Epictetus’ áskēsis and its theological dimension

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Epictetus pays special emphasis to the actual practising of philosophy. In his discourse On progress he dismissively refers to those who exclusively rely on theoretical knowledge, yet still purport to be philosophers: “Who, then, is making progress? The man who has read many treatises of Chrysippus? What, is virtue no more than this – to have gained a knowledge of Chrysippus?” (1.4.6).\(^1\) A true philosopher, unlike a literary critic (φιλόλογος/philólogos), must not only admire but follow the instructions included in such books (Ench. 49). As Arrian explains in his letter to Gellius, when Epictetus taught, he “was clearly aiming at nothing else but to incite the minds of his hearers to the best things.” (1.1.5-6). Conforming to his postulates, Epictetus develops the concept of áskēsis, or training, applying his exhortations in practice, thereby proving his teaching by exemplifying them throughout his own life. The strict Epictetan philosophy is usually encapsulated in two words ἀνέχου and ἀπέχου,\(^2\) or persist and resist, which denote the endurance of hardships and resistance of pleasure, respectively. However, I would like to argue that such a perspective is overwhelmingly one-sided and cannot give a full picture of Epictetus’ áskēsis. This “negative” aspect of áskēsis is complemented with a “positive” one. Stoicism not only consists of resistance and resignation,

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\(^1\) The translations from Epictetus’ Discourses and Encheiridion are by W. A. Oldfather form the Loeb edition 1925-1928.

\(^2\) Cf. frg. 10, ap. Aulus Gellius, Noctes Atticae 17.19; Disc. 4.8.20.
but at the same time appeals to such a notion as gratitude\(^3\) toward a
god or gods, and Epictetus’ point of view is not the exception here.
Gratitude, conceived as a special way of seeing the world, must be
practised, in the sense that it should be incorporated into the general
concept of \(\text{áskēsis}\) as a complimentary and indispensable part of the
whole. In effect, the Cynic way of life, which Epictetus inherits, takes
equal precedence in his philosophy to his exhortation to admire and
contemplate the divine order of the universe. In my article, I would
like to focus on the theological aspects of the Epictetan \(\text{áskēsis}\). My
perspective on Epictetus’ \(\text{áskēsis}\) as a form of practising philosophy
is very close to Pierre Hadot’s “spiritual exercises” category (Hadot,
1995). According to Hadot, within ancient philosophy we may distin-
guish philosophical doctrines, as well as forms of applying them to
practical life. The spiritual exercises are intended to shape our intel-
lect, emotions, imagination and moral attitude in the right way by
means of rational arguments, rhetorical amplifications, repetitions,
memorization, persuasive images etc. As Hadot explains, “By means
of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective
Spirit; that is to say, he re-places himself within the perspective of
the Whole (“Become eternal by transcending yourself”)” (Hadot,
1995, p. 82). In my opinion, the category of spiritual exercises is very
helpful to understand many theological claims Epictetus makes. In
other words, his theological opinions can be easily misinterpreted if
we try to explain them only from the doctrinal point of view, either
that of Stoic orthodoxy, or later theological influences. Sometimes
doctrinal precision seems to be of less importance to Epictetus than
the persuasiveness of his arguments or metaphors. His most general
intention is very practical, he wants to shape students’ minds in an
appropriate way rather than teaching pure doctrine for its own sake.

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The three tópoi

Many passages in Epictetus’ *Discourses* are devoted not only to the exegesis of the Stoic doctrine, but to the way philosophy must be practised. At the very beginning of the whole collection the most fundamental distinction is introduced between “what is and what is not in our power”. This distinction forms the core of the practice of áskēsis. As Epictetus explains, the ability to make the right use of impressions is within our control:

τὸ κράτιστον ἀπάντων καὶ κυριεύον οἱ θεοὶ μόνον ἐφ’ ἡμῖν ἐποίησαν, τὴν χρὴσιν τὴν ὀρθὴν ταῖς φαντασίαις, τὰ δ’ ἄλλα οὐκ ἐφ’ ἡμῖν.

the gods have placed in our power only the best faculty of all, the one that rules over all the others, that which enables us to make the right use of our impressions; but everything else they haven’t placed within our power. (1.1.7)⁴

It is most probable that Arrian, who recorded Epictetus’ teachings, intentionally drew attention at the beginning of the collection to this distinction, as he regarded it as crucial for anyone wishing to fully study and practice philosophy. The ability to correctly make use of impressions is the cornerstone of moral life and freedom, but needs to be trained and improved in the right way. As we will see below, Epictetus places that ability in a theological context, underlining that it has been given to us by the gods by virtue of our kinship with them. This relationship forms a good basis for áskēsis and for setting for human endeavour the final goal, which is assimilation to god. Epictetus’ *Encheiridion* opens with the same twofold distinction:

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⁴ Translated by R. Hard (2014).
Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion (ὑπόληψις/hypólēpsis), motivation (ὁρμή/hormē), desire, aversion (ὄρεξις, ἔκκλισις/orēxis, ekklisis), and, in a word, whatever is of our doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing. (1.1)

It is necessary to understand that what is not in our control has no moral value for us, and consequently, it is indifferent, because the only true good is moral good. In this way Epictetus actually reduces humans to purely moral beings, who must pursue purely moral ends to fulfill their nature. Epictetus is very Socratic here. In Plato’s Apology (30b) Socrates stresses that body and possessions are something of minor value in comparison to the soul, which must be cared for. Simplicius comments on Epictetus’ Encheiridion in a similar way, but he prefers to refer to Alcibiades I, where it is said that the body is a mere tool and the soul has to govern over it. The twofold division of things into those dependent and independent on human control is juxtaposed in Encheiridion with another distinction between three areas covered by philosophy and by philosophical áskēsis⁵ (Hadot, 1998, p. 83). Epictetus divides áskēsis into three parts, along with the triple division of philosophy into logic, physics, and ethics.⁶ Conforming to this model, he distinguishes three aspects, or disciplines within áskēsis: opinion is connected to logic, desire and aversion to physics,

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⁵ The triple division of philosophy was introduced by Xenocrates.
⁶ Cf. Hadot (1998, p. 90). Another point of view is provided by Ch. Gill. Referring to Hadot’s interpretation, he writes: “It is sometimes suggested that the threefold pattern in Epictetus represents a version of the complete Stoic curriculum (corresponding to the order, physics, ethics, and logic). But it may be better to interpret all these typologies as subdivisions of ethics and, specifically, of applied or practical ethics.” (Gil, 2003, p. 43). Cf. Oldfather (1925, p. 21): “This triple division of philosophy, with especial but not exclusive application to ethics, is the only notably original element which the minute studies of many investigators have found in Epictetus, and it is rather a pedagogical device for lucid presentation than an innovation in thought.”
and motivation to ethics. This triple division is more extensively explained in the following passage of the *Discourses*:

There are three areas (τόποι/tópoi) of study in which someone who wants to be virtuous and good must be trained: that which relates to desires and aversions, so that he may neither fail to get what he desires, nor fall into what he wants to avoid; that which relates to our motives to act or not to act, and, in general, appropriate behaviour, so that he may act in an orderly manner and with good reason, rather than carelessly; and thirdly, that which relates to the avoidance of error and hasty judgement, and, in general, whatever relates to assent. (3.2.1-2)

It is worth mentioning that the Stoics argued that logic, physics and ethics are virtues, which must be practiced (Cicero, *De finibus* 3.72). In this way, the three parts of discourse, in the form of ἀσκήσις of the three disciplines, become the discourse which is experienced and lived. As Hadot points out, “we no longer study logical theory – that is, the theory of speaking and thinking well – we simply think and speak well. We no longer engage in theory about the physical world, but we contemplate the cosmos. We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way.” (Hadot, 1995, p. 267). The three τόpoi of ἀσκήσις are placed by Epictetus in a theological context, inasmuch as they are described as a special gift from Zeus to humankind. Because Zeus could not make our body perfect and free, he has instead given human beings a “portion” of his own nature (μέρος/méros). That divine nature in us manifests itself as the power to make the right use of impressions, in relation to opinions, desires and aversions, and motivation (1.1.12). The basis of ἀσκήσις, or the ability to use impressions, is strictly connected to the idea of god as a benefactor. It may be understood as a philosophical refinement of the more traditional religious views on gods as givers of various goods useful for humankind, like wine (Dionysius) or
grain (Demeter). This perspective made a return in the Stoic allegoresis and eventually played an important role in Epictetus’ work. From Epictetus’ point of view Zeus turns out to be the most important of all divine benefactors, because he was responsible for granting the best possible gift to humankind, the gift which became of decisive importance for human inner freedom.

There are more examples indicating Epictetus’ tendency to combine the disciplines of áskēsis with theology. To provide just a few instances, he maintains that our judgements and general concepts are divine gifts (4.10), which claim may identified as belonging to logic. As to our attitude to nature, he advices to make the right use of what is in our control and treat all the rest in accordance with its own nature, i.e. with god’s decision7 – “give up wanting anything but what God wants” (2.17.22). Regarding ethics, which consists on having moral obligations directed at other people, he claims that due to Zeus decision man “can attain nothing of his own proper goods unless he contributes something to the common interest” (1.19.13). Finally, referring to Diogenes, one of his favourite moral heroes, Epictetus claims that the Cynic philosopher was focused on two tasks, namely caring for others and obeying the will of Zeus (3.24). In a similar way Epictetus summarizes the most important tenets of philosophy, by combining áskēsis with divinity. Quoting Zeno, he says: “To follow the gods is man’s end, and the essence of good is the proper use of external impressions” (1.20.15).

7 δεὶ τὰ ἑρὶ ἡμῶν βέλτιστα κατασκευάζειν, τοῖς δ’ ἄλλοις χρῆσθαι ὡς πέρυκεν. ἡ πός οὖν πέρυκεν,’ ὡς ἂν ὁ θεὸς θέλῃ (1.1.17).
The kinship between gods and mankind

In order to explain the relationship between men and gods, Epictetus uses the metaphor of a statue. As he describes, we are like living statues sculpted by gods, comparable to Phidias’ marble statues of Zeus or Athena. This imposes a moral obligation on us, because just like Phidias’ statues are visited by spectators, our whole life is a similar spectacle to be viewed by others. Moreover, as the bearers of the divine “portion” inside us, we need to care not only for ourselves, but for the divinity in us as well. Therefore, our task is to develop our human and godlike natures, through polishing the statue, to make it gleam brightly (2.8.25). The nature, or essence (οὐσία/ousiā) of god is actually equivalent to the essence of the good (2.8.1), and both are defined as useful and both are to be found not in the material world, but in the mind (νοῦς/noûs), knowledge (ἐπιστήμη/epistēmē), and right reason (ὁρθὸς λόγος/orthos lógos). Once again, Epictetus stresses the kinship between gods and human beings, using such words as μέρος/méros (part) and ἀπόσπασμα/apóspasma (a fragment, an offshoot). Occurring between human minds, with their ability to use impressions, and divine rationality is homology, which is the good point of departure for attaining the ultimate human goal, namely adjustment to god. The path leads through ἀσκήσις. Epictetus sums up this discourse by providing an image of a philosopher who made the most of his capabilities: the steadfast and successful practitioners of the philosophical ἀσκήσις who cultivate the divine in themselves are described as those who can use impressions in the right way in respect to the above mentioned three τόποι. The comparison to the statues recurs in another discourse, in which Epictetus exclaims: “Show me

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8 On the question of singular and plural in reference to deity in Greek religious and theological reflection cf. Else (1949). I think, one of his conclusions can be, at least provisionally, applied to Epictetus’ usage: “Singularity appertains to the concepts, plurality to the stories.” (Else, 1949, p. 24).
a Stoic, if you know of one” (2.19.21). Applying Stoic principles to one’s life is like sculpting one’s own statue, which means remaining completely untroubled in the face of every adversity. Unfortunately, according to Epictetus, most students of philosophy are not austere enough in their lives to deserve to be called Stoics. The Stoic attitude, once the doctrine is internalized by means of áskēsis, is described by Epictetus in theological categories. The true Stoic is a person, who never blames the gods, but who desires to become godlike (θεὸν ἐξ ἀνθρώπου ἐπιθυμοῦντα γενέσθαι/theòn ex anthrōpou epithymoûnta genēsthai). Even while residing in the body, the Stoic’s soul is yearning to attain communion with Zeus (περὶ τῆς πρὸς τὸν Δία κοινωνίας βουλευόμενον/perì tês pròs tôn Día koinōnías bouleuómenon), and focuses on god in every aspect of its life, in great as well as in small things (εἰς τὸν θεὸν ἀφορώντας ἐν παντὶ καὶ μικρῷ καὶ μεγάλῳ/eis tôn theòn aphôrontas en pantì kaì mikrō kaì megalô) (2.19.26-29).

The concept of the kinship of gods and men is strictly connected to the Stoic idea of cosmopolis. According to Epictetus, humankind and god, or gods, share the same reason and participate in the same community of rational beings (τὸ σύστημα τὸ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων καὶ θεοῦ/tò sýstema tò ex anthrōpōn kai theoû). Thus, it is more accurate to call human beings citizens of the world and children of god (1.9.5). Such figures as Socrates and Diogenes are, for Epictetus, cosmopolitans, even though, as we know from Plato’s Crito, Socrates declared his strong attachment to Athens and his allegiance of the Athenian laws. But Epictetus prefers to conceive a philosopher as a person who lives directly under the rule of Zeus, according to the divine lógos and nature. Argumentation of this kind usually appears in ancient consolatory works about exile, where the readers are encouraged to think about themselves as citizens of the world who can, everywhere

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9 E.g. the discourse 1.13 about eating in the proper way: “How may each several thing he done acceptably to the gods?”
on the earth, establish their true relationship with the divinely ordered universe. The topic of exile appears in Epictetus as well. His teacher, Musonius Rufus, was exiled to the arid island of Gyara (Lutz apud Rufus, 1947, p. 14). He devoted one of his diatribes to the subject of exile, giving the text the form of a consolation. Epictetus himself was displaced as a child and sold into slavery, and later in his life he was forced to leave Rome for Nicopolis, where he opened his famous school. Epictetus underlines that it makes no difference where we are compelled to live, whether it be in Rome, at Athens or on Gyara, because we are still living in the cosmopolis under god’s protection. Our only concern should be to unceasingly maintain our connection with god. Thus, Epictetus turns to Zeus with a request, saying: exile me wherever you want, but remember me (3.24.101). What does it actually mean that god must not forget a mortal? Given that we have the portion of god in us and that we must train ourselves while keeping this in mind, this can mean that in fact it is the human being who must not forget god. In other words, that Epictetus’ prayer can be understood as a kind of spiritual exercise intended to maintain human belief in the divine providence. In a similar way, Keimpe Algra interprets Epictetus’ allusion to the fatherhood of god, “when certain human individuals are called ‘sons’ of god, this is because they, on their part, exhibit a special attitude towards god, rather than the other way round” (Algra, 2007, p. 47). However, for Epictetus these categories have strong emotional dimension, and he uses the words father and son to describe the intimacy of this kinship (1.9.3-8, 1.3.1-3). It is difficult to derive a clear-cut, coherent theological doctrine from his allusions or unambiguously indicate the external influences on his theological views. Instead, it is his deep, emotional religiosity which comes into play as the overriding factor. It would

be difficult, for instance, to explain in what way the divine lógos could be identified with the more personal image of god. It is worth remembering that many of god’s attributes or functions, as Epictetus describes them, have a providential dimension. His god is a creator, protector and guide, who gave people reason and virtues (2.16). In this context, Epictetus considers the case of Heracles, who was one of the most important mythological figures for the Cynics as well as for Epictetus. Heracles was always obedient to his father Zeus (2.16; 3.24), and this was the reason why he became great. Our own vices – for example sorrow, fear, greed – are comparable to the monsters against which Heracles fought during his wanderings. Epictetus stresses that they cannot be overcome unless the practitioner of philosophy looks to god (τὸν θεὸν ἀποβλέποντα/tn theôn apobléponta) with obedience and devotion (2.16.45-46). Day and night, the philosopher, especially the beginner in this discipline, must keep in mind questions like these: how can the gods be followed in everything, how can their orders be adapted to, how can freedom be attained? (1.12.8-9). Once again, this sounds like a set of spiritual exercises.

While speaking about exile, Epictetus provides the example of Socrates, who combined in an extraordinary way his philosophical practice with religious attitude. Although every place on earth is good for the philosopher to live in, it nevertheless sometimes turns out that it is impossible to live in accordance with nature as well as moral principles, a prime example of this being Socrates, who was forced to give up his philosophical mission. In such situations, god gives a signal to retreat (1.29.29), because, as Epictetus used to repeat, “the door is open” (Stephens, 2014). Epictetus refers to Plato’s Phaedo, where Socrates, although he rejected suicide, admitted at the same time that it may happen that god provides a “good reason” (εὖλογος/eúlogos) to die. For Epictetus, Socrates is a unique example of obedience to the gods. Several times Epictetus repeats Socrates’ words from Plato’s Crito (43d): “if it pleases the gods, so be it”. These words can
be interpreted as an expression of ultimate trust and submission to
god’s will, and another example of a spiritual exercise which would
be directed at discovering the rational and providential order in every
aspect of life. But at the same time Socrates was free, even while in
prison. Moreover, he was not in fact in prison at all, because he chose
to be there (1.12.23). Prison, as Epictetus explains it, is a place where
somebody is held against their will. Even in the most extreme situa-
tions, Socrates was able to distinguish things under his control from
things out of his control, and not to adhere to the latter. Epictetus
compares him to ballplayers who do not value the ball itself, but rather
how to play with it, how to throw and catch in the best way possible.
Socrates behaved like this even during his trial, exchanging questions
and answers with his accusers. In the case of Socrates, what was at
stake were the most serious things, like imprisonment, exile, or execu-
tion, and the sufferings of his wife and children (2.5.20). Despite this
Socrates played the game like a virtuoso, doing his best, but at the
same time disregarding the results, because they were out of his con-
trol. In effect, Socrates turns out to be the perfect Stoic ante litteram,
who can make the right use of his impressions, fully engage in what
is in his power, and harmonize his intentions and actions with god’s
will. Epictetus says that the philosopher “should bring his own will
(βούλησις/boúlēsis) into harmony with what happens, so that neither
anything that happens happens against our will, nor anything that
fails to happen fails to happen when we wish it to happen” (2.14.7-8).

Philosopher’s divine mission

Epictetus compares philosophical education to initiation into the
Eleusinian mysteries. Reducing philosophy to empty words is like
attempting to unveil the secrets of the holy rites in order to profane
and vulgarize them (3.21.15). Learning philosophy requires time and
habituation, doctrines must be “digested” (Sellars, 2009, p. 121), and words have to be applied to deeds. First and foremost, the teacher of philosophy must be inspired by god to turn to teaching, like in the case of Socrates, Diogenes and Zeno (3.21.19). This point of view is fully developed in discourse 3.22, which is devoted to the Cynics, with Diogenes as the main protagonist. The general picture of the classical Cynicism in Epictetus has been deeply affected by his religious attitude. The rigorous Cynic way of life, for him, meets the highest standards of the philosophical ἀσκήσις, and at the same time he underlines that the Cynic cannot accomplish his philosophical duties without god’s guidance from the very beginning of this mission (πράγμα/práagma).

Epictetus assigns various roles to the Cynics, which are connected to the position the Cynic occupies as a person who mediates between gods and humankind. We are told that the Cynic is a messenger (ἄγγελος/ángelos), who has been sent by Zeus to teach people about the true nature of good and evil. In Epictetus’ terms, this actually means the right use of impressions in respect to what is and what is not in our power. The Cynic is called a scout, or a spy (κατάσκοπος/katáskopos) who goes further than the rest of men in order to come back and teach them in advance what things are friendly and what hostile to them. The Cynic is also a herald who, as used to happen in Greek tragedies, warns people of their folly and its near disastrous results. The Cynic is similar to the all-seeing giant Argus, the

11 M. Schofield, discussing the figures of those three philosophers in Epictetus’ work, summarizes Epictetus’ attitude towards them as follows: “It is immediately obvious that Epictetus is not thinking of Socrates, Diogenes and Zeno as authors or proponents of distinct although no doubt related philosophies, as they would standardly be presented in modern accounts of Greek philosophy. The implication is rather that there is one philosophy – or one thing, philosophy – but that these three thinkers each adopt a different mode of communicating it to others: a different mode of what one might roughly and in generic terms call ‘therapy’. For, although philosophy must involve argument and instruction, its ultimate purpose is care of the soul.” Cf. Schofield (2007).
mythological vigilant watchman, but, precisely speaking, even one-
hundred-eyed Argus is almost blind in comparison with the Cynic’s
penetrating mind and alertness. Finally, he is friend and servant to
the gods. There is a special relationship between the Cynic ἀσκήσις
and god, because it is Zeus who sends the Cynic every misfortune in
order to train him, since the Cynic’s life, behaviour and body must be
like a spectacle for other people that exhibits his endurance and obe-
dience to god. Epictetus cites the case of Diogenes, who exposed his
tick body in public place, thus demonstrating the hardships he was
enduring. While most people have the protection of their walls, door
and the darkness of their houses, enabling them to hide their vices,
the Cynic is obliged to do everything in public view, because the only
protection is his self-respect (αἰδώς/aidós), which is his house, door,
and darkness (3.22.14). If the Cynic decided to conceal anything he
was responsible for, he would annihilate his Cynic nature, his self-
sufficiency, and his indifference toward indifferent things. In another
discourse, Epictetus confirms that the first thing philosophers must
learn is that there is a god who cares for the whole universe (2.14.11),
and it is impossible to keep our actions, thoughts or intentions secret.
In some sense, in relation to god, everyone is in the position of the
Cynic who is living in the open air. The next step progresses toward
adjustment to the deity in respect of the virtues which we are able to
discover in it. In other words, to some extent it depends on us which
virtues we can find in our image of the deity. If the god is faithful,
we must be faithful; if free, we must struggle to be free, and so on.12

12 Similar ideas we may find in Epictetus’ teacher, Musonius Rufus (Diatribe XVII):
“In general, of all creatures on earth man alone resembles God and has the same virtues
that He has, since we can imagine nothing even in the gods better than prudence,
justice, courage, and temperance. Therefore, as God, through the possession of these
virtues, is unconquered by pleasure or greed, is superior to desire, envy, and jealousy;
is high-minded, beneficent, and kindly (for such is our conception of God), so also man
in the image of Him, when living in accord with nature, should be thought of as being
The ultimate aim of this obvious spiritual exercise is to imitate god in everything the philosopher says and does. The Cynics’ adjustment to nature is visible in their poverty, which is connected to the ideal of self-sufficiency. The Cynic wants to rely exclusively on the most necessary things to live. The ultimate measure of this is his own body, by means of which he demonstrates as well as performs his philosophy. Epictetus says: “And how is it possible for a man who has nothing, who is naked, without home or hearth, in squalor, without a slave, without a city, to live serenely? Behold, God has sent you the man who will show in practice that it is possible.” (3.22.45-47). We may compare these lines to the passage from Diogenes Laertius in which he suggests that Diogenes of Sinope could figure out the Cynic goal of life as an adjustment to god: “They [the Cynics] also hold that we should live frugally, eating food for nourishment only and wearing a single garment. Wealth and fame and high birth they despise. Some at all events are vegetarians and drink cold water only and are content with any kind of shelter or tubs, like Diogenes, who used to say that it was the privilege of the gods to need nothing and of god-like men to want but little.” (6.105). For Epictetus, the early Cynics are like incarnated sages, who surpass anyone else in respect of áskēsis. Their mission as the messengers of god may be understood once again through referring to one of the passages from the collection by Diogenes Laertius. While explaining his mission Diogenes the Cynic allegedly compared himself to a chorus conductor who gets the chorus to sing one tone higher in order to get the right tone (6.35).

Gratitude and the joy of contemplation

Epictetus’ postulate to follow the will of god cannot be understood as an exhortation toward simple resignation, as Cleanthes’ image of a dog tied to a cart could suggest. First of all, Epictetus is strongly
against blaming the gods. Before deciding to make such complaints, men need to realize they are equipped with all the necessary faculties to tackle misfortunes. As he says:

God has not merely given us these faculties, to enable us to bear all that happens without being degraded or crushed thereby, but – as became a good king and in very truth a father – He has given them to us free from all restraint, compulsion, hindrance; He has put the whole matter under our control without reserving even for Himself any power to prevent or hinder. (1.6.40)

Once they have the resources to become free, it makes no sense for people to make complaints against god. Instead of trying to strive for inaccessible things or avoid inescapable ones, Epictetus advises us to focus on what is in our power to reach and avoid, given that things in our power are truly good. Several times in his work Epictetus repeats that god made people to be happy (εὐδαιμονία/eudaimonia, 3.24.2; εὐτυχία/eutychia, 3.24.64), giving them all the necessary means to attain happiness. Moreover, Zeus cares for mankind to such an extent that he wishes for people happiness equal to his own (3.24.19). Obviously, this happiness does not consist of pleasure, but is instead directly proportional to virtue. In the Stoic theodicy, misfortunes are sent to us by god in order to bring out our virtue and train us, by analogy to athletes who practise before a contest. Zeus expects a demonstration (ἀπόδειξις/apódeixis) from the Stoic, namely to show how strong his beliefs are in the face of adversities (3.24.112). In Cleanthes’ Hymn to Zeus, the order of the universe under Zeus’ rule consists of good as well as bad factors which are harmoniously combined, an idea which can be traced back to the Heraclitean notion of harmony as the tension of opposites (Epictetus, Discourses 1.12.15-18). Nevertheless, the world-order from the Hymn deserves our praise. Epictetus seems to echo this point of view, stressing the importance
of gratitude toward the gods and admiration of the universe. As I have mentioned above, the gods appear in Epictetus as benefactors, with Zeus as the most important of all. In his discourse *On providence* (1.6; cf. 1.16) Epictetus says people must learn how to think about the universe with a feeling of gratitude. People travel to Olympia to contemplate Phidias’ masterpiece yet cannot see the works of nature which are around them. In other words, gratitude requires a sort of training. The same opinion can be found in Seneca’s *Letter* 15 where we are told that gratitude has to be exercised. As William O. Stephens points out: “What is so remarkable about this attitude of gratitude is that Epictetus believes it can be maintained in the face of what are commonly considered to be the most tragic, horrible adversities.” (Stephens, 2007, p. 63). For Epictetus, Socrates is the philosopher who exemplifies gratitude in the most exalted manner and his attitude should be ascribed to: “we shall be emulating Socrates, when we are able to write paeans in prison” (2.6.26-27).

Epictetus says, the world is arranged in such a way that everything goes well together, for example colours, light and sight, which complement each other (1.6). This arrangement suggests that there is a providential agent behind it, a benefactor. According to Epictetus, this is the reason why god and nature moulded human beings, namely to bring them into the world as spectators and interpreters of god himself and his works. To live in accordance with nature is to contemplate nature itself. “Have you anything finer or greater to look at than the sun, the moon, the stars, the whole earth, the sea?” (2.16.31-34). The noblest task people can undertake is “hymning and praising the

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13 Cf. Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.16: “Yet, by Zeus and the gods, one single gift of nature would suffice to make a man who is reverent and grateful perceive the providence of God. Do not talk to me now of great matters: take the mere fact that milk is produced from grass, and cheese from milk, and that wool grows from skin – who is it that has created or devised these things? No one, somebody says. Oh, the depth of man’s stupidity and shamelessness!”
Deity” (1.16): “This is what we ought to sing on every occasion, and above all to sing the greatest and divinest hymn, that God has given us the faculty to comprehend these things and to follow the path of reason”. Cleanthes closes his *Hymn* in similar words, suggesting that human beings ought to be attuned to the cosmic order in such a way, that their whole lives are nothing else than hymns praising Zeus:

> But all-bountiful Zeus, cloud-wrapped ruler of the thunderbolt, deliver human beings from their destructive ignorance; [...] so that we, having been honored, may honor you in return, constantly praising your works as befits one who is mortal. For there is no other greater privilege for mortals or for gods than always to praise the universal law in justice.

(Cleanthes, 2005, p. 41)

**Referências**


