly urges that it is our collective self-interest which guarantees societal harmony, so that the pursuit of inner peace would also promote peace in others, and self-control is also a vital component of the moral life: but some of the text does not read easily today. The privileging of reason over emotion, for example, might rob tragedy of much of its power: Antigone was a fool to care about a dead brother who was going to die one day anyway, and Medea should not have let Jason get to her. It is also a pity that the short compass of this book did not allow Long to discuss the contribution made to Roman political life by Stoics such as M. Porcius Cato Uticensis and the 'Stoic Opposition' of a man like Thrasea Paetus under Nero.

Modern readers will also find other aspects troubling. Epictetus accepts that society makes use of enslaved persons (as he himself had been) and some of the *Encheiridion* reads like a cosy version of Nietzsche's *Sklavenmoral* as written by a man still bearing the chalk on his feet and the stripes on his back. The Stoic emphasis on fate and determinism (except in the free realm of the human mind where god has given us a share of his own free will (p.137)) makes the title of the book somewhat surprising and raises far more questions than this short book can answer. If our lives are mapped out—including the choices we will make—then can we be free? The answer (*Discourses* 1.12.15) to this dilemma (it is said) is to conform our will to what is happening so that we are choosing our fate: Socrates, by choosing to be in prison, was not in fact imprisoned (p.109).

Some Romans—such as Horace—found much to ridicule in the paradoxes of Stoicism. Long tells us that he finds the message 'abrasive . . . provocative, invigorating, and even comforting' (p.99) and many readers will agree with him. They will decide for themselves whether (as Epictetus says) we need to accept what life throws at us rather than rage against the machine. Much of the thinking is good advice and will help us to give ourselves freedom from unhealthy desires, from obsessing about possessions which are ephemeral and not worth worrying about: in our own over-emoting materialist times this is sage and valuable. When Epictetus takes this same disinterested attitude towards our personal attachments to family and friends many of us will struggle to follow him—but nobody could accuse him of ducking the big questions.

The translation is accurate but not always as clear or as lively as (say) Dobbin's translation for the Penguin Classics. The book is generally well edited and produced: I only spotted a couple of typos, although I was surprised to see in *Ench*. 15 that Long prints 'Heraclitus' in the text but translates it with Dorion's emendation 'Herakles'. The book ends with a helpful glossary of key words and concepts, an excellent guide to further reading, and an index.

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