

Reading Guide Flourishing and Detachment

Readings for 3 February 2011

READINGS (REQUIRED)

- [A] Epictetus. *The Handbook (The Encheiridion)*. Trans. Nicolas P. White. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.
- [B] James Stockdale, “Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus in the Laboratory.” Speech delivered at King’s College, 15 November 1993. (V*2)
- [C] Boethius, *The Consolations of Philosophy*, selections (V*2)
- [D] Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Chapter 7, pp. 135-153

[A] Epictetus, *The Handbook*

Background

Background information about the Stoic philosopher Epictetus (c. 50-130 CE) and his famous work *Encheiridion (The Handbook)* appears in Nicholas White’s introduction to our translation. White has also added footnotes that explain points of potential confusion.

As the title indicates, *The Handbook* is intended as a tidy introduction to a more complex philosophical outlook. It is written in an accessible and engaging style.

The Stoic movement originated around 300 BCE and flourished for over five hundred years. The Stoics believed that the external world is deterministic: its state at any time is completely determined by its prior states. So, they maintained, it is pointless to wish for things to be different because to do so is to wish for something impossible. A wise person would, therefore, accept whatever befalls them without desiring that things go otherwise – hence the English word ‘stoic.’

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

I encourage you to read the text in full, at a steady reading pace.

The following sections are particularly important. Please make sure that you read them at least twice: 1, 2, 5, 8, 26, 20, 28, 29, 34, 43, 44, 47

The following sections may be a bit confusing; you do not need to worry about understanding their details: 7, 15, 18, 27, 36, 39, 45, 49, 52

All other sections should be read at least once, in a way that ensures understanding.

Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) How does Epictetus' opening observation that "Some things are up to us and some are not up to us" underpin the remainder of his discussion? What are the things that are "up to us"? What are the things that are "not up to us"? How does he recommend relating to things in each of the two categories?
- (2) What does Epictetus mean when he says "What upsets people is not things in themselves but their judgments about the things" (section 5)? How does he apply this observation in his subsequent (and previous) discussion?
- (3) Optional: Make a list of five practical suggestions from Epictetus that you could implement in your own life, and make an effort to implement those suggestions over the next week.

[B] James Stockdale, "Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus in the Laboratory."

Background

James Bond Stockdale (1923-2005) was a highly-decorated Vietnam War officer who spent seven years as a Prisoner of War in the notorious Hoa La Prison (the so-called "Hanoi Hilton," where John McCain was also held as a POW.) Additional information about his life and influence can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Stockdale (yes, I am directing you to the Wikipedia!) or at his personal website: <http://www.admiralstockdale.us/>

The selection we are reading is a speech that he gave in 1993, entitled "Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior." In it, he describes how the writings of Epictetus helped him to maintain equanimity during his time in Vietnam and thereafter.

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

Please read the speech in full, focusing especially on pages 6-15. (But do please read the speech in full. It's a very interesting document, for a number of reasons.)

Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) Why does Stockdale give his lecture the subtitle "Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior"? Do you think the subtitle is accurate? Why or why not?
- (2) How applicable do you think Stockdale's observations are to less extreme circumstances?

[C] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, selections (V*2)

Background

Boethius was an early Christian philosophy who lived in Rome in the late 5th and early 6th centuries, from roughly 480-525 CE. Born to a noble Roman family, he was an influential political figure, rising to the position of senator in his mid-20s and consul in his mid-30s. In 523CE (when he was in his mid-40s) his fortunes changed. He was stripped of his wealth, arrested on charges of treason, and imprisoned. The next year (524 CE) he was executed.

The Consolation of Philosophy, from which we are reading excerpts, was written during his imprisonment. Composed as a dialogue between Boethius and the figure of Philosophy (personified as a woman), it offers an account of how happiness is possible even in the face of great adversity. It is considered one of the most important works of Christian philosophy from the late Medieval period.

The Consolations of Philosophy was originally written in Latin. The translation we are using is by H.R. James, and was made in 1897. The work is divided into five Books, the titles of which will give you a sense of the volume's contents: Book I: The Sorrows of Boethius; Book II: The Vanity of Fortune's Gifts; Book III: True Happiness and False; Book IV: Good and Ill Fortune ; Book V: Free Will and God's Foreknowledge.

Our selections are drawn from the first four Books. If you would like to see them in context, you can find the full text at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14328>.

Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) Why does Philosophy say that Boethius has not truly lost anything?
- (2) Why does Philosophy say that Ill Fortune is of more use than Good Fortune?

[D] Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Chapter 7, pp. 135-153

Background

[For background information about Jonathan Haidt, see the Reading Guide for 1.18.11]

Terms, Concepts, and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following terms and concepts:

Terms and Concepts: the adversity hypothesis (weak and strong versions); posttraumatic growth; active coping/reappraisal/avoidance coping; explicit knowledge/tacit knowledge

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Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What does Haidt say are the three benefits of adversity? Would you willingly endure adversity in order to obtain these benefits?
- (2) What are the three levels of personality proposed by Dan McAdams, and how does adversity interact with each?
- (3) Who are the people most likely to benefit from adversity and why? What does Haidt say is the key to posttraumatic growth?

[Posted 1/28/11]