

Epictetus

Discourses

Book One, Chapter 1

Of the things which are in our Power, and not in our Power

“Of all the faculties, you will find not one which is capable of contemplating itself; and, consequently, not capable either of approving or disapproving. How far does the grammatic art possess the contemplating power? As far as forming a judgement about what is written and spoken. And how far music? As far as judging about melody. Does either of them then contemplate itself? By no means. But when you must write something to your friend, grammar will tell you what words you must write; but whether you should write or not, grammar will not tell you. And so it is with music as to musical sounds; but whether you should sing at the present time and play on the lute, or do neither, music will not tell you. What faculty then will tell you? That which contemplates both itself and all other things. And what is this faculty? The rational faculty; for this is the only faculty that we have received which examines itself, what it is, and what power it has, and what is the value of this gift, and examines all other faculties: for what else is there which tells us that golden things are beautiful, for they do not say so themselves? Evidently it is the faculty which is capable of judging of appearances. What else judges of music, grammar, and other faculties, proves their uses and points out the occasions for using them? Nothing else.

As then it was fit to be so, that which is best of all and supreme over all is the only thing which the gods have placed in our power, the right use of appearances; but all other things they have not placed in our

power. Was it because they did not choose? I indeed think that, if they had been able, they would have put these other things also in our power, but they certainly could not. For as we exist on the earth, and are bound to such a body and to such companions, how was it possible for us not to be hindered as to these things by externals?

But what says Zeus? "Epictetus, if it were possible, I would have made both your little body and your little property free and not exposed to hindrance. But now be not ignorant of this: this body is not yours, but it is clay finely tempered. And since I was not able to do for you what I have mentioned, I have given you a small portion of us, this faculty of pursuing an object and avoiding it, and the faculty of desire and aversion, and, in a word, the faculty of using the appearances of things; and if you will take care of this faculty and consider it your only possession, you will never be hindered, never meet with impediments; you will not lament, you will not blame, you will not flatter any person."

"Well, do these seem to you small matters?" I hope not. "Be content with them then and pray to the gods." But now when it is in our power to look after one thing, and to attach ourselves to it, we prefer to look after many things, and to be bound to many things, to the body and to property, and to brother and to friend, and to child and to slave. Since, then, we are bound to many things, we are depressed by them and dragged down. For this reason, when the weather is not fit for sailing, we sit down and torment ourselves, and continually look out to see what wind is blowing. "It is north." What is that to us? "When will the west wind blow?" When it shall choose, my good man, or when it shall please AEolus; for God has not made you the manager of the winds, but AEolus. What then? We must make the best use that we can of the things which are in our power, and use the rest according to their nature. What is their nature then? As God may please.

"Must I, then, alone have my head cut off?" What, would you have all men lose their heads that you may be consoled? Will you not stretch out your neck as Lateranus did at Rome when Nero ordered him to be beheaded? For when he had stretched out his neck, and received a feeble blow, which made him draw it in for a moment, he stretched it out again. And a little before, when he was visited by Epaphroditus, Nero's freedman, who asked him about the cause of offense which he had given, he said, "If I choose to tell anything, I will tell your master."

What then should a man have in readiness in such circumstances? What else than "What is mine, and what is not mine; and permitted to me, and what is not permitted to me." I must die. Must I then die lamenting? I must be put in chains. Must I then also lament? I must go into exile. Does any man then hinder me from going with smiles and cheerfulness and contentment? "Tell me the secret which you possess." I will not, for this is in my power. "But I will put you in chains." Man, what are you talking about? Me in chains? You may fetter my leg, but my will not even Zeus himself can overpower. "I will throw you into prison." My poor body, you mean. "I will cut your head off." When, then, have I told you that my head alone cannot be cut off? These are the things which philosophers should meditate on, which they should write daily, in which they should exercise themselves.

Thrasea used to say, "I would rather be killed to-day than banished to-morrow." What, then, did Rufus say to him? "If you choose death as the heavier misfortune, how great is the folly of your choice? But if, as the lighter, who has given you the choice? Will you not study to be content with that which has been given to you?"

What, then, did Agrippinus say? He said, "I am not a hindrance to myself." When it was reported to him that his trial was going on in the Senate, he said, "I hope it may turn out well; but it is the fifth hour of

the day"- this was the time when he was used to exercise himself and then take the cold bath- "let us go and take our exercise." After he had taken his exercise, one comes and tells him, "You have been condemned." "To banishment," he replies, "or to death?" "To banishment." "What about my property?" "It is not taken from you." "Let us go to Aricia then," he said, "and dine."

This it is to have studied what a man ought to study; to have made desire, aversion, free from hindrance, and free from all that a man would avoid. I must die. If now, I am ready to die. If, after a short time, I now dine because it is the dinner-hour; after this I will then die. How? Like a man who gives up what belongs to another."

Book One, Chapter 9

How from the fact that we are akin to God a man may proceed to the consequences

If the things are true which are said by the philosophers about the kinship between God and man, what else remains for men to do then what Socrates did? Never in reply to the question, to what country you belong, say that you are an Athenian or a Corinthian, but that you are a citizen of the world. For why do you say that you are an Athenian, and why do you not say that you belong to the small nook only into which your poor body was cast at birth? Is it not plain that you call yourself an Athenian or Corinthian from the place which has a greater authority and comprises not only that small nook itself and all your family, but even the whole country from which the stock of your progenitors is derived down to you? He then who has observed with intelligence the administration of the world, and has learned that the greatest and supreme and the most comprehensive community is that which is composed of men and God, and that from God have descended the seeds not only to my father and grandfather, but to all

beings which are generated on the earth and are produced, and particularly to rational beings- for these only are by their nature formed to have communion with God, being by means of reason conjoined with Him- why should not such a man call himself a citizen of the world, why not a son of God, and why should he be afraid of anything which happens among men? Is kinship with Caesar or with any other of the powerful in Rome sufficient to enable us to live in safety, and above contempt and without any fear at all? and to have God for your maker and father and guardian, shall not this release us from sorrows and fears?

But a man may say, "Whence shall I get bread to eat when I have nothing?"

And how do slaves, and runaways, on what do they rely when they leave their masters? Do they rely on their lands or slaves, or their vessels of silver? They rely on nothing but themselves, and food does not fail them. And shall it be necessary for one among us who is a philosopher to travel into foreign parts, and trust to and rely on others, and not to take care of himself, and shall he be inferior to irrational animals and more cowardly, each of which, being self-sufficient, neither fails to get its proper food, nor to find a suitable way of living, and one conformable to nature?

I indeed think that the old man ought to be sitting here, not to contrive how you may have no mean thoughts nor mean and ignoble talk about yourselves, but to take care that there be not among us any young men of such a mind that, when they have recognized their kinship to God, and that we are fettered by these bonds, the body, I mean, and its possessions, and whatever else on account of them is necessary to us for the economy and commerce of life, they should intend to throw off these things as if they were burdens painful and intolerable, and to depart to their kinsmen. But this is the labour that your teacher and instructor ought to be employed upon, if he really were what he should be. You

should come to him and say, "Epictetus, we can no longer endure being bound to this poor body, and feeding it and giving it drink, and rest, and cleaning it, and for the sake of the body complying with the wishes of these and of those. Are not these things indifferent and nothing to us, and is not death no evil? And are we not in a manner kinsmen of God, and did we not come from Him? Allow us to depart to the place from which we came; allow us to be released at last from these bonds by which we are bound and weighed down. Here there are robbers and thieves and courts of justice, and those who are named tyrants, and think that they have some power over us by means of the body and its possessions. Permit us to show them that they have no power over any man." And I on my part would say, "Friends, wait for God; when He shall give the signal and release you from this service, then go to Him; but for the present endure to dwell in this place where He has put you: short indeed is this time of your dwelling here, and easy to bear for those who are so disposed: for what tyrant or what thief, or what courts of justice, are formidable to those who have thus considered as things of no value the body and the possessions of the body? Wait then, do not depart without a reason."

Something like this ought to be said by the teacher to ingenuous youths. But now what happens? The teacher is a lifeless body, and you are lifeless bodies. When you have been well filled to-day, you sit down and lament about the morrow, how you shall get something to eat. Wretch, if you have it, you will have it; if you have it not, you will depart from life. The door is open. Why do you grieve? where does there remain any room for tears? and where is there occasion for flattery? why shall one man envy another? why should a man admire the rich or the powerful, even if they be both very strong and of violent temper? for what will they do to us? We shall not care for that which they can do; and what we do care for, that they cannot do. How did Socrates behave with respect to these matters? Why, in what other way than a man ought to do who was convinced that he was a kinsman of the gods? "If you say to me now," said Socrates to his judges, "'We will acquit you on the condition that you no longer

discourse in the way in which you have hitherto discoursed, nor trouble either our young or our old men,' I shall answer, 'you make yourselves ridiculous by thinking that, if one of our commanders has appointed me to a certain post, it is my duty to keep and maintain it, and to resolve to die a thousand times rather than desert it; but if God has put us in any place and way of life, we ought to desert it.'" Socrates speaks like a man who is really a kinsman of the gods. But we think about ourselves as if we were only stomachs, and intestines, and shameful parts; we fear, we desire; we flatter those who are able to help us in these matters, and we fear them also.

A man asked me to write to Rome about him, a man who, as most people thought, had been unfortunate, for formerly he was a man of rank and rich, but had been stripped of all, and was living here. I wrote on his behalf in a submissive manner; but when he had read the letter, he gave it back to me and said, "I wished for your help, not your pity: no evil has happened to me."

Thus also Musonius Rufus, in order to try me, used to say: "This and this will befall you from your master"; and I replied that these were things which happen in the ordinary course of human affairs. "Why, then," said he, "should I ask him for anything when I can obtain it from you?" For, in fact, what a man has from himself, it is superfluous and foolish to receive from another? Shall I, then, who am able to receive from myself greatness of soul and a generous spirit, receive from you land and money or a magisterial office? I hope not: I will not be so ignorant about my own possessions. But when a man is cowardly and mean, what else must be done for him than to write letters as you would about a corpse. "Please to grant us the body of a certain person and a sextarius of poor blood." For such a person is, in fact, a carcass and a sextarius of blood, and nothing more. But if he were anything more, he would know that one man is not miserable through the means of another."