If it Pleases the Gods: The Socratic Piety of Epictetus

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I. Introduction

A. *The Discourses* of Epictetus is the most provocative and "soul-stirring" Stoic text. Amid vivid references to literary, historical, and mythical figures, two names rise above the rest: Zeus and Socrates.

1. Epictetus departs from Stoic orthodoxy by speaking of Zeus/God in personalist terms.

2. Socrates is presented as the complete paradigm of wisdom and virtue.

B. A common thread between these unique emphases is the virtue of piety.

1. Piety is not merely one virtue among others, but a basic orientation toward the world—an attitude of reverent acceptance and trust in reason.

2. Inspired by Socrates, Epictetan piety comprises three distinct attitudes: optimism, gratitude, and obedience.

C. My aim is to elucidate the central features of Epictetan piety and explain how Socrates served as the model in each case. I will also argue that Epictetan piety is an attractive ideal within our modern context—whether religious or secular.

II. Piety in the Greco-Roman World

A. The Greek word most often translated as 'piety' is *eusebeia*, which connotes a sense of reverence and duty.

1. It was widely believed that the gods looked favorably on just conduct and disapproved of injustice. Anti-social behavior was thus considered impious.

2. Prayer and sacrifice were considered vital due to belief in causal relations between acts of devotion and good fortune bestowed by the gods.

B. Stoic piety was distinctive due to the Stoics' unique conception of the divine.

1. The universe is imbued with a perfect intelligence that guarantees that everything will happen for the best.

2. The most important aspect of Stoic piety is believing that God governs the universe well and justly (*Enchiridion* 31).

3. Stoic reverence is not based on admiration of power or fear of wrath. It's a matter of respect for God's perfect rationality and appreciation of the beauty and order of nature.

III. Optimism

A. Epictetan piety requires optimism regarding one's own lot and the world as a whole. It's irrational to revere a god who created a broken world or deprives us of happiness.

B. Optimism is better than hope. Rather than hoping for a certain outcome, we should welcome events however they unfold. (*Disc.* 1.4.99, 1.6.1, 4.7.20, *Ench.* 8)

C. God has given us the capacities to be happy in any circumstance.

A good man cannot be harmed, either in life or in death. (Plato, *Apology* 41d)

1. Well-being consists entirely of virtue, which is always within our power.

2. Responding to challenging circumstances with excellence is no less conducive to well-being than enjoying easier conditions. (1.6.28, 2.16.13)

The wand of Hermes promises that 'whatever you touch will turn to gold'. For my part, I can say, 'bring whatever challenge you please and I will turn it to good account: bring illness, death, poverty, slander, a death sentence: they will all be converted to advantage by my wand of Hermes. (3.20.12)

D. Maintaining this conception of happiness and adjusting desires and aversions accordingly are necessary for preserving piety.

If you regard any external as good or bad, and fail to get what you want or get what you don't want instead, you will blame the gods and inevitably hate them for being the cause of your trouble…The upshot is, when you practice using desire and aversion correctly, you practice being pious. (*Ench.* 31)

E. Epictetus uses Socrates as the prime exemplar of pious optimism.

My dear Crito, if it pleases the gods, so be it. (Plato, *Crito* 43d)

1. Socrates shows an abiding trust in providence as well as in his own ability to make good use of whatever God has planned for him—even death.

2. Socrates is unfazed by the arrival of the Ship of Delos because he wants whatever God wants (2.17.22, 4.7.20).

3. This posture not only honours the divine order—it also shields us from resentment and anxiety.

IV. Gratitude

A. Epictetus urges his students to thank the gods for making them strong enough to endure what they cannot control and only responsible for what they can. (1.12.32)

B. Expressing gratitude toward God is the best use of one's time. (1.16.15-18)

1. Grateful prayer is an appropriate and rational response to immense gifts like our faculty of reason.

2. It also reinforces belief in God and his goodness, which helps us maintain equanimity and cultivate virtues like courage and patience.

3. Socrates exemplified this attitude by composing a hymn to Apollo while in prison awaiting execution (2.6.26, 4.4.22; see *Phaedo* 60d).

C. Someone truly grateful to Zeus will never complain and always be of good cheer.

> *God wants people keen to participate in the dance and revels – people, that is, who would sooner applaud and favor the festival with their praise and acclamation. As for those who are grumpy and dour, he won't be sad to see them excluded. Even when they are invited, they don't act as if they are on holiday, or play an appropriate part; instead they whine, they curse their fate, their luck and their company. They don't appreciate what they have, including moral resources given to them for the opposite purpose – generosity of spirit, high-mindedness, courage and that very freedom we are now exploring.* (4.1.108-9)

D. Epictetus is especially concerned with maintaining cheerfulness in the face of what most people consider dire circumstances, such as exile, injury, or death. This isn't a matter of repression—it's the result of a shift in one's values and perspective.

> *I must die. But must I die bawling? I must be put in chains – but moaning and groaning too? I must be exiled; but is there anything to keep me from going with a smile, calm and self-composed?* (1.1.21-2)

> *Socrates took the cup and quite unperturbed he was…without a tremor and any change in his colour or his face.* (*Phaedo* 117b)

V. Obedience

A. Epictetus frequently declares that the goal of life is to "follow the gods," which is a matter of using reason to guide our conduct as God intended. (1.12.5, 1.30.4, 4.7.20)

1. Human beings have an innate rational faculty that lets them determine the right thing to do in any circumstance. (4.12.11-12)

2. This rational faculty is not only a gift from God, it is an offshoot of God's own intelligence. (1.14.11-14)

3. Hence, when we correctly use our powers of reason to guide our conduct, we are both living in agreement with nature and obeying God. This allows us to act with confidence, free from internal conflict or regret.

B. Epictetus recounts Socrates' unwillingness to give up philosophy on the grounds that it was a role assigned by God—a post far more important than one assigned by a general. (1.9.23-24)

C. Prayer is an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to serving God by gladly accepting his plans and striving for moral excellence. Epictetus invites his students to swear an oath to God just as hired soldiers swear to Ceasar:

If they want to be paid, they must swear to put the emperor's safety first. You, however, who have been chosen to receive an abundance of blessings – and for free – why won't you swear a similar oath, and if you have done so already, why not reaffirm the commitment? What is that oath? You swear that under no circumstances will you disobey, complain, or find fault with God and his gifts. You won't shrink from life's essential task or trials. (1.14)

Lift up your head, like a person finally released from slavery. Dare to face God and say, 'From now on, use me as you like. I am of one mind with you; I am your peer.' (2.16.42)

VI. Contemporary Relevance

A. While piety hasn't been part of the cultural revival of virtue discourse, Epictetan piety can be helpful for anyone seeking moral motivation and inner peace.

B. For theists, the optimism of Epictetan piety can reduce the risk of disillusionment when petitionary prayers go unanswered.

C. The Christian view that suffering is redemptive can console, but it may also lead some to see emotional pain as necessary or even virtuous. The idea that cheerfulness is a matter of piety can mitigate this problem.

D. The central elements of Epictetan piety can also prove beneficial for non-theists.

1. One needn't believe in God to accept the key Stoic grounds for optimism—that happiness is entirely a matter of living virtuously.

2. Even without a belief in God, one can recognize that the forces of nature combined in such a way as to make possible our existence and our capacities for reason, love, and wisdom. Hence, we always have grounds for gratitude.

3. Epictetan obedience involves relying on one's own reason to guide one's conduct. This is a policy that everyone can adopt and benefit from.