

Reflections on Epictetus' Notion of Personhood

Charles Hogg

ABSTRACT Epictetus' discussion of the death of spouse and child in *Encheiridion* 3 raises interesting problems on the meaning of "person" in his Stoic philosophy. The author uses Epictetus' discussion as a window into his notion of person, and weighs the strengths and weaknesses of that notion. The Stoic view of person represents an advance over pre-Stoic views. It offers us a better way to look at significant others throughout life, and helps us better to deal with their loss. Yet it falls short of being a fully satisfactory notion of person, because it does not address the fact that I am constituted as person only in relationship to others who are themselves persons.

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ὦ τοῦ θαύματος!
Τί τὸ περὶ ἡμᾶς τοῦτο γέγονε μυστήριον;
Πῶς παρεδόθημεν τῇ φθορᾷ, καὶ συνεζεύχθημεν τῷ θανάτῳ;¹

Crises rarely change minds. They serve rather as occasions to reveal our deepest thoughts and ideas, which were conceived and born in the quiet of daily life and experience. They test the limits and weaknesses of those ideas. Because they reveal those thoughts and test those ideas, crises are valuable.

No crisis is more valuable as touchstone than death. For death is not merely a theoretical, but also a practical and existential crisis. It is also universal, touching rich and poor, wise and foolish, young and old. And its effect is most profound, bringing to an end not merely this or that personal project, but the person himself with all his projects at once. That is why, in exploring the Stoic conception of the person, it can be worthwhile for us to consider the writings of Epictetus on death.

We must, of course, exercise caution in speaking of a Stoic conception of the person. As the writings of John Zizioulas demonstrate, the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers in the late 4th century AD first capture a truly rich and robust notion of person.² It would be foolish to hold Epictetus to the standards they set. What is reasonable is to look at how he addresses the same field of study that they do: the actions of one or more agents in a universe of other agents.

The exact meaning of “person” is itself problematic, and I intend this paper to be an effort *toward* a better understanding of person. The western Christian definition of person, made famous by Boethius, that a person is “*naturae rationabilis individua substantia*”³ is probably the most familiar and has much to commend it, though I agree with Lossky’s claim that according to that view persons become conflated with the relationships which exist between them.⁴ The definition of person endorsed by Turcescu, “an indivisible, unique and therefore non-replicable unity in human existence”⁵ is not sufficiently broad. To those sympathetic to Christianity, it excludes angels and God; to those interested in scientific pursuits, it eliminates any possibility of extraterrestrial life or of machines as persons.

1. John of Damascus, *Idiomelon* used in Orthodox funeral liturgy for lay people, tone 8. Text drawn from Spyridon Zerbos, ed., *Euchologion to mega periechon tas tōn hepta mustērion akolouthias*, 3rd ed. (Venice: Tupographia Phoinix, 1869; reprint, Athens: Astēr, 1970; 1980; 1986; 1992), 414, accessed 2 July 2014, <http://dbooks.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/books/PDFs/591092833.pdf>; <http://books.google.com/books?id=db0UAAAAQAAJ>. This *Euchologion* is normally used nowadays in Orthodox liturgy. For an earlier printed version of this text, transmitted until 18th century in manuscripts, see *Euchologion to mega en hō periechontai kata taxin hai tōn hepta mystērion akolouthiai*, (Constantinople: En tō tou Patriarcheiou tēs Kōnstantinoupoleōs Typographeio, 1803), 273, accessed 1 July 2014, <http://jancemi.lib.uoc.gr/metadata/0/f/8/metadata-70-0000206.tkl>; <http://books.google.com/books?id=Xg9YAAAAcAAJ>.

2. He speaks, for example, of the “historical revolution in philosophy” they brought about by equating person to *hypostasis*. John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed Paul McPartlan (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 157–58. We may also note the remark by Lucian Turcescu who (though he disagrees with Zizioulas in key ways) notes: “prior to the Cappadocians there scarcely was a concept of person in ancient philosophy.” Lucian Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons*, American Academy of Religion (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14.

3. Boethius, *Contra Eutychen*, 3.4–5. Text according to the edition in *De consolazione philosophiae, Opuscula theologica*, ed. Claudio Moreschini, 2nd ed. (Munich; Leipzig: Saur, 2005).

4. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 57. Lossky slightly misquotes Aquinas, but not in a way which materially affects Lossky’s contention. Lossky claims that Aquinas said “*Persona est relatio*,” but Aquinas actually says, “*Ergo hoc nomen persona relationem significat*.”

5. Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons*, 7.

Epictetus himself uses the thought of death often as an heuristic device. To cite but one of many examples, in the *Encheiridion* he says, "Let death and exile, and all other things which appear terrible be daily before your eyes, but chiefly death, and you win never entertain any abject thought, nor too eagerly covet anything."⁶

One text of Epictetus on the topic of death is particularly useful as a window on his view of the person. In *Encheiridion* 3, he says:

Concerning each one of the things that give you delight, or are useful, or that you love, remember to think about what kind of thing it is, beginning from the least. If you love a ceramic cup, [say] "I love a cup." Then if it breaks you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your own child or wife, [say] that you kiss a human. Then when they die you will not be disturbed.⁷

Epictetus begins this section by listing three sorts of items, according to how they affect us. First, he speaks of things that *delight* us. The Greek here is "ψυχαγωγούντοι," things that "lead the soul away."⁸ Next, he speaks of things as *useful*—things we have need of. Here he has in mind things of instrumental value: pots, cups, cell phones, and computers all come to mind. The third word, *deeply loved*, renders the Greek verb "στέργω." While this verb is sometimes used of objects, in the works of Epictetus it is usually connected with family and friends.

The three kinds of items are not mutually exclusive. The same cell phone that delights us with its games, is also useful to us as a communication device. A given human being may affect us in all three ways. All three of these involve things that are, strictly speaking, outside our control—specifically, external goods.

For each individual thing that affects us in these ways, Epictetus bids us to remember⁹ what kind of thing (ὁποῖον) it is. As I write this article, I have a ceramic cup on my desk. I find it useful, because it is able to hold

6. Epictetus, *Ench.* 21, translated by Elizabeth Carter, in *All the Works of Epictetus, Which Are Now Extant; Consisting of his Discourses, Preserved by Arrian, in Four Books, the "Enchiridion," and Fragments*, ed. Elizabeth Carter (Dublin: Hulton Bradley, 1759), <http://classics.mit.edu/Browse/browse-Epictetus.html>. In this paper, I rely on the English translations of Epictetus found at classics.mit.edu unless otherwise noted.

7. My translation.

8. The word also occurs in *Discourses* 2.16.37, 3.21.23, 4.4.4. In Plato's *Phaedrus* it is used to mean "bewitched."

9. The word "remember" is crucial in the *Encheiridion*, occurring no less than 16 times in the brief 52 sections of the text. It suggests that many of our problems stem from forgetfulness.

my daily allotment of coffee. It delights me, because it has an image of The Beatles on it. But as I use it, I keep in mind what sort of thing it is. I would not be surprised if some day it drops and shatters, rendering it useless. Remembering what kind of thing it is carries a twofold benefit. First, as I use it from day to day, I treat it with greater care than if it were metal or plastic. Second, if and when it drops and shatters, I will not be surprised. It would be stupid to expect that fragile things will not at some point shatter.

The way that remembering takes place for Epictetus is, to a great extent, verbal. "If you love a particular ceramic cup, [say] 'I love a cup.'" A. A. Long notes that *description* is a crucial component in human freedom.¹⁰ Description happens by means of *lekta*, or things that can be said. The *lekta* are not, strictly speaking, material entities. Hence they are not subject to the determinism involved in the physical world. They are under us, and so we retain freedom in forming them.

It may seem like a leap to move from ceramic cups to wife and child, but Epictetus is citing two ends of the spectrum. As a good teacher he urges his students to start with simpler and more easily accepted loss, and move toward the goal of dealing with the death of a close family member. Coming to terms with loss is a skill, and all skills require practice.

Epictetus' counsel in dealing with death sheds light on his underlying ontological commitments, specifically with regard to his view of the human person. When I face the death of someone who is near to me, much is out of my control. I cannot bring the departed person back to life, any more than I can restore a shattered cup to its pre-shattered condition. Not even Zeus can keep bodies free from hindrance,¹¹ and death is the ultimate hindrance. Gods and men alike are bound by fate.

But I retain the power to form my *lekton* concerning the situation. I re-

10. "[T]he way someone views his situation . . . will depend on the *lekton* he selects as the paradigm appropriate to his belief-set and values. *Lekta* will 'result in' representations, not because they are the physical source of what we perceive or think but because they are the way we are disposed to interpret that source. Epictetus insists that 'the correct use of representations' is 'in our power.' It is reasonable to suggest that what is in our power is a *lekton* or description, and that this is 'our' individual contribution to our representations. In that case, the mind's freedom from constraint, so strongly emphasized by Epictetus, gains a transcendental dimension that scholars of Stoicism have overlooked." Anthony A. Long, "Representation and the Self in Stoicism," in *Psychology*, ed. Stephen Everson, Companions to Ancient Thought 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 119–20. While, as Gill notes, this description may not be conscious and hence not explicitly said, it is in principle sayable. See Christopher Gill, "Is There a Concept of Person in Greek Philosophy?," in Everson, *Psychology*, 188.

11. Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1.1.10–13.

tain my ability to choose, my *prohairesis*, and this is central to the ontology implicit in Epictetus' view of the person as agent. In one passage he even goes so far as to identify an individual human being with their faculty of choice:

[Y]ou are not flesh, nor hair, but moral purpose (*προαίρεσις*); if you get that beautiful, then *you* will be beautiful.¹²

As Long notes, "If my representations are up to me to interpret, accept or reject, there must be a 'me' to which they appear and an 'I' which reacts to them—a subject that is identifiable precisely by the representations that it receives and what it does with them."¹³

This, it seems to me, marks an advance over the Platonic and Peripatetic division of the human mind into parts, some rational and some irrational. For Epictetus as for all the Stoics, one subject, one unified agent, underlies all of a human's acts. I am responsible for what I choose. I am not responsible for what others choose, or for what happens to them outside my choice.

Epictetus' view may seem to undercut human relationships, but it actually strengthens them. Stoics recognize that each human relationship is twofold. Consider the bond between husband and wife. There is the role that the husband must play towards the wife, and the role the wife must play towards her husband. How my wife acts towards me is completely out of my control. She alone is responsible for her acts; she alone chooses them. My sole responsibility is choosing how I act towards her. In cases of grief, almost always the grieving person is distressed by things he could, should, or would have done differently. If I focus on those things I can do while the other person is alive, it is more likely I will better be able to cope with the loss.

Further, if as I deal with the other person I remind myself that they are human, and therefore mortal, I will deal more patiently with any lapses or weaknesses on their part. Children and parents often lash out at each other from an unjustified belief that the other person will always be there, so they will have time to restore whatever harsh words or deeds might have wounded the other. Just as I treat a ceramic cup carefully, because of

12. *Discourses*, 3.1.40. The translation used in this quote and hereafter is the one of George Long, in *The Discourses of Epictetus; with the Encheiridion and Fragments*, ed. George Long (New York: Hurst, 1800), <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/discourses.html>.

13. Long, "Representation and the Self in Stoicism," 112.

its fragile nature, so also we will take care to treat each other with kindness when we remember our mortality.

Yet the analogy Epictetus draws between a ceramic cup and a human person also reveals a weakness in the Stoic, and indeed, nearly all views of the ontology of the person. In order to see this weakness, and therefore why Epictetus' view ultimately falls short, let us first cash out the meaning of "person" in Epictetus.¹⁴

To begin with, consider the comparison Epictetus draws between ceramic cups, on the one hand, and close family members, on the other. A particular ceramic cup is a token of a given type, an individual. Sentimental attachment or memory may shape how I think of a particular cup; but when I consider *what it is*, its loss does not debilitate. Epictetus recognizes that the loss of a family member will be more difficult to process. But he offers here no other relevant difference between the experience of losing a cup and losing a spouse or child. Ontologically considered, each of us is, like the cup, a part of a greater whole, a token of a given type.

This same view is set forth in *Discourses* 2.5. There, Epictetus says,

I am not an immortal being, but a man, *a part of the whole* as an hour is part of the day. (2.5.13)

He adds,

If you consider yourself as a man and *a part of a certain whole*, it is for the sake of the whole that at one time you should be sick, at another time take a voyage and run into danger, and at another time be in want, and, in some cases, die prematurely. Why then are you so troubled? Do you not know, that as a foot is no longer a foot if it is detached from the body, so you are no longer a man if you are separated from other men. For what is a man? A part of a state, of that first which consists of gods and of men; then of that which is called next to it, which is a small image of the universal state.

(2.5.25–7)

But that is not all that Epictetus says about persons. Elsewhere he analyzes human nature and finds a feature which makes us unique among all the elements of the world. Like a ceramic cup, I am an individual, a

14. In what follows, I am indebted to Michael Frede, "A Notion of a Person in Epictetus," in *The Philosophy of Epictetus*, ed. Andrew S. Mason and Theodore Scaltsas (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

part of a greater whole. *Unlike* the ceramic cup, and even the animals, I have the faculty of *prohairesis*, the ability to observe the rest of the universe and freely to act according to reason. Elsewhere Epictetus contrasts human beings with other animals, and notes:

God has brought man into the world to be a spectator of Himself and of His works, and not merely a spectator, but also an interpreter. (*Discourses*, 1.6.19)

Rightly understood, these two do not conflict. When I use my *prohairesis* rightly, I recognize that I am first and foremost a part of a greater whole and must accordingly act for the good of the whole and not for myself alone. Acting for the good of the whole may mean embracing loss. I must learn to interpret losses, great and small, as elements in a greater context. And this can happen, because my descriptions of situations, my *lekta*, are up to me.

Consider a case that harmonizes with the use of Epictetus' writings in the ancient world: the military situation. Each soldier sees himself as a part of a greater whole. In battle situations, it frequently happens that one soldier dies or is disabled; the other soldiers continue to press on, and the plan of battle is modified as necessary to attain the goal.

But just here is a problem. Is the loss of an individual or part which has *prohairesis* a loss different in kind, or only in degree, from the loss of something which does not? It would seem that for Epictetus, it is ultimately a difference in degree, if "person" is analyzed in terms of a part/whole relation to humanity in general. An individual human is a prohairetic part of the whole. Although we are prohairetic, the operative word is "part."

There is another context in which Epictetus examines our personhood. In *Discourses* 2.10 Epictetus invites us to consider our duties from our names. His discussion, though it resembles Panaetius' earlier list found in Cicero,¹⁵ is distinct enough to warrant its own treatment. "Consider who you are (τίς εἶ),"¹⁶ he tells us (2.10.1). First, I am a man, whose most significant and distinctive feature is *prohairesis*. *Prohairesis* entails both that I am rational and free. Second, I am a citizen of the world and a part of it.¹⁶ Third, he lists family relationships, specifically those of being son and

15. Cicero, *De officiis*, 1.30.107–9.

16. I take the "and" as expegetical—in other words, I am a citizen of the world, namely a part of it. In all that follows, he explicates the citizen's relation to the world as a part/whole relationship.

brother. Finally, he mentions “names” that are more adventitious—like being a youth or a senator.

This way of looking at personhood moves us closer to something resembling the way we think of a given person: as a unique combination of features, including roles played and history lived.¹⁷ The first two “names” Epictetus lists are common to most human beings.¹⁸ The third and fourth begin to pick me out in my uniqueness. I alone am my parents’ third child and first son, the brother to three sisters. Of course, that descriptor is not unique to me; there are others who are third children and only sons. But I alone am the only son of *my* parents, and that is unique. The final kind of name that Epictetus mentions also narrows the field of description. These features are less permanent and more mutable than the third. At one point I am younger and at another I am older, but I always remain the son of my parents and brother of my sisters.

To see personhood in terms of a list of uniquely-identifying properties is not unique to Epictetus or the Stoics. The Neoplatonists, too, understood person as “a collection of properties.”¹⁹ Death unties this unique collection or bundle of properties, but most of the properties that would be important to me in a relationship can be found in other people, other bundles of properties.

So Epictetus views personhood from three perspectives: as parts of a greater whole, as bearers of *prohairesis*, and as a unique collection of non-unique properties. But none of these, it seems to me, fully captures what we mean by “person.” For all of them view persons merely as things-of-a-certain-sort.

Maybe we can get at the problem by considering again the analogy Epictetus draws in *Encheiridion* 3. My relationship with a ceramic cup is fundamentally different than my relationship with wife or child. In the first place, there is a reciprocity of relationship with other persons that does not exist with things. I encounter other persons as an “I” to a “thou,” not as an “I” to an “it.” I reveal myself to them, and they in turn reveal themselves to me.

That revelation has, as one of its characteristics, a certain freedom which

17. For Epictetus, the person is “the combination of the different roles one has or sorts of person one is,” according to Frede, “A Notion of a Person in Epictetus,” 166.

18. Even here, however, we may consider whether Epictetus’ criteria embrace all human beings. For example, can a person in the late stages of Alzheimer’s disease be said to have *prohairesis*? It certainly seems not. It is hard to think of any single analyzable characteristic which might include all humans and only humans and other persons.

19. Turcescu, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons*, 104, see also 38–40.

we may experience as surprise. My mother-in-law died of Alzheimer's disease some years ago. Just before she lost the ability to speak, the family was driving in the car and discussing the Falklands War. Most of the people in the car expressed the view that the British were justified in defending their territory. Suddenly she spoke up and said, "I don't agree! They should let Argentina have the islands!" Again, when someone has died their next of kin may say, "If dad were here he would have said such-and-such." But what makes a relationship truly *personal*, I-thou, is that we are never quite sure *what* the other person might have said. They are fundamentally free to think and say what they want.

In the second place, my very being as a person is constituted by my relationship with others who are themselves persons. We hinted at this above when I noted that what makes me unique is my being the only son of *my* parents. No definition of person that fails to recognize this relational constitution of persons can possibly be adequate. When I reflect on the death of someone close to me, I reflect on the loss of a *person* of a certain nature—one who, to a greater or lesser extent, has made me to be the person who I am. A thought experiment may help to clarify this. Suppose I suffered the loss of a child. Even if a computer scientist could design a robot that perfectly copied the child, both physically and behaviorally, I would never view it as a matter of indifference between having that robot and having the child herself who was lost.

Perhaps at this juncture we reach the boundaries of what philosophy, as philosophy, is able to accomplish. Whether with the Buddhists one views "person" as, ultimately, an illusion, or whether, with Christianity, one views "person" as ultimately even more fundamental than "essence" or "nature"—the answers to such questions may well remain beyond philosophy's competence, and leave us with the words cited at the head of this article, from the funeral liturgy of St. John of Damascus:

O wonder!

What is this mystery which happens to us?

How are we handed over to corruption, and wedded to death?²⁰

20. My translation.

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