

EPICETUS'S PHILOSOPHICAL OUTLOOK OF LIFE

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Abstract: It is really surprising that in the present age though umpteen number of philosophies and religions are available for avid readers easily still there is no complacency as such. In fact with a greater share of knowledge there is unfortunately more of confusion and uneasiness growing incessantly. Upcoming generations are also at a loss for not knowing as to which philosophy or even religion should be viewed as dependable! Much owing to this there has been skeptic attitude getting slowly on a rise and when impartially viewed, there is nothing wrong. The bad practice of answering questions related to day today life only with the help of religion and old textual matter filled with promising aphorisms and parables have totally disappointed all. However very few are vocal about it. Therefore it is necessary to revisit the ancient philosophies having pragmatic sense without losing hold of Spirituality, Morality and Ethical practices. It is in this context that Epictetus's philosophy is presented in this paper in brief. According to Epictetus the primary concern of any philosophy must be the Art of Living because society looks at Philosophy as a Manual full of guidelines for a proper living. The techniques must be feasible and thoroughly applicable to everyday lives and with this the mass must be able to learn to respond to the negativities in life with proper convictions.

Keywords: philosophy, textual matter, Ethical practices, proper convictions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of nature of values and subsequently value judgments falls under Axiology which is one of the most important branches of Philosophy. In fact unless we have an analytical outlook, we may not be able to understand the application of any philosophy, in practical sense. Every object has clearly two aspects related to the fact of the object and value of the object. The first one is grasped through the general description for confirming its existence while the second one infers its value, which is more valuable in mundane life. An object is like a self-indicator when it comes to its description because of its capacity to exhibit its physical aspects clearly but its value and efficacy are confirmed on the basis of our feelings and ideas. Obviously the latter being a practical aspect is confirmed on the basis of utility and on the scale of the ideals set by us. That is why every object under our study is an object of interest is 'eo ipso' invested with value. No doubt values do differ with our interest and insightfulness. In John Dewey's outlook, values may be connected with liking and yet not with every but only with those that judgment has approved, after examination of the relation upon which the object liked depends. In fact for a common man whatever provides satisfaction and comfort has a value. Therefore what Aurelius advises is really worthwhile. He says, "Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will and selfishness- all of them due to the offenders' ignorance of what is good or evil."¹

It is sad that often we feel lost even though we choose to read the popular works which are strongly recommended. This is applicable to all subjects. Particularly in Philosophy there are scores of books which adhere to a much publicised behavioral science but at the end it becomes a Herculean job for the reader to gather the gist which could be made workable in practical life. It goes without dispute that most of them have envious scholarship but unfortunately they are

drifted away from practical life owing to which they remain merely ornamental. Many times subject jargons are used so liberally and frequently that very few can claim to have understood. Those works which impress upon the readers' minds stick on to the ideas borrowed from religions and claim with an overtone of spirituality. The philosophers who are supposed to be simple and natural in their expressions too make use of flowery language. The already confused reader furthermore gets confused and is at a loss for not knowing the exact direction to adopt. But for most of the ancient philosophers, this has been practised from centuries. Whosoever wants to place his ideas of life need not require verbose language and deliberately extended write up to make it a voluminous work. Life has phases and variety problems in every phase. We do need quality methods to tackle problematic situations but the message from the philosophy must be in brief, succinct and direct, to be worthy. Failing this it may be forced to conclude though a little harshly as merely an ingenious work without basic pragmatic sense.

2. HISTORICAL OUTLOOKS IN VARIED FORMS

In the ancient age, philosophy was quite steady in its approach leaning more towards the external Nature and wondering at its mystic forms. Most of the phenomena which seem to be hardly qualified to be a wonder today, posed a problem until an analytical or scientific solution was cracked. Particularly in the Western thinking every genuine seeker was more keen to grasp the knowledge in stages about Nature and its functioning. Therefore we have systematized laws or hypotheses. On the other hand in East the contemporaries did the same but partly because they were more engrossed in studying the inner nature of human beings. No doubt they were also very much interested in understanding the external Nature and its varied workings but may be because of the impact of religiosity they left many details as falling in the arena of higher forces. Therefore in west this eventually worked out in a systematized presentation from the Greeks and gained the deserved publicity. In spite of a similar viewpoint somehow Indians in particular remained shy of publicity and did not carry enough enthusiasm in maintaining tidiness, in the sense, a proper chronological order so as to keep everything properly documented. "Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine, if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind."² Despite this in East or West, specifically from Socratic era the need to look more inwardly rose uniformly and in a genuine sense the human philosophical problems were dealt seriously. One of the main problems was regarding life, its meaning and later life after death. Philosophies with religious outlook could hold on to a specific set of scriptures and mythological texts to place before the society as the eternal solutions to any human problem howsoever grave. Everything was entrusted to the much revered God as the ultimate resourceful personality. Many parables were presented and the restless minds psychologically got trapped claiming tranquility through unshaken faith and lasting hope. There had been many currents of thought prevailing for centuries though irrespective of religion the common axis had been Ethics combined with Moral Science. However, in practice, most of the stringent postulates could not deliver the desired goods that were given overtly much publicity. This gave a way to deviations partially as well as totally giving birth to unorthodox schools which found greater sense in the atheistic attitude. Not all the criticisms were defended successfully by the then extant religious and moral philosophies. This was due to the failure of the principles in the actual mart of the world. Therefore even in the present age we badly need a balanced type of philosophy which could cater to the needs of people and remain simple, direct as well as usable.

3. EPICTETUS AND HIS DIRECT MESSAGE

Epictetus the famous philosopher said, "It's not what happens to you but how you react to it that matters.", was born in 50AD at Hierapolis, Turkey and lived for eighty long years getting influenced by Socrates, Zeno of Citium, Diogenes and a few more. He died in Nicopolis, Greece. Thankfully his teachings rather sermons were properly and promptly documented by his pupil Arrian and later on published. He was born a slave and had to move to Greece from Rome after banishment. We do not have much details regarding his educational institutions where he was groomed. However there is a mention about his mentor Musonius Rufus, a Roman senator and a studied personality from whom it can be claimed that he must have taken lessons of Stoicism. But then having gained the basic knowledge of this branch of philosophy he freely incorporated some of his own ideas and preferred lecturing as a method to propagate his feelings. Somehow he was not destined to continue this volition, to the contrary, had to quit the city. Actually it was a decision wrongly taken to ban all philosophers from the Italian peninsula. Much owing to this he had to establish his own school in Nicopolis, Greece. This proved to be his final abode for all the chosen philosophical activities till the end. Health wise Epictetus was not very lucky. He often suffered particularly in the later phase of life. An interesting part of his life is that he never married but adopted a child. He himself did not write but his lectures were well attended and therefore the notes drawn thereof are

presented to us without much edition. It is always necessary to go through the early life of a philosopher to understand his matured philosophical stance in the later part of life. Epictetus always felt that there is a dire need to provide a direct message or philosophical guidance to the followers than beating round the bush claiming authority. In fact he realized that no philosophical or even religious approach would ever support the vices rather make every attempt to arrange a platform covered by virtues only. Surprisingly even then, every generation has much of the suffering arising and that too in a sharp ascending manner from own sheer ignorance. The ignorance sprouts from faulty conclusions and as usual would be sadly missing the track of pragmatic outlook towards life. Seneca says, "Misfortune weighs most heavily on those who expect nothing but good fortune..Epictetus echoes this advice : We should keep in mind that 'all things everywhere are perishable.' If we fail to recognize this and instead go around assuming that we will always be able to enjoy the things we value, we will likely find ourselves subject to considerable distress when the things we value are taken away from us."³

To present Epictetus's philosophy in an orderly manner is a difficult task. As one goes on reading his works it would seem like a set of discourses covering every aspect and phase of common man's life. Further they do provide a straight opinion and guidance for taking on the challenges of life. These philosophical discourses at no point look like oft repeated or with deliberation. On the other hand the reader gets a feeling that it is so simple and his own feelings finding an expression. He also feels enriched in knowledge with clarity and discovers answers to all his queries. Since everything is presented in brief and crystal clear way no reader would find difficulty in grasping. To begin with Epictetus advises us to accept the facts of life before forcefully projecting our aims and entertaining liberally own conjectures. Life as such for anyone is burdened by own desires and therefore difficulties. No one is exempted from this. There could be differing percentages but on an average everyone has share of that kind of experience which cannot be evaded. Therefore Epictetus thinks it is our prime duty to prepare ourselves for happiness and tranquility in a systematic way irrespective of the circumstances. Having accepted the course of life not as a smooth one, one has to honestly verify the facts impartially and cope up than complaining about them. That is why only intelligent people can be happy or comfortable because they have a clear understanding of the primary principle of life that there are very few things over which we can claim a control but most of the times we have absolutely no control on the things that happen to us. They are not in our province and yet we voluntarily suffer. The very root cause of our suffering, despondency and uneasiness stems from this ignorance our faulty inference. Therefore one has to acquire the knack of discerning between the things around us to march on the path of happiness or at least having the right vision to avoid unhappiness. Similarly our desires and reproaches are always short lived. Embracing this fact also provides complacency. We have to always take a graceful stance in achieving what attracts us but bearing in mind that things that are not in our premises are uncontrollable. Nothing functions in a wayward manner. External events have their own style of working. Therefore this fact should not disturb us. It is ever wise to adjust with the external conditions than combating and then getting disappointed. There is always a need to scrutinize our notions and also tendencies. It is wise to accept the events and their falling shades as it is. This would help us silence our turbulent mind and create a new path for personal moral progress. Therefore control on self or on the varied moods of our mind is of utmost importance. Epictetus expressed his message clearly and zealously to all people interested in living a morally awake life...Epictetus would have had little patience for the aggressive position taking and defending verbal pirouettes that unfortunately sometimes pass for doing philosophy in today's Universities. As a master of succinct explanation he would have been similarly suspicious of the murky verbiage found in academic, philosophical, and other dry texts."⁴

When it comes to the Divine Will it should be borne in the mind that it has its own working but not as we desire in a bookish manner or by our wishful thinking. We are never consulted for its methodical operations. Therefore manufacturing our own ideas, opinions freely and then expecting the same to surface will create more agony. On the other hand freeing self from the illusions and acknowledging the concrete realities would be a healthy habit leading to peace of mind. We have absolutely no control on the visible realities like death, infirmity, separation etc. And therefore they should be accepted sportively as part of life events and compulsory. Half hearted appeals have generally no response in life. Rarely they may click. Tentative working style meets same level response and therefore the results would also be disappointing. This is the usual story of average people who wait for the miracles to happen. You need to get inspired to endeavour headlong so that your expectations get qualified for the expected results. Nature has its own whimsical functioning and due to this we understand by experience that not everything can be reasonable for us.

A person who has gained this basic knowledge is wise failing which he has to pay heavily for the mistakes committed. Epictetus does not stop with these sermons. On the other hand carries these practical tips to manage a moral platform for a spiritual growth. He expects perfecting our speech because that is a key to the spiritual path. Therefore blathering about

minor things would make us weak and least dignified. Once we understand that our life is ephemeral and very short, then wasting precious hours over petty things is a great loss to self only. For this purpose we have to be choosy regarding friends, aims, colleagues and purpose of life. Health is the most precious thing in our custody and therefore taking its care is our prime duty. Virtue, Happiness and Tranquility go hand in hand. Even if one of them is absent or has fallen weak then the personality as a whole loses its quality. Therefore Epictetus thinks, it all depends on our life style choices and more so the inner moral choices which must be given priority. Philosophy which we all take as Love for Wisdom also guides us to lead a good and meaningful life. Moderating our desires after a proper analysis is essential because the pleasure drawn thereof is always fleeting. We do not have any power to make the joy stay forever nor unto grief command to depart at our will. Anytime it is the beginning or the triggering action which is enormously a difficult task. Once that is accomplished rest of the journey has its own course and it automatically becomes a steady process evolving joy and interest in life. At every phase of life this pattern is to be remembered by maintaining patience. Forgive others as well as self any number of times whenever required. Epictetus thinks it is unjust to be over critical. He insists on rationality and though gives importance to reason yet cautions us that there are certain domains wherein rationality may not have access to reason. Finally Epictetus says, “ Let’s quit trying to be mystics or saints and instead try our utmost to be MENSCHES(fully honorable, decent people).⁵

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