

MAKING PROGRESS: EPICTETUS ON HABITUATION

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ABSTRACT: The Stoic philosopher Epictetus repeatedly warns his students not merely to repeat what they have heard but instead to digest it in order to transform how they live. This involves changing their habitual ways of thinking. The way one goes about this, Epictetus suggests, is by setting up contrary habits. Habits are the sorts of things that can vary in intensity, unlike virtue which is an all or nothing affair. The challenge when attempting to do this is avoiding external negative influences, Epictetus argues. The sort of training Epictetus advocates is broadly non-cognitive, which raises questions about the orthodoxy of Epictetus's account.

1. Training Students

Habituation is a central theme in the work of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus.¹ His *Discourses*, based on classroom discussions in his school at Nicopolis, often comment on how best to overcome bad habits and how to cultivate better, new ones.² These remarks were directed primarily at students who had come to study philosophy. As we shall see, Epictetus was insistent that philosophy is a life-changing activity, a task of self-transformation, and the way it does this is by attending to our habits. With this in mind, Epictetus was particularly concerned by students of his who happily talked about philosophy but never moved on to the next stage of transforming their habits in the light of the philosophical ideas they had embraced. In a chapter of the *Discourses* entitled 'To those who set out to become lecturers without due thought', he says:

Those who have taken in philosophical principles (*theôrêmata*) raw and without any dressing immediately want to vomit them up again, just as people with weak stomachs bring up their food. (*Diss.* 3.21.1)

Instead, he advises:

¹ Abbreviations: LS = Long and Sedley 1987; *SVF* = von Arnim 1903-24. Ancient texts are referred to using standard abbreviations, many of which are listed in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

² Epictetus's *Discourses* (*Diss.*) are edited in Schenkl 1916. Schenkl's text is reprinted with minor modifications and a facing translation in Oldfather 1925-28. The most recent complete translation into English is in Hard 2014, which I quote from, occasionally amended.

Digest them first, and then you won't vomit them up in this way. Otherwise they do indeed become nothing more than vomit, foul stuff that isn't fit to eat. (*Diss.* 3.21.2)

This process of digestion or assimilation is essential, says Epictetus, if one is to make any philosophical progress, for it is only through such a process that one is able to benefit from the content of philosophical principles. He continues:

But after having digested them, show us some resulting change in your ruling centre (*hégemonikon*), just as athletes show in their shoulders the results of their exercises and diet, and those who have become expert craftsmen can show the results of what they have learned. A builder doesn't come forward and say, 'Listen to me as I deliver a discourse about the builder's art', but he acquires a contract to build a house, and shows through actually building it that he has mastered the art. And you for your part should follow a similar course of action: eat as a proper human being, drink as a proper human being, dress, marry, have children, perform your public duties [...]. Show us these things to enable us to see that you really have learned something from the philosophers. (*Diss.* 3.21.3-6)

All of this is built on Epictetus's view that philosophy is, like building, an art or craft: something that one can talk about but also, primarily, something that one does. In particular he thinks philosophy is the art of living, a skill that enables us to live well (*Diss.* 1.15.2).³ The master of this art – the Stoic sage – will display his or her mastery not in words but in actions. By contrast, the beginning student remains wedded to words:

'Come and listen to me reading out my commentaries.'
 Away with you, look for someone [else] to vomit over.
 'Yes, but I'll expound the teachings of Chrysippus to you like no one else can, and analyse his style with perfect clarity, and even mix in some of the brio of Antipater and Archedemus.' (*Diss.* 3.21.6-7)

This is one of many passages in the *Discourses* in which Epictetus warns his students against getting lost in textual interpretation for its own sake (cf. *Diss.* 1.4.6-7). As a number of commentators have noted, that this warning was deemed necessary might indicate that Epictetus and his students in fact devoted a good deal of time to reading and analysing the works of Chrysippus in the classroom.⁴ Epictetus does not seem to have

³ On the Stoic claim that philosophy is an 'art of living', see Sellars 2009.

⁴ See, for example, Barnes 1997, 48, and Cooper 2007, 10-11.

had a problem with the activity of close textual analysis; his concern was with what one does with the results of such work. The goal, he insists, is ethical self-transformation. Students may well become experts the analysis of philosophical texts, but:

Shouldn't they return home as people who are patient and helpful towards others, and have minds that are free from passion and agitation, and are furnished with such provisions for their journey through life that they'll be able, by that means, to face up well to everything that comes about, and draw honour from it? (*Diss.* 3.21.10)

Epictetus goes on to compare the student who becomes so infatuated by philosophy that they think it might be a good idea to try to teach it, to someone who thinks they are qualified to work as a doctor simply because they have acquired a supply of medicines, even though they don't know how to administer them (*Diss.* 3.21.20-21).⁵ To such people who want to rush into the profession of talking about philosophy all day, Epictetus counsels the following:

But if philosophical principles hold a fascination for you, sit down and reflect on them within yourself, but don't ever call yourself a philosopher, and don't allow anyone else to apply that name to you. (*Diss.* 3.21.23)

Instead of launching into a career of teaching philosophy, the student serious about the subject ought to take some time out to reflect privately.

The *Discourses* were, according to the prefatory letter that has been transmitted with them, written down by Arrian, one of Epictetus's students, who went on to become a noted historian (*Diss.* Praef. 1-2). Arrian is also credited with compiling the *Handbook*, a much shorter collection of material that summarizes the key ideas running through the *Discourses* (Simplicius, *in Ench.* Praef. 4-9).⁶ Towards the end of the *Handbook* there is one chapter that picks up on the same theme. It opens with similar advice:

⁵ Compare this with the comments of Musonius Rufus, *Diatr.* 5 (Hense 1905, 19-22), which stress the importance of practical experience: 'Suppose there are two doctors. One of them can talk about medical matters as if he had the greatest possible acquaintance with them, but has never actually cared for sick people. The other is not able to talk about medical matters but is experienced in healing in accordance with medical theory. Which one would you choose as your doctor if you were ill?'. The interlocutor responds, 'The one who is experienced in healing'. This passage is discussed further below. See also the discussion in Stephens 2013.

⁶ The *Handbook* (*Ench.*) is edited and translated in Boter 1999. Simplicius's commentary on the *Handbook* (*in Ench.*) is edited in Hadot 1996 and translated in Brennan and Brittain 2002.

Do not call yourself a philosopher on any occasion, and do not talk much about philosophical principles in the presence of non-philosophers, but practise what follows from those principles. For instance, at a banquet do not say how people should eat, but eat as people should. (*Ench.* 46.1)

The vomit is not far behind, so to speak:

And when a discussion arises about some philosophical principle among non-philosophers, keep silent for the most part; for there is a fair risk that you will vomit up immediately what you have not digested. (*Ench.* 46.2)

Once again, Epictetus insists on the importance of digestion of philosophical principles (*theôrêmata*). Whereas in the *Discourses* he used builders as his example, emphasizing his idea that philosophy is an art or craft (*technê*), here in the *Handbook* he takes digestion more literally:

For sheep, too, do not bring their food to the shepherds to show them how much they have eaten, but after they have digested their food within themselves, they produce wool and milk outside themselves; you too, therefore, do not show the philosophical principles to the non-philosophers, but show them the deeds that result from the principles as digested by you. (*ibid.*)

At first glance, then, Epictetus's view seems fairly clear: students of philosophy are all too keen to talk about philosophy, vomiting up what they have just heard. Instead, they ought to focus their attention on assimilating philosophical principles in order to affect self-transformation. The ideal wise person or sage, by contrast, will be less concerned with talking about philosophical ideas, and more concerned with behaving in accordance with them. They will demonstrate their excellence of character through actions rather than words.⁷

2. Making Progress

While this distinction between sages and beginning students captures something of what Epictetus says, it cannot be the whole story, in part because Epictetus himself complicates this dichotomy. According to early Stoic doctrine, humankind divides into two categories:

⁷ We shall qualify this claim later. To be more precise, the sage will be able to express their virtue through both their actions and their words, which will be in complete accord with one another. Having said that, given that the goal is ultimately act virtuously rather than merely talk about it, it is not unreasonable to give actions priority here.

the wise (*sophoi*) and the non-wise or foolish (*phauloi*).⁸ The wise, we are told, are exceedingly rare, so almost every one falls into the category of the non-wise.⁹ Those who make progress towards wisdom, no matter how far they come, nevertheless remain firmly among the non-wise until some moment of transition at which they attain wisdom.¹⁰ As Plutarch reports it, somewhat sarcastically, ‘the sage changes in a moment or a second of time from the lowest possible inferiority to an unsurpassable character of virtue’.¹¹ In a memorable image, Chrysippus is reported by Plutarch to have said that approaching wisdom is like drowning in a few feet of water: one might be close to the surface, but one is still drowning.¹² As Cicero put it, ‘when submerged in water one can no more breathe if one is just below the surface and on the verge of getting out, than one can in the depths’.¹³ One of the reasons why the Stoics insisted on this sharp division is because they took virtue or excellence (*aretê*) to be something that does not admit of degrees. It is, according to them, a completeness (*teleiôtês*) and the perfection (*teleiôsis*) of a thing.¹⁴ As Chrysippus put it in another image, a stick is either straight or bent; likewise, one can be either virtuous or vicious.¹⁵ One of the central doxographical reports says the following:

They [the Stoics] hold that there is nothing in between virtue and vice, whereas the Peripatetics say that between virtue and vice there is moral progress. For according to the Stoics, just as a piece of wood must be either straight or crooked, so a man must be either just or unjust (not more just or more unjust), and likewise with the other virtues. And Chrysippus holds that virtue can be lost, whereas Cleanthes says that it cannot be lost, the former maintaining that it can be lost as a result of drunkenness and melancholy, the latter that it cannot, owing to the virtuous person’s firm cognitions. (Diog. Laert. 7.127, *SVF* 3.536, LS 61I)

Despite the minor difference of opinion between Chrysippus and Cleanthes reported here, the association of virtue with straightness as two things that do not admit of degrees remained current throughout the Stoa right through to the Roman period, with Seneca commenting that just as a straight line cannot be improved by any further change, so too

⁸ See Stobaeus 2,99,3-5 (*SVF* 1.216, LS 59N). I cite Stobaeus according to the volume, page, and line numbers of Wachsmuth and Hense 1884-1912. This passage come from the epitome of Stoic ethics attributed to Arius Didymus, which is also edited and translated in Pomeroy 1999. Here, Arius refers to *spoudaioi* rather than *sophoi*.

⁹ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Fat.* 199,14-22 (*SVF* 3.658, LS 61N).

¹⁰ For an extended discussion of this topic, see Brouwer 2014, 51-91.

¹¹ Plutarch, *De prof. in virt.* 75c (*SVF* 3.539, LS 61S).

¹² Plutarch, *De comm. not.* 1063a (*SVF* 3.539, LS 61T).

¹³ Cicero, *Fin.* 3.48 (*SVF* 3.530).

¹⁴ See Galen, *PHP* 5.5.39 (*SVF* 3.257) and Diogenes Laertius 7.90 (*SVF* 3.197) respectively.

¹⁵ Simplicius, *in Cat.* 237,31-238,1 (*SVF* 2.393, LS 47S).

in the case of virtue: ‘it too is straight; it does not admit of curvature’ (*Ep.* 71.20; cf. *Ep.* 66.8). As Graver and Long note (2015, 537), the same Latin word, *rectus*, means both ‘straight’ and ‘right’, so there is something of a play on words here. In both cases these are all or nothing affairs.

This stark division in the early Stoa between the wise and the non-wise looks like it might map on to the division in Epictetus between sages and beginning students. The matter is complicated, however, by the fact that Epictetus places great weight in his *Discourses* on an intermediate category: those who are making progress (*prokopê*).¹⁶ As we have just seen, Diogenes Laertius reports that this was a Peripatetic idea, not a Stoic one; indeed, he explicitly contrasts it with the Stoic view. Whether Epictetus was influenced directly by the Peripatetic tradition, or by what have been called ‘Peripateticizing Stoics’,¹⁷ the figure of the person ‘making progress’ is ubiquitous throughout the *Discourses*. Such a person is no longer a beginning student; they have started to make genuine progress towards wisdom, even if strictly speaking they remain drowning a couple of feet under the surface. This more advanced student focuses their efforts on the assimilation and digestion of philosophical principles in order to develop the appropriate character.

In his commentary on the passage from the *Handbook* quoted earlier, the Neoplatonist Simplicius suggests that:

He [Epictetus] addresses these comments to the person still making progress (not to the complete philosopher, who would no longer need such advice; nor would he say to a complete philosopher ‘there’s a great danger that you will immediately vomit up material that you have not digested’) because people still making progress are troubled by the emotion of love of honour or showiness. (Simplicius, in *Ench.* 64.3-7)

Simplicius is surely right to note that this advice is directed to those who are making progress (*prokopê*). The complete philosopher (*teleios philosophos*), by which Simplicius presumably means a sage, need not worry about discord between their words and their actions, and so Epictetus’s admonitions regarding talking too much about philosophy do not apply.

3. Contrary Habits

¹⁶ See, among other places, *Diss.* 1.4, which is devoted to the notion of making progress (*prokopê*). For a full list of places where Epictetus discusses this and the *prokoptôn*, the person who is making progress, see Schenkl 1916, 670. For further discussion see Roskam 2005, 103-24.

¹⁷ For this phrase, see Bonhöffer 1894, 227, where he refers in particular to Panaetius, citing Cicero, *Off.* 3.17. On Panaetius’s relative disinterest in the perfect wise person, see Seneca, *Ep.* 116.5 (LS 66C). On his debt to the Peripatetic tradition, see Cicero, *Fin.* 4.79.

So, Epictetus says that those who want to make ethical progress, but are caught in the habit of merely talking about philosophy, ought to cultivate the habit of silence. One might wonder whether this advice to remain silent is somewhat excessive. Epictetus answers this concern elsewhere (*Diss.* 1.27.3-6; 3.12.6): if someone has developed an unfortunate habit, the most effective way to remedy this is to replace it with a contrary habit (*enantion ethos*). For someone in the precarious state of making progress, mere moderation is not enough, he suggests; only going to the opposite extreme will do the work of undermining the engrained bad habit. In this he might be seen to be echoing the advice of Aristotle, who had recommended sometimes aiming at the contrary extreme of a vice in order to end up in the appropriate virtuous intermediate state (*Eth. Nic.* 1109b4-6).

As to *how* one goes about developing a new opposed habit, Epictetus suggests that it is all very simple. All of our habits are the product of the relevant type of action. Again, this might be taken as an echo of Aristotle's advice that the best way to learn something is simply by doing it (*Eth. Nic.* 1103a33-b2). Epictetus puts it like this:

Every habit (*hexis*) and capacity (*dunamis*) is confirmed and strengthened by the corresponding actions, that of walking by walking, that of running by running. If you wish to be a good reader, read; if you wish to be a good writer, write. (*Diss.* 2.18.1-2)

The term translated in this passage as 'habit' is *hexis*, whereas when Epictetus talks about opposing habits with contrary habits he uses the word *ethos*. These two terms are both regularly translated as 'habit' by his recent English translators, although early modern Latin translations keep the distinction clear by using *consuetudo* for *ethos* and *habitus* for *hexis*, while the very first translation of the *Discourses* into English, by Elizabeth Carter, used 'custom' for *ethos* and 'habit' for *hexis*.¹⁸ I follow recent translators in using 'habit' for both terms, and there are, I think, reasonable grounds for doing this, not least because Epictetus himself slides between the two terms in the chapter from which this passage comes. However, it is also worth noting that for the Stoics *hexis* is a technical term in their physics, referring to a level of pneumatic tension in objects that generates cohesion and gives them certain qualities.¹⁹ Plutarch reports the following:

¹⁸ For English translations that translate both *hexis* and *ethos* as 'habit', see e.g. Long 1887, Matheson 1916, Oldfather 1925-28, and Hard 2014. For early modern Latin translations that render *hexis* as *habitus* and *ethos* as *consuetudo*, see Scheggio 1554, Wolf 1595, Upton 1741, and Schweighauser 1799-1800. For Elizabeth Carter's use of 'habit' and 'custom', see Carter 1758.

¹⁹ Hijmans 1959, 64, contrasts this narrow use of *hexis* in Stoic physics with a broader one used in ethical contexts.

In his books *On Hexis*, he [Chrysippus] again says that the *hexis* are nothing but currents of air: ‘It is by these that bodies are sustained. The sustaining air is responsible for the quality of each of the bodies which are sustained by *hexis*; in iron this quality is called hardness, in stone density, and in silver whiteness. (Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1053f, *SVF* 2.449, LS 47M)

In this context *hexis* is sometimes translated as ‘cohesion’, ‘condition’, or ‘tenor’.²⁰ It is responsible for qualities that can vary in intensity, such as hardness, density, or whiteness. It forms one part on the Stoic *Scala naturae*, in which differing qualities in the physical world are explained by reference to varying degrees of tension (*tonos*) within the *pneuma* that permeates all things. Within this continuum, *hexis* is the lowest level of tension, binding together physical objects and giving them their qualities. Next comes *phusis*, a more complex degree of tension generating life in organisms; then *psuchê*, giving powers of perception and movement to animals; and finally, *logikê psuchê*, producing reason within humans.²¹ The notion of *hexis* is thus firmly embedded within Stoic physics.

The Stoics contrast this variable *hexis* with a *diathesis*, sometimes translated as ‘disposition’ or ‘character’, which is invariable.²² These are sometimes referred to as scalar and non-scalar properties.²³ Thus, in Chrysippus’s earlier example, the straightness of a stick is a *diathesis*, because it cannot vary in intensity: the stick is either straight or not.²⁴ Similarly, virtue is a *diathesis*, an all or nothing affair that is invariable.²⁵ By contrast, the hardness of iron *can* vary in intensity, they claim. It is worth noting that this is the terminological reverse of the view of Aristotle, who, in the *Categories*, says that virtue is a *hexis*, a state, which is stable, and not a *diathesis*, a condition, which is changeable.²⁶ Simplicius, whom we met earlier, is one of our key sources here, writing in his commentary on the *Categories*:

²⁰ Pomeroy 1999 translates *hexis* as ‘condition’; Long and Sedley 1987 translate it as ‘tenor’, while Cherniss 1976 opts for ‘habitudes’.

²¹ See Philo, *Leg. alleg.* 2.22-3 (*SVF* 2.458, LS 47P).

²² On *hexis* and *diathesis* in Stoicism, see Stobaeus 2.70,21-71,4 (*SVF* 3.104, LS 60L); these are translated as ‘condition’ and ‘disposition’ respectively in Pomeroy 1999, 31, and as ‘tenor’ and ‘character’ in Long and Sedley 1987. On this distinction, see further Brouwer 2014, 31-2.

²³ See e.g. Graver 2007, 135-8.

²⁴ See Simplicius, in *Cat.* 237,25-238,20 (*SVF* 2.393, LS 47S).

²⁵ See Diogenes Laertius 7.127 (LS 61I) and 7.89 (LS 61A): ‘virtue is a consistent character (*diathesis*)’. For further discussion of Stoic virtue as a *diathesis*, see Jedan 2009, 58-65.

²⁶ See Aristotle, *Cat.* 8, 8b25-9a13. The translations of *hexis* and *diathesis* as ‘state’ and ‘condition’ respectively come from Ackrill 1963, 24. Note also *Eth. Nic.* 1106a10-12 on virtue as a *hexis*. The difference is merely terminological; the Stoics agree with Aristotle that virtue is a stable state or condition. See further Rist 1969, 3.

It is worthwhile to understand the Stoics' usage in regard to these terms. In the opinion of some people, they reverse Aristotle by taking character (*diathesis*) to be more stable than habit (*hexis*). [...] For they say that habits can be intensified and relaxed, but characters are not susceptible to intensification or relaxation. So they call the straightness of a stick a character [...]. For the straightness could not be relaxed or intensified, nor does it admit of more or less, and so it is a character. For the same reason the virtues are characters [...] because they are not susceptible to intensification or increase. (*in Cat.* 237,25-238,1, *SVF* 2.393, LS 47S)

Despite this apparent difference in kind, it is also worth noting that the Stoics define character (*diathesis*) as an unshakeable habit, that is, a special kind of *hexis* that is invariable and does not admit of degrees.²⁷ In other words we ought to understand *hexis* in two senses: i) a broad category encompassing properties that both can and cannot be varied, and ii) a narrower sub-category restricted to properties that can be increased or decreased, in contrast to the other sub-category of unchanging *diathesis*.²⁸ The important point in the present context is that for Epictetus there is a contrast between the sage who has the *diathesis* of virtue, which is an invariable, and the person who is making progress, who has a variable *hexis* that can be strengthened or weakened through processes of habituation.

Returning to our passage from Epictetus after this lengthy detour, a *hexis* or habit can be strengthened by the relevant actions. Similarly, refraining from an action will weaken any corresponding habit (*Diss.* 2.18.2-3). This leads Epictetus to argue that actions always have a twofold impact. Every good action is both good in itself but also beneficial in a further way, in so far as it contributes to the maintenance or development of a good habit. Likewise for bad actions, which damage us both immediately and in the longer term, in so far as they perpetuate a bad habit (*Diss.* 2.18.5-12). Consequently every action we undertake will potentially contribute to either a virtuous or a vicious circle. Given this, Epictetus suggests that it is essential at all times to remain in a continual state of vigilance, for even a tiny slip can have greater negative consequences than one might expect. Not only that, once one stops paying attention to one's actions, one will also develop a habit of not paying attention, making it much harder to maintain one's fragile state.²⁹ He writes:

When you relax your attention (*prosochē*) for a little while, do not imagine that whenever you choose you will recover it, but bear this in mind, that because of

²⁷ On this point see Brouwer 2014, 59.

²⁸ So Sambursky 1959, 85, who sees *diathesis* as 'a special case of *hexis*', and Graver 2007, 136-7, who describes *hexis* as a broad class encompassing both *diathesis*, which is nonscalar, and *hexis* proper, which is scalar.

²⁹ On the topic of attention (*prosochē*) in Epictetus, see Sellars 2018.

the mistake which you have made today, your condition must necessarily be worse as regards everything else. For, to begin with – and this is the worst of all – a habit (*ethos*) of not paying attention is developed. (*Diss.* 4.12.1-2)

So, one must remain vigilant in order to avoid developing bad habits, but also vigilant about remaining vigilant, in order to avoid developing a habit of inattention. As Epictetus' teacher Musonius Rufus put it, 'to relax the mind is to lose it'.³⁰ Epictetus likens these processes of habituation to physical damage and recovery (*Diss.* 2.18.11). The mistaken judgement one makes that leads to a bad action leaves a mark on the mind, just as a whip might leave a weal on the flesh. Unless that mark is able to heal completely, the next time it will become a deeper wound.³¹ Repeated bad actions damage the mind just as the whip cuts into the flesh. In the terms of Stoic physics, the *hexis* that is the state of one's soul is weakened by a reduction in its pneumatic tension. To someone who is easily provoked to anger, Epictetus says two things: keep quiet and remain vigilant (*Diss.* 2.18.12-14). Count how many days in which one has not got angry. The longer one can go without getting angry, the weaker the habit (*hexis*) will become until eventually it will be destroyed (*Diss.* 2.18.13). Thus, the positive counterpart to the vicious circle he warns about is that every tiny success will have a twofold virtuous impact, with the potential quickly to snowball into significant progress towards wisdom.

4. Negative Influences

So far we have seen Epictetus advocate the overcoming of existing bad habits by cultivating new ones that are diametrically opposed to them. While, as noted earlier, this might be taken to echo Aristotle's advice of aiming at an opposed extreme in order to land at the virtuous mean, it might equally follow the example of Diogenes the Cynic, who claimed that his own extreme behaviour deliberately set the note a little too high, in order to ensure that everyone else would hit the right note (Diog. Laert. 6.35), and it is worth noting that Epictetus nowhere mentions Aristotle in the *Discourses*, while his admiration for Diogenes is quite explicit. Indeed, Epictetus's most important extended discussion of Cynicism (*Diss.* 3.22) is in the chapter of the *Discourses* that comes immediately after the one with which we opened about those who wish to become lecturers in philosophy (*Diss.* 3.21). I do not think this is by accident, for Epictetus takes Cynicism to be the archetypal example of a philosophy expressed in actions rather than words, and also the one where the potential for dissonance between actions and words is

³⁰ Musonius Rufus, fr. 52 (Hense 1905, 133), from Aulus Gellius, *NA* 18.2.1.

³¹ One might compare this with Marcus Aurelius, who in *Meditations* 11.8 draws an analogy between a person cut off from society and a branch broken off a tree. Both can be grafted back on, but the more often this occurs, the weaker the bond will become.

at its greatest.³² Another common theme in the *Discourses* is Epictetus attacking his students for merely playing the part of the Cynic – such as not washing before coming to lectures – rather than acting in accord with Cynic principles (e.g. *Diss.* 3.22; 4.11.25-30).

As well as recommending this, Epictetus goes on to suggest that a particular danger for those trying to make progress is the influence of other people, especially given that almost every person that one is likely to encounter will be foolish, without virtue, and riddled with bad habits. He suggests that if two people spend time together, one will inevitably end up being influenced by the other: you will start to be shaped by their influence, or they will be shaped by you (*Diss.* 3.16.1-3). As he puts it rather bluntly, if you get too close to someone covered in dirt, you will end up covered in dirt yourself (*Diss.* 3.16.3).

He goes on to analyse an encounter between someone trying to make progress and a typical non-wise person (*Diss.* 3.16.7). In a social encounter the non-wise person will be much stronger than the student of philosophy in two ways: first, their views will be based on firm judgements, albeit incorrect ones, and, second, their actions will be in accord with their beliefs, even if the actions are vicious and the beliefs are false. The student of philosophy, by contrast, will still be unsure about their judgements and won't yet act fully in harmony with their professed commitment to virtue. In short, the fool is secure in his ignorance while the student remains in a fragile state. Thus Epictetus argues that in such an encounter it will always be the student who is trying to make progress who will suffer the negative influence of the non-wise, and never the other way around (*Diss.* 3.16.6).

Epictetus's solution to this is to counsel withdrawal from social situations where one might come into contact with non-philosophers. He writes:

Until these fine ideas of yours are firmly fixed within you, and you have acquired some power which will guarantee you security, my advice to you is to be cautious about joining issue with the non-wise (*idiôtês*). (*Diss.* 3.16.9)

Or, as he puts it elsewhere, 'flee far away from things that are too strong for you' (*Diss.* 3.12.12). Of course, spending time with the wise will cause no problems; in fact it will only benefit, but the wise are few and far between (*Diss.* 2.18.21). So Epictetus's advice for students of philosophy trying to make progress is to avoid social situations in order to avoid the harmful influence of other people's bad habits. He also recommends a complete dislocation from one's past life in order to break free from past habits and unhealthy influences (*Diss.* 3.16.11). And he chastises philosophy students who, having left home

³² Whether this is due to Epictetus or Arrian is impossible to know. It is conceivable that the existing discourses that have come down to us reflect the order in which they were recorded and so reflect the order in which Epictetus himself addressed these topics. It is equally possible that the order of the discourses was determined by Arrian himself as he sorted through his lecture notes and prepared them for publication. Either way, I suggest that this is not a random juxtaposition.

to study philosophy, persist with their old habits as soon as they step outside of the classroom (*Diss.* 3.16.14). Real philosophical progress requires a complete break with the non-wise lives of other people and with one's own past non-wise way of life. A common theme in Epictetus's *Discourses* is the image of the philosopher as a doctor, the classroom as a hospital, and the student as a patient in need of treatment (*Diss.* 3.22.30). We might extend that medical analogy further by saying that bad habits are contagious and so the most appropriate treatment for those in recovery is quarantine. It is also worth noting, though, that the Stoics claimed that by nature people are disposed towards virtue, a point stressed by Epictetus's teacher, Musonius Rufus.³³ Despite the rarity of the sage, everyone, it is claimed, has an innate moral sensibility, and, left to their own devices, will develop towards virtue. Thus bad habits that lead us away from virtue are contrary to our natural state, and so in this sense they are a sickness or illness, perverting us from our natural, healthy state of progress towards virtue. Hence the medical analogy. This also means that the sickness of bad habits is often the product of some external influence, and so the one definitive way to avoid them is via social isolation. The student of philosophy should avoid all non-philosophers, for the health of their soul depends on it. It may be that Epictetus is deliberately setting the note a bit too high here, but his point is clearly made.

5. Non-Cognitive Training

All of this hopefully gives a good sense of the processes by which Epictetus thought one might transform one's habits for the better. Much of this is what might be called non-cognitive training. It involves a clear contrast between the study of philosophical theory, which his beginning students have completed, and separate acts of training designed to digest that theory, which they have not. This was a distinction that Epictetus inherited from Musonius. In one of Musonius's lectures a contrast is drawn between theory (*logos*) and habit (*ethos*): theory tells us what is right (*orthōs*), while habit is concerned with acting in accordance with theory.³⁴ Musonius goes on to insist that in practical contexts such as medicine, navigation, or music, one would always choose someone accomplished in action over someone who had only mastered theory. Surely the same applies in the case of virtuous action, he adds: 'is it not much better to be self-controlled and temperate in all one's actions than to be able to say what one ought to do?'.³⁵ Yet like Epictetus, Musonius does not reject the value of theory altogether, for it is after all the foundation of the entire enterprise:

³³ See Musonius Rufus, *Diatr.* 2 (Hense 1905, 6-8).

³⁴ Musonius Rufus, *Diatr.* 5 (Hense 1905, 19,19-20-3).

³⁵ Musonius Rufus, *Diatr.* 5 (Hense 1905, 21,11-14).

Theory (*logos*) which teaches how one should act is related to application, and comes first, since it is not possible to do anything really well unless its practical execution be in harmony with theory. In effectiveness, however, practice (*ethos*) takes precedence over theory (*logos*) as being more influential in leading humans to action. (*Diatr.* 5, Hense 1905, 21,22-22,3)

To some, this focus on habits might seem out of place within the context of early Stoic philosophy. The early Stoics have a reputation for being cognitivists in ethics and moral psychology.³⁶ According to a fairly standard view, the early Stoics argued that an individual's actions are determined by impulses (*hormai*) that are, in turn, determined by beliefs (*doxai*), which are the product of giving assent (*sunkatathesis*) to impressions (*phantasiai*).³⁷ Once a belief has been generated by an assent, the impulse automatically follows, leaving no obvious room for weakness of will. If that is so, what role is there for habituation? If one believes that a certain course of behaviour is the right or desirable thing to do, then on this Stoic model the individual will surely simply do it, their impulses being determined by their beliefs.

Epictetus's focus on a variety of non-cognitive practices of habituation might at first glance seem to call into question his orthodoxy as a Stoic. As we have seen, his concern with this kind of practical training was inherited from his teacher Musonius. Traditionally Musonius has been taken to be a Stoic, although recently that view has been challenged and he has instead been presented as simply a generic (and potentially eclectic) philosopher.³⁸ This raises the possibility that his focus on training may have come from some other, non-Stoic philosophical source. Roughly contemporary with Musonius, we also find an interest in non-cognitive habituation in Seneca. In Seneca's case the non-Stoic influence is quite explicit: he quotes from the Pythagorean *Golden Verses* and he reports that he learned at least some of these practices from his teacher Sextius, who operated a philosophy school in Rome.³⁹ The school of Sextius was known for being eclectic in outlook, drawing on Stoic and Pythagorean ideas among others.

All this might lead one to wonder if the stress on non-cognitive practices of habituation by Roman Stoics such as Epictetus, Musonius, and Seneca was the product of non-Stoic influences that drew them away from the purely cognitive approach to human action associated with the early Stoa. If that were the case, it would make Epictetus a heterodox Stoic. Yet the standard view of Epictetus is that, despite his own distinctive approach, he remained a thoroughly orthodox follower of the early Stoa. Over a century

³⁶ See e.g. Lloyd 1978, 237, and Inwood 1985, 52, as just two established examples. For some scepticism, see Sorabji 2000, 44-5.

³⁷ On impulses and assents, see Stobaeus 2,88,1-7 (*SVF* 3.171, LS 331); on impressions and assents, see Cicero, *Acad.* 2.145 (*SVF* 1.66, LS 41A).

³⁸ See the case set out in Inwood 2017.

³⁹ See esp. Seneca, *De ira* 3.36.1-3, with further discussion of Seneca and Sextius in Sellars 2014.

ago, Bonhöffer argued that Epictetus paid little or no attention to the supposedly heterodox ‘middle Stoics’, instead confining his points of reference to the early Stoics, especially Chrysippus.⁴⁰ More recent commentators have reiterated this view, even where they have highlighted the distinctive and original aspects of Epictetus’s approach.⁴¹

So, on the one hand, Epictetus is widely held to be an orthodox Stoic while, on the other, his focus on non-cognitive practices of habituation appear to take him away from core Stoic teaching about the cognitive basis for human action. To complicate matters further, Epictetus himself seems to express agreement with the orthodox Stoic view when, for instance, he says that ‘it is impossible to judge one thing to be advantageous and yet desire another’ (*Diss.* 1.18.2). If that is the case, then why does he also think that we need to engage in non-cognitive processes of habituation?

Before trying to respond to that question directly, it is worth noting the way in which Stoics in general responded to the problem of weakness of will. Because, on their account, there can be no inner conflict between competing faculties in the mind, they needed to give some other explanation for situations in which people appear to act against their judgements. They did so by suggesting that such cases can be explained in terms of an inconsistency of judgement, understood as an oscillation: ‘a turning of the single reason in both directions, which we do not notice owing to the sharpness and speed of the change’.⁴² It is not, on their view, the case that someone can believe one thing while at the same time acting against that belief. Instead, the apparent akratic has such unstable judgements that they might believe and act one way in a given moment, only to change their mind in the next, continually oscillating back and forth, unable to settle on a stable judgement. Indeed, this is one of the states that the Stoics thought ought to be avoided: Zeno’s initial formulation of the Stoic *telos* was to live consistently (*to homologoumenôs zên*), and consistency is one of the hallmarks of the Stoic sage.⁴³

In the light of this, one would expect Stoic practices of habituation to be directed towards the cultivation of more stable and consistent judgements. The problem is not, according to the Stoics, that people act against their judgements; it is that their judgements oscillate between existing habitual patterns of judgement and newer ones that have not yet become fully embedded. Indeed, this is no doubt why Epictetus advised his students who were beginning to make progress to avoid contact with other people whose negative influence might contribute to an ongoing state of instability.

Another aspect of the Stoic account of action relevant here is their understanding of impulse (*hormê*). Unfortunately, this is especially complex and only the basic outlines can be given here. Impulse is something shared by all animals and humans. In animals

⁴⁰ See Bonhöffer 1894, iii-iv.

⁴¹ See e.g. Long 2002, 7-8; Cooper 2007, 10; Klein 2020.

⁴² Plutarch, *Virt. mor.* 446f (*SVF* 3.459, LS 65G). For further discussion of the Stoic response to the problem of *akrasia*, see Gill 1983.

⁴³ For Zeno’s *telos* formulation see Stobaeus 2,75,11-12 (*SVF* 1.179, LS 63B).

and children this is non-rational, but in adult humans this develops into what the Stoics call rational impulse (*logikê hormê*).⁴⁴ Impulse is thus something that can develop, in this case from something non-rational and instinctive into something rational. An ideal process of development would see a human being mature into a fully rational agent with perfectly rational impulse. But, of course, things rarely work out that way: the process of development towards perfect rationality is often impeded or diverted. The important point to note in the present context is that impulse is something that can develop and improve. Indeed, Epictetus lists it as one of the objects of his programme of philosophical training. There are, he says, three areas (*topoi*) in which someone who wants to be good must be trained. The second of these is concerned with *hormê* and *aphormê*, so that one ‘behaves appropriately, in an orderly way, with good reason, and not carelessly’ (*Diss.* 3.2.2).

One of our main sources for the early Stoic account of impulse (*hormê*) lists a number of different types, and one of these is *hexis hormetikê*, which one might translate as ‘dispositional impulse’,⁴⁵ or, in the present context, ‘habitual impulse’. It is unclear at first glance where this ought to fit into the Stoic account of action: if impulses are produced by beliefs that are, in turn, produced by judgements, how can they also be underlying dispositions or habits? It has been suggested that in order to make sense of this the Stoics must have been committed to two different types of impulse: there are i) underlying dispositional or habitual impulses already in place before we make judgements, and ii) the impulses directly produced by our judgements.⁴⁶ It has been argued that the first type have a strong influence on the second type, in so far as our underlying dispositions or habits will shape the sorts of propositions presented to the mind for assent.⁴⁷ For example, a person at the beginning of a new diet may judge that they ought not to eat cake any more, but if their underlying disposition persistently presents to their mind the thought ‘I really like cake’, it is perhaps unsurprising that their still inconsistent judgement sometimes endorses that statement and they succumb to eating cake. The task at hand for such a person is to try to alter their underlying dispositional or habitual impulse (*hexis hormetikê*) in order to change the sorts of propositions presented to the mind for assent.

This is why Epictetus pays so much attention to habituation. It is in order to transform these underlying dispositional or habitual impulses. For someone trying to transform their way of life, this often involves trying to overcome engrained habits of thinking that are at odds with a newly embraced set of beliefs. But how does one do this? Epictetus has already given us an answer. Each time someone manages to act in accordance with their

⁴⁴ See e.g. Stobaeus 2,86,17-87,13 (*SVF* 3.169, LS 53Q).

⁴⁵ Stobaeus 2.87,9-13 (*SVF* 3.169). The text reads *tês hexeôs tês hormêtikês*, which Pomperoy 1999, 55, translates as ‘the condition which is able to impel’. Annas 1992, 91 opts for ‘impulsory state’. I take ‘dispositional impulse’ from Klein 2020.

⁴⁶ See the helpful discussion in Annas 1992, 100-01.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

new belief, they contribute to the inculcation of a new habitual way of thinking. Every time the person who habitually thinks ‘I really like cake’ manages to avoid assenting to this, and so resists eating cake, that underlying habitual way of thinking is weakened. If they resist eating cake often enough, they may eventually fall out of the habit of thinking about cake at all. The habitual impulse will be reshaped by a virtuous circle of the sort we saw Epictetus describe earlier. This will contribute to reaching the goal where one’s habitual impulses are fully in line with one’s professed beliefs. It is much easier to resist the temptation of cake if one is not continually thinking ‘I really like cake’!

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