

Epictetus on Fearing Death: Bugbear and Open Door Policy

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Aristotle claims that the most fearsome thing is death (*Nicomachean Ethics* iii 6.1115a26). In contrast, Epicurus famously argued that death is nothing to us, and so nothing to fear (*Letter to Menoecus* 124). The Stoics agreed with their Epicurean rivals that death is not to be feared, but they presented different reasons to support this judgment.¹ Epicurus identified the goal of living with pleasure, especially freedom from pain and distress, and evil with pain and distress. Since no sensation at all, neither pleasant nor painful, is possible for the dead, he inferred that death is nothing. It is nothing for the dead, who no longer exist, and nothing for the living, who do not experience their own deaths as long as they live (*Letter to Menoecus* 125).

The Stoics rejected the Epicurean identification of good with pleasure and evil with pain. The Stoics maintained that life, death, strength, weakness, health, illness, wealth, poverty, beauty, ugliness, good reputation, infamy, pleasure, pain, and other such things are neither goods nor evils but rather indifferents (*adiaphora*, see Long and Sedley (LS) 1987, i 354-355 [58A-C]). Within this class of indifferents the Stoics grouped death with weakness, illness, poverty, ugliness, infamy, and pain, calling such things ‘dispreferred’ (*apoproēgmena*) indifferents. This means that although the threat of death in no way diminishes the happiness of the Stoic, it is natural and reasonable for him to choose to continue to live unless and until doing so conflicts with virtue, which is the only good.² The Epicurean view of death as *nothing* to a person and the Stoic view of death as *indifferent* to one’s happiness therefore offer distinct rationales for not fearing death.³

I present the Stoic Epictetus’ arguments that no fears about death are warranted. If Epictetus can persuade his students to dispel all their fears of death, he will thereby have gone a long way toward liberating them from a host of other unreasonable worries that the uneducated typically regard as less scary than death. Consequently, debunking the fear of death is a vital pedagogical goal for

¹ Diogenes Laertius x 6 reports that Epictetus called Epicurus a *κιναιδολόγος*, a ‘preacher of effeminacy’ (Hicks) or more precisely a man who advocates assuming the female’s position in sex. Epictetus engages with the views of Epicurus and Epicureans at *Disc.* i 20.17-19, i 23, ii 20.6-20, ii 22.21, ii 23.20-22, iii 7, iii 24.37-39, and Oldfather frag. 14.

² I refer to a Stoic with the male pronoun only because Epictetus does, since evidently all his pupils were male. His arguments about death apply equally to females.

³ Englert 1994, 67 notes that ‘both schools thought that human beings misunderstood and feared death, and taught that their systems, if properly understood and practiced, enabled human beings to conquer the fear of death’.

him. I argue that Epictetus aims to reach this goal by endorsing these eight assertions: (a) the cosmic perspective on death is essential for understanding why death is an indifferent; (b) a person can be justified in deciding not to take steps that increase the likelihood he will survive; (c) a person can be justified in deciding to exit life; (d) the justification of such life or death decisions is autonomous; (e) the identity of a human being is a union of a particular body with a particular soul, neither of which survives death; (f) knowledge that we mortals can opt for death is comforting; (g) understanding assertions (a) through (f) frees us to pursue the virtuous life fearlessly, whereas (h) the false belief that death is bad grounds the fear of death, which, as the epitome of all human evils, cripples our ability to live according to virtue.

Previous scholars who have discussed the Stoic doctrine of suicide,⁴ and specifically Epictetus' remarks on death, have not recognized that these eight assertions together constitute a single, coherent, and encompassing case against fearing death.⁵ Rist 1969, 252 believes that Epictetus usually subscribes to a heteronomous justification of suicide and also sometimes forgets this view when, at i 2.25ff., he justifies exiting life for reasons of pride. I argue against both of these views and contend that Epictetus' rationale of exiting life is sophisticated and consistent.

Sandbach 1989, 51 observes that with the phrase 'The door stands open' at *Disc.* ii 1.19 Epictetus clearly intends suicide. He interprets i 9.12-16 to mean that it is one's duty to bear the pains God sends, and that one knows that God is sounding the recall only if one is deprived of life's necessities. Yet Sandbach's comments are far too brief to shed much light on Epictetus' sophisticated views on exiting life.

Seidler 1983, 433n13 canvasses a broader range of Epictetus' texts on suicide than does Rist and does not run afoul of the heteronomous view. He notes that Epictetus frequently employs the language of God calling us to exit from life, but sensibly argues that 'the appeal to God solves nothing at all, for our reason still has to discern or decide by reference to nature when and how God is "calling"'.

⁴ The Stoics' doctrine of suicide is discussed by Bonhöffer 1996, 239-244; Rist 1969, 233-255; Sandbach 1989, 48-52; Seidler 1983; Griffin 1976, 367-388; Griffin 1986; Droge 1988; Cooper 1989, 24-29; Englert 1994; and Nussbaum 1994. I endorse defining suicide as 'a person's death both intended by him and brought about by some action of his own that was aimed, at least proximately, at bringing it about' (Cooper 1989, 10). Cooper explicates Cicero's statement of the Stoic view on departing and not departing from life at *De finibus* iii 60-61 and does not discuss Epictetus' views. Englert 1994, 76 holds that Seneca is our single best source on the nature of the debate among Roman thinkers about the philosophical justifications of suicide, and so concentrates on Seneca rather than Epictetus. Nussbaum 1994, 109 argues that 'In the very act of deciding for suicide, the Stoic has become as deeply implicated in the world and its evils as the angry person', but her argument rests on her interpretation of texts in Seneca's *De ira*. She discusses none of Epictetus' texts about departing from life.

⁵ Epictetus' views on death in *Discourses* i are treated well by Dobbin 1998, but his comments on suicide are comparatively brief, scattered, and add little to earlier discussions. Bonhöffer 1996, 50-67 treats Epictetus' views on 'voluntary death', and below I take issue with several points in his account while advancing the discussion of Long 2002 on Epictetus on death and suicide.

For this reason Seidler 1983, 432 concludes that the Stoics' position 'comes down to an individual making his own decision to leave life whenever he sees fit'. He soundly notes that 'Stoic metaphysical views about the integral relation of human and cosmic reason, about our being parts of God and nature' gave their stance on exiting life all the support it needed. Nevertheless, Seidler misunderstands Epictetus' story about the athlete at *Disc. i 2.25-26*; he describes Epictetus' approval of 'how the Olympic victor decided upon suicide after losing his genitals in an accident' (Seidler 1983, 434). Seidler misses entirely the key factor of *prosōpon* in both the case of the Olympic wrestler refusing to let his genitals be amputated and the case of Epictetus refusing to sacrifice his beard—the badge of his chosen profession and self-identity as a philosopher.

Unlike earlier accounts, I differentiate five kinds of fear of death to frame the discussion, reconstruct and emphasize Epictetus' cosmic perspective on death, explicate his mind-body physicalism, and offer a fuller account of the role of *prosōpon* in life-or-death decisions. By integrating and engaging with earlier discussions, and developing Seidler's point about Stoic metaphysics, I provide a more complete picture that situates Epictetus' criticism of the pathology of fearing death and his open door policy within his Stoic physics, thereby contributing an original discussion of this imperial Stoic's case against fearing death.

Five fears regarding death need to be distinguished: (1) the fear of being dead, or not existing; (2) the fear that one will die or apprehension about being mortal; (3) the fear of dying prematurely, that is, before one has completed one's goal(s) in life; (4) the fear of the process of dying, of how one dies; and (5) the fear of the death of others, especially the death of loved ones.⁶ Discussion of Epictetus' analyses of these five fears will frame my study.

I. What it is to be dead

What does Epictetus think about the fear of being dead? He holds that death is nothing other than the body separating from the soul (ii 1.17; iii 22.33).⁷ Epictetus denies the possibility of an afterlife of a disembodied consciousness. On this point he and the other Stoics agree with the Epicureans. Epictetus emphasizes that this separation of soul and body must be understood as a *change*, not annihilation. Personal consciousness ends, and with it the identity of the person. But the physical material that constituted the person as a psychosomatic whole is recycled back into those elements from which it came (iv 7.15). As such, the death of a human being is as natural and as ordinary as any other process of transformation of an organic body. Epictetus observes that the harvesting of ears of grain, the falling of leaves, fresh figs becoming dry figs, and grapes turning into raisins are all changes from prior states into something else. They are not cases of destruction *simpliciter*, but rather instances, and evidence, of a certain ordered

⁶ See Warren 2004, to whose fourfold analysis of types of fears of death I add fear of the death of others.

⁷ Parenthetical references are to Arrian's *Discourses* of Epictetus or the *Encheiridion*.

management and government (iii 24.91-92). Similarly, Epictetus contends that death is a change of that which is now, *not* into what is not, but into what is not *now* (iii 24.93).⁸ The person who dies will exist no more, but something else will come to be in his place. Epictetus says that this new thing is something that the cosmos then *needs*. He reminds us that we each came into existence not when *we* wanted, but when the cosmos had need of us (iii 24.94).

How does Epictetus intend this argument to dispel the fear of being dead? By observing that both the cause and the time of our coming into being were not up to us but determined by the cosmos, he directs his students' attention to the time prior to their existence and the cosmic perspective. Just as one's body is separate from one's soul in death, so too the material elements constituting our body existed apart from our soul (ii 1.17). Epictetus tries to console his students about their deaths by emphasizing that death is as inevitable, as predictable, and as ordinary as the cycle of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth throughout nature.⁹ Being dead, and the transformation of the material body and the material soul that once together constituted a living human being, are as much a part of a thoroughly regular cosmic plan as being born.

II. Fear of mortality

Though we do not fear our prenatal non-existence, once we do exist, dying, ceasing to be, seems to be a real loss. If fear of one's own mortality is understood as fear of the inevitability of this loss, why is such a fear foolish? Epictetus contends that souls and bodies must separate so that the revolution (*περίδοξος*) of the cosmos (cf. LS 1987, ii 275) may be accomplished, and the cosmos has need of things that are now coming to be, things that will be, and things that have been (ii 1.18). Cosmic periodicity necessitates the continuity of the birth/death cycle and precludes birth without death. Since every living thing is mortal and all must die for the cosmic cycle to proceed, the mortality of human beings is no different from the cosmic perspective than the mortality of mayflies. Fear of one's own mortality reveals a kind of psychological solipsism rooted in ignorance of the shared vitality and mortality of all organic constituents of the world. Life is no less of a potential benefit, as a preferred indifferent, for being temporary. Epictetus reminds his students that they are mortal human beings living amidst innumerable other mortal plants, animals, and human beings. None of these cosmic tenants are immortal residents (cf. ii 6.27). The idea seems to be that the death of any mortal being can be no surprise to us, and so cannot be upsetting to anyone who understands and accepts how nature works.

Apprehension about one's mortality may arise from a desire to live forever. But to wish to live forever is to wish to be a different kind of being than one is, to

⁸ This may suggest rejection of the Epicurean claim that death is nothing to us, unless 'nothing to us' can be squared with 'nothing for the moment, but something else later on'.

⁹ O'Keefe 2003 argues that the Epicurean Cycle of Life argument in *De rerum natura* is not a Stoic argument but rather a supplement to the more familiar Epicurean arguments against the fear of death.

desire not to be a human being, and so to desire that the cosmos not be as it is. Such desires are impossible to satisfy, contrary to nature, and perverse, according to Epictetus.¹⁰ The recycling of material elements in the cosmos as a *whole* is not worrisome. So too, he reasons, the recycling, after death, of the material elements of an *individual* within the cosmos is no tragedy (iv 7.15) and so no more worrisome.

To fear being mortal, he thinks, is either to be confused about how the cosmos operates or to understand that the cosmos needs its tenants to be mortal but to believe that this cosmic need, at least in one's own case, is bad. Epictetus tries to debunk this erroneous, resentful judgment by invoking an agricultural example. Stalks of wheat grow in order to ripen, and ripen in order to be reaped. They do not come to be as things apart (ἀπόλυτοι γίνονται)—they are embedded in the fabric of the cosmos (ii 6.11). Oldfather's translation that the heads of grain 'do not grow for themselves alone' suggests the teleological idea that the grain is a crop for us.¹¹ The analogy Epictetus implicitly makes is that just as human beings sow, tend, harvest, and consume grain in an agricultural cycle, the cosmos similarly gives birth to, rears, harvests, and consumes us in nature's all encompassing cycle.

Moreover, Epictetus argues that if stalks of wheat were sensate, it would be silly for them to pray never to be harvested. Hence, just as it would be a curse for stalks of wheat never to be harvested at all, so too it would be a curse for human beings never to die (ii 6.11-13). By means of this analogical lesson Epictetus tries to teach his students not to offer up a silly prayer never to die. Such a prayer is silly because it amounts to a wish to exist eternally outside the cosmos. He urges his pupils to internalize the cosmic perspective on death so that they can think about their future deaths as necessary, routine, utterly benign processes in agreement with the rhythms of nature. Apprehension about one's own mortality rests on the failure to accept that how the cosmos works is reasonable and appropriate. Consequently, Epictetus holds that (a) the cosmic perspective on death is essential for understanding why death is an indifferent. I will argue in section 7 that Epictetus welcomes human mortality as a potential blessing, since it provides the hinges, so to speak, of his open door policy.

III. Fear of the death of others

Now since we realize that other people, including our loved ones, are as mortal as we are, it is just as foolish to wish that they could live on indefinitely, since that would require them to be not human beings, but immortal, supernatural beings that exist outside the body of the cosmos, and that is not up to us (see *Ench.* 14). Wisdom about the way the world works reveals that loving others for

¹⁰ 'I cannot escape death; but can't I escape the fear of it, and must I die lamenting and trembling? For the origin of suffering (γένεσις πάθους) is wanting what doesn't happen' (i 27.9-10). Translations of Epictetus are mine unless otherwise indicated, though I have consulted Oldfather 1925, 1928, Hard 1995, Dobbin 1998 and 2008, and Long 2002.

¹¹ Oldfather 1925, 249. In i 6 Epictetus seems to affirm such anthropocentrism.

who they are requires that we love them also for *what* they are, which in turn requires that we accept both their mortality and our own.¹² But perhaps when we fear the death of others what bothers us is not that they will not live forever, but that they will not survive *us*. This worry may apply especially to one's children. If one's child were to fall seriously ill or suffer a life-threatening injury, why would it be foolish to fear the child's death?

Another reason to fear the death of a loved one could arise from the belief that the death of a particular individual, a spouse, for example, is the permanent loss of an irreplaceable person whose importance in one's life is profound and unique. Here again one might wish not that one's spouse be immortal, but that he or she live a long, healthy life at least as long as one's own, and worry that this wish might go unfulfilled.

The mistake underlying these kinds of wishes, according to Epictetus, is to suppose that any human being—or nonhuman animal, such as a *κυνάριον* or *ἰππάριον* (iv 1.111)—in one's life is one's own enduring possession or belonging.¹³ Rather, all persons are effectively temporary loans from the cosmos (Zeus). The wise Stoic celebrates others as transient gifts, not as lasting entitlements.

Never say about anything, 'I have lost it'; but rather 'I have given it back.' Is your child dead? It is given back. Is your wife dead? She is given back... And does it matter to you through what means the giver demanded it back? For so long as he gives it to you, take care of it, but as something that is not your own, as travelers treat an inn. (*Ench.* 11)

Caring for, and caring about, loved ones are entirely appropriate for the Stoic (see Stephens 1996). But when they enter one's life, what happens to them, and when they depart from one's life, are all circumstances ultimately beyond one's control. So, the Stoic loves them as precious, fragile, temporary gifts whose continued presence is utterly contingent.

IV. Can a Stoic die prematurely?

Epictetus does not directly address the fear of dying prematurely, but his views about this fear can be inferred.¹⁴ Given that one ought not to take a loved one's

¹² *Ench.* 3: 'When you kiss your child or your wife, say to yourself, "I'm kissing a human being." Then you won't be distraught when they die.'

¹³ Another possible fear could be that my surviving family members or friends might suffer from my absence and my inability to help and support them after I die. I imagine that the Epictetan advice to offer my family members and friends, assuming they wish to be happy, that is, to be Stoics, would be to regard my existence in their lives as a temporary gift to enjoy only as long as I live, and to remember this when I die so as not to grieve. Their grief would result from the false belief that my death is bad or at least bad for them.

¹⁴ Oldfather frag. 24 begins: 'If a man dies young, he blames the gods' but then breaks off without completing Epictetus' thought about such a premature death. For conjectures suggested by Cobet and Schweighäuser to fill the lacuna, see Oldfather 1928, 468. Nowhere in the extant *Discourses* or *Encheiridion* does Epictetus hint that it is ever appropriate to blame the gods for anything.

life for granted and that one ought to conceive of a human life as a traveler thinks of his stay at an inn, it seems safe to surmise that Epictetus would reject the judgment that unintentional departure from the inn of life could ever be premature. No one is entitled to a life span of any particular length. Reason justifies the belief *that* one will die, not *when*.

Yet Epictetus explicitly addresses the opposite tendency to *desire* premature death. He endorses his teacher Musonius Rufus' criticism of Thrasea's announced preference to be killed today rather than banished tomorrow (i 1.26-27). Indeed, Epictetus wonders why his students have not become so weary maintaining their burdensome bodies (cf. Oldfather frag. 23) and so eager to reunite with god that he needs to dissuade them from seeking premature deaths. So he urges them to remain where god has stationed them for their tolerably short lives (i 9.11-17). Perhaps since Epictetus' students are adolescents, he believes that they are old enough to learn why they need not fear death even at their tender age.¹⁵ Perhaps Epictetus thinks that only an unjustified suicide, a death chosen contrary to nature, would be 'premature' in the sense of being unwarranted. But even in this sense, caution is required in assessing whether suicide is appropriate in one's particular situation, while fear of the possibility that death may occur sooner rather than later is unwarranted. After all, Epictetus insists that there is no point in fretting about a death caused by factors that are not up to us. Indeed, many are consoled by the thought that events are fated and things have to happen a certain way.

V. Ablation of genitals and pogonotomy

When experiencing genuine adversity and extended hardship, how is the Stoic to determine whether he is facing a serious challenge with which Zeus wants him to wrestle (cf. iii 20.9-15 and iv 9.14-15) or his circumstances are so extreme that continuing to live according to nature becomes impossible and Zeus is inviting him to exit life? Consider a case that Epictetus judges to be an unwarranted decision to die. Epictetus cites the example of his friend who got it into his head to starve himself to death 'for no reason at all' (ἐξ οὐδεμῶς αἰτίας, ii 15.4-12). Epictetus characterizes a suicide in these circumstances as 'removing from life our friend and companion, our fellow-citizen in both the greater city and the lesser' (ii 15.10; see Reydams-Schils 2005, 49). Removing himself from life in these circumstances destroys his social roles as a friend, companion, fellow-citizen of the local community, and fellow-citizen of the cosmic city. This destruction would be shameful, because no higher role, like that of embracing the life of a Cynic, for example, is preserved or achieved by it. As such, this case of self-killing is condemned as murder of an innocent person (ii 15.11). Epictetus says it

¹⁵ Bonhöffer 1996, 48 plausibly suggests that 'Epictetus permits those who are learning to exceed moderation toward the one direction in order to make them conscious, all the more drastically, of the error of the other direction (fearing suffering and death), true to his pedagogical principle that one must most zealously struggle against those false notions and inclinations of which the soul is especially prepossessed.'

was hard work to dissuade this fellow from his stubborn, ungrounded resolution to die (ii 15.13). For Epictetus, appeals to good reasons justify or undermine a decision to exit life.¹⁶

Just as choosing to die for no good reason is shameful, so too is choosing to live at too great a cost. Each is a vicious choice, and thus a real and self-imposed evil. What then is a case of deciding not to prolong one's life at too great a cost that Epictetus approves of? He relates the case of an athlete who was in danger of dying unless his genitals were amputated (i 2.25-26). The medical condition calling for this surgery is not identified, though a plausible guess is that the athlete suffered from a form of infection leading to suppuration, ulceration, or swelling.¹⁷ The athlete's brother, who was a philosopher, urged the athlete to have the amputation so that they could together return to the gymnasium. But the athlete refused to submit to the amputation, steeled himself and died.¹⁸ The athlete clearly did not fear dying or else he would surely have opted for the surgery to try to prolong his life.

Notice that the athlete was not seeking death. His decision was to forego surgery that conflicted with his particular *prosōpon*, knowing that doing so increased the risk of death. But he did not act to terminate his life straightaway. The disease in his body was the proximate cause of his death, so it would be wrong to describe the athlete's death as a suicide.¹⁹ It would also be wrong to liken his death to a case of what would be called passive, voluntary euthanasia in contemporary medical parlance. This is because although the athlete's decision to decline the ablation was voluntary, Epictetus does not mention that the athlete received any assistance from a physician. Thus, it seems likely that the athlete's ensuing death was neither painless nor easy.

Epictetus commends the athlete's decision, interestingly likening the athlete's conduct to that of the senator Helvidius Priscus, who insisted on speaking his mind despite Vespasian's threat to put him to death if he did (i 2.19-21). Some evidence suggests that one reason that Epictetus approves of the judgment that amputation of the genitals is unacceptable is because such surgical unsexing violates the integrity of one's anatomical endowment. In this sense, such radical surgery can reasonably be judged to be contrary to nature. However, the discourse in which this case occurs concerns how the concepts of rational and irra-

¹⁶ Bonhöffer 1996 correctly notes that Epictetus thinks a suicide 'is immoral when it is reckless, without rational consideration of all reasons for and against, when it results from passion, softness or cowardice' (61) or is the result of thoughtlessness, obstinacy, a vain thirst for glory, or disregard of one's social duties (66).

¹⁷ Venereal syphilis can be excluded, and while the non-venereal forms of syphilis and gonorrhea are possible, I have found no source that mentions surgery as the recommended treatment for these diseases. I thank Professor Vivian Nutton for these insights.

¹⁸ This is the translation of Dobbin 1998, 7. Oldfather 1925, 21 has the more literal 'hardened his heart and died'. Hard 1995, 10 has 'awaited his death with courage'. The Greek reads οὐχ ὑπέμεινεν, ἀλλ' ἐγκατεθήσας ἀπέθανεν.

¹⁹ As does Bonhöffer 1996, 58, and given the definition of 'suicide' of Cooper 1989, 10; see n4 above.

tional, good and bad, and advantageous and disadvantageous mean different things to different people (i 2.5), and how a few individuals distinguish themselves as conspicuous moral exemplars (i 2.22). So, when Epictetus reports that someone asked how it was that the athlete did as he did, whether as an athlete or as a philosopher, Epictetus replies that he did so as a man (ὡς ἄνθρωπος). Had Epictetus said no more than this, then he may have understood the desire for bodily integrity to have provided sufficient warrant for the athlete's decision. But the athlete was no ordinary man. Epictetus remarks that he was 'a man who had contended and been proclaimed a victor at Olympia, and who was at home in such a place, and not just someone rubbed down at Bato's wrestling school' (i 2.26). This characterization of the kind of man the athlete was emphasizes his grit, his determination to win tough contests, and his experience competing in the Olympic Games. Such a man is contrasted with those so-called 'athletes' who get oily massages in training schools while being unaccustomed to swallowing sand in the arena (see iii 22.52 and iv 4.12 for language of this kind). Epictetus thus views the decision of the athlete to risk imminent death as a manifestation of his *prosōpon*, of the kind of person he is.²⁰ It seems that the *prosōpon* of the Olympic wrestler not only guided his decision to decline the surgery, but it also served to provide him equanimity about the fact that this decision would almost certainly hasten his death. Epictetus respects the man's choice to refuse amputation and thereby risk a hastened death, because he adds the biting remark that 'another would even have had his neck cut off, if he could have lived without his neck' (i 2.27). These instances of cutting off parts of one's body in a desperate attempt to prolong one's life well illustrate the concepts of advantageous and disadvantageous, good and bad, meaning different things to different people. The Olympic athlete was the kind of man who thought it advantageous to compete against his ailment and risk defeat by death rather than to compromise his bodily integrity through castration. He chose to keep his body whole instead of becoming a eunuch.²¹ Zeus (fate) chose to make his disease lethal. Another kind of person refuses to wrestle at all, because of the pain involved in the sport. Still another kind of person wrestles a bit, but desires oily massages most of all and is

²⁰ I borrow the gloss of *prosōpon* as 'the kind of person one is' from Frede 2007. Bonhöffer construes the surgery as an offense to the athlete's 'personal honor'. Griffin 1976, 381 is on the right track to note that the athlete's character (πρόσωπον) 'is to be a man as nature designed him and, being an athlete, a particularly good physical specimen of one', but it is his agonistic character that Epictetus is at pains to emphasize. Dobbin 1998, 85 thinks that the athlete's first *prosōpon* is human nature, and all his other roles are variations of that one and are subordinate to it: 'Respect for one's own identity gives contour to moral choice.' Compare Bonhöffer 1996, 58-59 and Johnson 2012, 141 on the athlete's case and the philosopher's beard case below (cf. Long 2002, 239-240).

²¹ Guyot 2013 notes that from the time of Domitian onwards there was a ban on castration in the Roman empire. Because castration permanently changed their appearance and voice, eunuchs were stigmatized for life and were a marginalized group in society. They were viewed as 'effeminate' men who could not meet the social norm of differentiation between the gender roles. They were both constantly rejected, and occasionally desired as catamites, by the likes of Alexander the Great, Nero, and Domitian, because of their androgynous characteristics.

unwilling to undergo the extensive, onerous training and sacrifice required to compete in the Olympic Games.

We might wonder, however, if he could overcome being embarrassed by his physical disfigurement wrestling naked in the ring, and if he was not planning to procreate, why would the athlete need his genitals? Galen provides insight on this question. If the testicles were only for the purpose of procreation, then might not Olympic competitors be able to dedicate themselves more fully to their athletic contests if their testicles were removed? Castrated athletes could demonstrate superior performance, one might suppose, since their minds would not be distracted by family affairs. Galen rejects this view and observes that eunuchs do not perform well in these games, because they lose not only their ability to impregnate but also everything else necessary to achieve victory. For this reason Galen concludes that this kind of excision is unsafe, because it severs, together with the testicles, the power from the entire body (see Diamandopoulos *et al.* 2005, 118 citing Galen, *De semine libri ii*). Presumably it was known by many who lived a generation or two before Galen that eunuchs competed poorly in the Olympic Games. If so, then such knowledge could have informed the deliberation of Epictetus' athlete.

His approbation of the Olympic athlete who preferred to wrestle against a life threatening disease than to allow his genitals to be ablated establishes that, for Epictetus, (b) a person can be justified in deciding not to take steps that increase the likelihood he will survive. Preservation of one's *prosōpon* can trump prolongation of life by means of, for example, radical surgery. In this case, Epictetus endorses the judgment of the Olympic athlete that, for him, dying as an athlete is better than living as a forcibly-retired athlete. This claim connects neatly with sections 2 and 3 where it was shown that the wish for immortality is the irrational wish to be something other than what we are. Here the other side of the coin is exhibited by showing how the athlete's *prosōpon* is what makes him what he is. In turn, we can see that this offers further argument against fearing one's own death since there are conditions under which we value being ourselves and dying above living on as someone else.

Moreover, Epictetus also holds that there are conditions under which we value being ourselves in the sense of being true to certain chosen features of our self-identity above living as someone else by abandoning those chosen features. This is illustrated in the fascinating case of Epictetus' beard, which immediately follows his remarks about the athlete's decision. Epictetus replies in this way to being told to shave off his beard:²² 'If I am a philosopher, I will not shave it off.' His interlocutor replies, 'But I will cut off your neck', to which Epictetus responds, 'If that will do you any good, do it' (i 2.29). This may well strike a modern sensibility as a ludicrous reply. Yet Epictetus sees the beard not only as the hallmark of the philosopher (ii 23.21; iii 1.24; iv 8.12; iv 8.15), but also as a

²² Apparently by a different interlocutor than the one who had asked about the athlete's decision *qua* athlete or *qua* philosopher. See Wehner 2000 for the intricacies of Epictetus' use of interlocutors.

salient differentiation of the sexes (i 16.9-14).²³ To be stripped of one's beard is thus both to be stripped of the badge of one's identity as a philosopher (see Zanker 1995) and to be symbolically emasculated. Consequently, a pogonotomy is a more subtle assault upon one's masculine identity than castration.

Scholars have been much exercised by precisely how to construe this passage about Epictetus' beard. Reydamas-Schils 2005, 46 thinks that the significance of the beard for the philosopher reduces simply to its sign of masculinity: 'The beard may not make the philosopher—nor may any other trappings, for that matter (as in 3.22, 4.8)—but insofar as he is a man, the philosopher does not do without it.' The first text she cites, iii 22, is a discussion of the calling of the Cynic, and does not bear on the significance of the beard as the public badge of the Stoic philosopher. In iv 8.12-16 Epictetus does remark that those who wear a rough cloak, let their beards grow, and claim to be philosophers are not, thereby, what they claim.²⁴ But Epictetus is explaining that these men fail to live up to the profession of philosophy because they do not practice the art despite having assumed the guise. This, however, does not mean that the beard is superfluous to the public identity of the philosopher. Epictetus certainly does not believe that a beard is what enables one to philosophize, because he insists that the nature of the philosopher's principles do *not* have to do with how to grow a long beard or a thick head of hair (iv 8.12). The relevant principle at work for Epictetus in this case is that he will not be coerced into doing *anything* against his will. He refuses to be coerced into shaving his beard because his beard is not indifferent to *his* self-image as a philosopher and Stoic teacher. Reydamas-Schils misses this point in holding that qua *man* the philosopher keeps his beard. Yet not all self-proclaimed philosophers who are bearded would, like Epictetus, risk death by refusing a pogonotomy (Johnson 2012, 141n also seems not fully to grasp this point).

Rist 1969, 251, 252 thinks Epictetus believes that 'suicide must be at god's command' and so would seem to hold the view that the justification of suicide is heteronomous, yet he adds that Epictetus seems to *forget* this view when he invokes his open door policy at iv 10.27. While he concurs in general with Bonhöffer 1996, 56 that Epictetus regarded suicide as 'permissible in cases of physical suffering only when that suffering is at its most extreme', Rist 1969, 252 is perplexed by Epictetus' account of the athlete needing surgical removal of his genitals in order to recover from a disease (i 2.25 ff.). Epictetus' approval of the athlete's refusal of surgery and subsequent death Rist interprets as a departure from the Old Stoa's doctrine of suicide and 'a perversion of the older and commonplace view that a man may die for his principles' (Rist 1969, 252). Rist's heteronomous interpretation of Epictetus' view of exiting life stumbles on i 2.25ff. when he tries to reconcile the explanatory force of the athlete's *πρόσωπον* in the athlete's refusing genital amputation with Epictetus preferring to be beheaded

²³ Bonhöffer 1996, 59 thinks that Epictetus sees the pogonotomy 'as a violation of modesty and manly honor, the symbol of a womanish mentality' and thus 'almost as a reversal of the divine order, as a crime'. My interpretation of the significance of his beard to Epictetus is rather different.

²⁴ Cf. iv 8.6 and 12 where he insists that the *telos* of the philosopher is not to wear a rough cloak.

than shaved.

The term πρόσωπον here seems to mean something like a mask of office, which is presented to the public. Part of Epictetus' own mask as a philosopher is his beard. If someone says 'Shave it off or I will kill you', he prefers to die. Doubtless this attitude arises from the view that life and death are matters of indifference; but why should Epictetus imagine that the command to shave off his beard is god's signal that it is time to die? (Rist 1969, 252)

Rist's adherence to the heteronomous view is what confuses him here. We can indeed doubt that Epictetus' attitude of preferring death to pogonotomy arises from the view that life and death are matters of indifference since that would fail to explain why keeping his beard is *not* a matter of indifference to him and that he would rather die than remove it, instead of being indifferent to dying and indifferent to becoming beardless.

Rist's puzzlement results from mistaking god's signal to retreat as what provokes and motivates the decision to die at a particular time with the individual's own understanding of his πρόσωπον, the roles constitutive of one's self-identity, and what his beard means to a philosopher. After all, the command to Epictetus to shave off his beard is issued by a human bully and not god, and so no divine signal figures into Epictetus' refusal to obey and his willingness to face death instead. Rist 1969, 252 answers his own question thus: 'It seems again to be a matter of pride. The Stoic can never be humble; that would be an affront to his dignity as a free man.' Rist 1969, 252-253 also claims that the association of suicide with pride is 'almost explicit in Epictetus'. But it is not *pride* that motivates Epictetus and a pogonotomy is not an affront to the dignity of *every* free man. Griffin 1976, 381-382 corrects Rist on this point. The decision to submit to coercion by removing one's beard or to risk death and defy such coercion will depend entirely on the kind of person one is, on one's individual πρόσωπον. Pride and discerning god's signal do not enter into a Stoic's decision-making when he is threatened by a bully.

In her earlier study, Griffin 1976, 381 remarks that 'the philosopher refuses to part with his beard because it is a part of the role that he has chosen and he must show *constantia* in sticking with it' and observes that the fourth *persona* Cicero reports in *Off.* i. 115 is the profession we have chosen. Here Griffin fails to see that not all who call themselves philosophers possess *constantia*. Rather, some would abandon their chosen profession and the scruples they profess when threatened. In her later study, Griffin 1986, 196 interprets the story of the Olympic athlete and Epictetus' beard as manifesting Panaetius' doctrine of *decorum*, the view that 'the inborn characteristics of an individual, his economic and social position, and his chosen role in life might make an act appropriate for him, but inappropriate for another'.

Englert 1994, 73 essentially follows Griffin, stating that 'Cicero and Epictetus apparently extended the doctrine of the four *personae* and argued that commit-

ting suicide or facing certain death is appropriate in order to maintain one's commitment to one's *personae*'. I concur with his comment that the cases of the athlete's refusal of amputation and Epictetus' beard 'show that commitment to one's *personae* could be so strong as to justify or even require death in order to act consistently with them'. At issue is the precise construal of *prosōpon*. Englert sees it as a bundle of roles, a *plurality* of *personae*: 'the non-sage on this account [will] sometimes suffer punishment, perhaps even death, rather than commit any action which is not "fitting," that is, which is consistent with the manner in which one has reconciled one's other roles with the first role, our common human nature'. If this reconciliation of all one's many roles involves achieving an integrated conception of the kind of person one is, then my interpretation is close to Englert's. Epictetus does not argue that *all* athletes must risk death by refusing potentially life-saving surgery, but he is commending *that* particular Olympic athlete for making such a decision based on the value he places on preserving his *prosōpon*, the kind of man he is. In this discourse (i 2) Epictetus describes as similarly outstanding the conduct of Agrippinus (12-18), Senator Helvidius Priscus (19-21), and the Olympic athlete. His interlocutor wonders what good Priscus did, in defying Vespasian's threats, as a single individual. Epictetus replies that he serves the same purpose as the purple stripe in the hem of the white *toga praetexta*, he is a 'fine example' (*καλὸν παράδειγμα*) for others. Epictetus is urging his students to think about what kind of person they take themselves to be and whether they aspire to be like the few *paradeigmata* or are content to be like the many. He is not prescribing for them that they all be one way or the other. He is prodding them thoughtfully to craft, and be consistently mindful of, their own chosen identities.

I contend that at i 2.29 Epictetus seems to mean that if he is real philosopher, and not merely one who professes to philosophize, he will not be coerced into denying the outward hallmark of the philosopher.²⁵ Despite the 'if', Epictetus seems to imply that he wishes to be the kind of person who cannot be coerced into denying his chosen identity. He does not want to be the kind of man who can be bullied into submitting to a pogonotomy.²⁶ He believes that dying as a philosopher with his philosopher's badge of a beard intact would be better than living as a forcibly-retired philosopher, as it were, as a man who, to all appearances, renounced his profession to save his hide. Epictetus' remark suggests that he would rather die preserving the outward hallmark of a vital feature of his identity than cower under the threat of death and deface himself to live on as someone

²⁵ Long 2002, 122 draws this helpful distinction. However, he thinks Epictetus is being ironic and self-deprecating here, and so believes Epictetus disclaims being a Philosopher with a capital letter for fear of being mistaken for a Favorinus or a Dio Chrysostom, who display themselves as erudite sophists. Long sees Epictetus as humbly seeking to be the Socrates of the Second Sophistic. Yet since Socrates is the paragon of philosophy for Epictetus, I see Epictetus' aspiration to model Socrates to be decidedly ambitious. Perhaps the *ὅν* subtly conveys both Epictetus' ambition and his humble recognition that he has a long way to go to realize that ambition.

²⁶ Apropos here is the observation of Englert 1994, 72n that Epictetus explains why someone who is truly virtuous cannot be made to do anything against his will at iv 1.68-90.

else, as someone who looks like a coward, not a philosopher.

VI. All roads are equal

What about the fear of the process of dying? Most non-Stoics believe that a good death is one in which a person who has enjoyed a full life gently and unknowingly expires without trauma, pain, or distress. For an elderly person to die peacefully in her sleep is often said by non-Stoics to be a 'good way to go'. In contrast, to be murdered or executed, or to die in a violent, grisly accident, or by means of a painful or incapacitating disease, are often claimed by non-Stoics to be particularly 'bad deaths'. So, does it not matter *how* one dies? Is it not reasonable to fear a 'bad death' even if one has been convinced by Stoic arguments that *some* ways of dying are not bad?

Epictetus maintains that the non-intended cause of one's death is indifferent. If one is not choosing to die, then the manner of one's death is indifferent because it results from neither a vicious nor a virtuous choice. He presents the following argument by analogy (in ii 5.13-14) reasoning from part to whole.

1. Epictetus is not eternal; he is a man.
2. A man is a part of the whole.
3. An hour is a part of the day.
4. An hour comes and must pass away.
5. Epictetus is related to the (whole) world as an hour is related to the day.
6. Hence, Epictetus (comes and) must also pass away.
7. Therefore, it makes no difference how Epictetus passes away, whether by drowning or by a fever or however.

Epictetus confesses having thalassophobia: 'Whenever I go to sea, as soon as I gaze down into the depths or look at the waters around me and see no land, I am beside myself, and imagine that if I am wrecked I must swallow all that sea; nor does it once enter my head that three pints are enough' (ii 16.22). Similarly, in an earthquake he imagines that the city is going to crash down on him, but realizes that one little stone is enough to knock his brains out (ii 16.23). The idea seems to be that the actual moment of dying may be painful, but it will likely be quick. What causes the alarm is not the sea or the earthquake but the judgment that one will be permanently separated from one's companions, familiar places, and social relations coupled with the false judgment that such separation is evil. To the contrary, Epictetus argues that it does not matter whether one dies from an accident (a fever, a lethal blow to the head from a tile falling from a roof, drowning, starvation, or an earthquake), whether one is killed through human agency (a soldier's weapon, a tyrant's command, a highwayman), or even whether one is frightened to death by a mouse.²⁷ Since death is the same result of all these

²⁷ Epictetus ascribes such a death to Crinus, whom Oldfather 1928, 26-27 believes was 'a Stoic philosopher of no great prominence, who must be supposed to have died from an apoplectic stroke occasioned by fright at a mouse falling down from the wall'.

causes, none is harder than any other.

where is the hardship when something that was born is destroyed? The instrument of destruction is either a sword, or a wheel, or the sea, or a tile, or a tyrant. And what does it matter to you by what way you descend to Hades? All roads are equal. But, if you want to hear the truth, the one that a tyrant sends you along is shorter. No tyrant ever took six months to cut someone's throat, but a fatal fever often lasts a year. All these things are meaningless noise and the boasting of empty names.
(ii 6.17-19)

'All roads to death are equal' means that they are all equally indifferent because they all lead to the same destination. The 'descent to Hades' mentioned in this passage is simply a conventional way of referring to death, and so merely Epictetus' concession to popular religious usage. He follows Stoic orthodoxy in rejecting the possibility of an afterlife.²⁸ Epictetus defuses the threatening sounding names—decapitation by a sword, being broken on a wheel, etc.—by recasting them as inarticulate noise (ψόφος), mere static hiss from the mouths of non-Stoics who do not understand death. They boast about the horrors of various gruesome executions a tyrant could command, but this attempt to intimidate, this boasting (κόμπος), is vacuous clamor, empty words (κενῶν ὀνομάτων). Indeed, a quick execution is a shorter road to death than the protracted, febrile, fatal disease. While the fatal fever may well be a longer road, Epictetus does not suppose that it is more painful, more difficult to bear, or more to be feared. The judgment of which manner of death is preferred he leaves up to his students to make for themselves. Epictetus insists that it is indifferent whether the cause of one's death is a fever, a falling tile, a soldier's weapon (iv 7.27), starvation (iii 26.1-4), exile (ii 15.4-13; iii 24.101), a highwayman, a tyrant (iii 24.27-28; cf. i 9.12-16), drowning (ii 5.12-14), an earthquake (ii 6.20), or even a mouse (iii 2.15).²⁹ Since all these causes of death equally result in the separation of the body and soul and so termination of personal identity, and that event is itself acceptable and nothing tragic, there is no good reason to fear any of them. Again, from the cosmic perspective, since the end result is separation of body and soul and recycling of somatic and psychic (pneumatic) materials, it does not matter how that separation is caused. All paths to death are equally commonplace, equally indifferent, from the Stoic perspective.³⁰

²⁸ The textual evidence (ii 5.12-13 and iv 7.27; ii 9.1-2, iii 1.25-26, iv 1.104; iv 1.105-110; i 27.7-9; ii 6.11-14; iii 24.94; iii 13.14-15) in support of this claim is presented in the discussion of Erler's position in section 8.

²⁹ Droge 1988, 272n cites ii 5.14 as an instance of Epictetus' concern with the problem of death in general and his insistence on its indifferent status. But in this text Epictetus asks rhetorically what difference it makes to him *how* he dies. It is the manner or cause of his death that makes no difference to his *mortality*. Droge thus mischaracterizes ii 5.14 as a text in which Epictetus insists that the *status* of death is indifferent.

³⁰ Newman 1989, 1506 notes that in ii 6.18-19 Epictetus adapted the commonplace maxim that 'all roads to Hades are equal' to the rhetoric of the *meditatio* by adding the paradox that the road of

VII. The open door policy

Epictetus thinks that children are sometimes wiser than adults. So, deft pedagogue that he is, he also upholds the behavior of children as a positive, courageous example for his adolescent pupils to emulate. This is his technique in propounding his open door policy. He invokes this policy to rebuff the ‘woe is me’ complaint. He reminds his students that if they judge their current situations to be insufferable hardships, then death offers them an alternative.

Remember that the door is open (ἡ θύρα ἤνοιχται). Don’t be more cowardly than children, but just as they say, when the game (τὸ πρᾶγμα) is no longer fun for them, ‘I won’t play any more’, you too, when things seem that way to you, say, ‘I won’t play any more’, and leave, but if you remain, don’t complain. (i 24.20)

Epictetus frequently uses this game-playing metaphor in the *Discourses* (i 25.7-8; ii 5.14-21; iv 7.19; iv 7.30-31; cf. iv 4.26). Here he tries to quiet those who gripe about how miserably the game of life is going for them with the reminder that if they genuinely believe that their lives are seriously, irremediably bad, all things considered, then they can simply opt out and exit life.³¹

If the game situation is only moderately bad and there is reason to believe it can or is likely to improve, then suicide in such a situation would seem unjustified. ‘Has someone made smoke in the house? If it is moderate, I’ll stay. If too much, I exit. For you must always remember and hold fast to this, that the door is open’ (i 25.18; cf. Seidler 1983, 435-437). ‘If suffering isn’t worth your while, the door is open. If it is worth your while, bear it. For the door must (δεῖ) be open for everything (πρὸς πάντα), and then we have no trouble (πρᾶγμα)’ (ii 1.19-20). By no ‘trouble’ (*pragma*), it seems clear from i 24.20 that Epictetus means no ‘game devoid of fun’, that is, no unendurable life.

Both of these last two enthymemes are constructive dilemmas (see Barnes 1997 on the role of logic in Epictetus’ teaching.

Either the smoke is moderate (the suffering is worth your while) or the smoke is immoderate (the suffering is not worth your while).

If the smoke is moderate (the suffering is worth your while), then you bear it.

If the smoke is immoderate (the suffering is not worth your while), then you exit life.

Hence, either you bear the smoke (the suffering) or you exit life.

The second enthymeme can be reconstructed thus.

getting one’s throat cut by a tyrant is far shorter than the road of the year-long fatal fever.

³¹ Cf. *Letter to Menoeceus* 127a: lines 1-3 where Epicurus criticizes Theognis’ proverb that it is good not to be born, but when born to pass through the gates of Hades as quickly as possible: ‘For if he really believes what he says, why doesn’t he leave life? For it is easy for him to do, if he has firmly decided on it’ (my translation).

Either you bear the smoke (the suffering) or you exit life.
 If you bear the smoke (the suffering), then you have no trouble.
 If you exit life, then you have no trouble.
 Therefore, (the door must [δέϊ] be open for everything and)
 you have no trouble.

I take it that the δέϊ indicates that Epictetus cannot imagine a situation in which our agency is suddenly so damaged, say, by an injury to the skull or spine, that we lose the ability to take our own life unassisted. In the event of this sort of trauma, I suspect that the Epictetan solution would be to ask for assisted euthanasia. Epictetus does not appear to entertain the possibility that one's speech could suddenly be lost due to injury or illness.

In extreme circumstances, when the smoke of life's troubles is too thick, and—crucially—if there is no reason to believe that one's dismal circumstances will improve, then Epictetus apparently concedes that one could be justified in judging that one would be better off dead. Examples of this might include facing inevitable starvation (see section 8) or being terminally ill (as when a fatal fever lasts a year [ii 6.19]) and suffering intolerable pain, when one's physical or mental capacities are irreversibly deteriorating.³² In such dire conditions, no purpose is served by taking the longer road to death. Therefore, the Stoic's rationale for suicide in these conditions is not the foolish judgment that stubborn pangs of hunger or the painful symptoms of one's disease are *evils to be escaped from immediately at any cost*, but the wise judgment that the conditions for the possibility of exercising one's agency in the performance of one's social roles, responsibilities, and activities expressive of the kind of person one is (one's *prosōpon*) are irretrievably slipping away.³³ This evaluation of one's life-or-death circumstances could warrant suicide as a viable, reasonable, final option.³⁴ Hence, on

³² DL vii 130 reports the Stoics adding as reasons for the wise man to exit life doing so for the sake of his country or his friends. Notice that Epictetus does not specify the details of a circumstance that could be judged as making too much smoke in the house, but leaves that judgment up to the individual.

³³ Englert 1994, 71-72 interprets *De finibus* iii 60 to mean that the Stoics argued that 'a person ought to consider suicide when faced with overwhelming situations like extreme poverty, intense pain, and chronic serious illness, not to escape the pain involved, which is an indifferent, not an evil, but because these conditions will prevent her or him from practicing virtue. If the opportunity for virtuous action remains, we should stay alive, if it does not, we should depart.' Yet greater clarity about what constitutes the opportunity for virtuous action could be sought.

³⁴ My account finds more help from Seidler 1983, 437-438: 'From their emphasis on freedom from external constraints, on the moral quality of continued existence rather than its length or any other morally neutral natural advantages, and on the privilege of selecting an appropriate moment and mode of departure according to personally interpreted and applied criteria of opportuneness and accordance with nature, we can see that suicide represented to the Stoics a proper means of insuring a distinctively human presence in the world.' The position that the Stoics interpreted freedom, rationality, and autonomy in operational terms, which implied that they could be lost at some points during one's life due to changes in various internal and external circumstances and that the 'Stoics argued that the act of suicide sometimes allows us a final exercise of our freedom before becoming no longer practically possible because of changes in life's circumstances' (Seidler 1983, 451) holds true for Epictetus, in my view.

my interpretation of his open door policy, Epictetus believes that (c) a person can be justified in deciding to exit life.

Performing one's natural and acquired roles and functions in life as husband, wife, brother, sister, son, daughter, teacher, student, government official, private citizen, friend, fellow traveler, or what have you is central to a human life for Epictetus (see Johnson 2012). But it is important to emphasize that Epictetus believes that the choice ultimately rests with the individual. Individuals are the final arbiters of which circumstances and bodily conditions they can tolerate when striving to fulfill their roles and live well and which they cannot.

Droge 1988, 272-273 offers a different view, according to which the justification of suicide is heteronomous (Rist 1969 also attributes the heteronomous view to a forgetful Epictetus; see section 5). Droge has Epictetus believing that 'an individual ought not to give up on life irrationally or for frivolous causes' and that Epictetus' 'reason for this is that the deity does not desire it. As in the case of Socrates, Epictetus maintains that god provides the sign indicating departure'. Droge cites i 9.16 and i 29.29 in support. These texts, however, are better understood in light of iii 24.101, a text that Droge construes to mean that 'simple adversity is usually not a sufficient ground for suicide'. On this view, the ultimate warrant for a Stoic's suicide derives heteronomously from a divine command, not from the person's autonomous choice. But the view that Zeus calls for the Stoic's death, independently of the person's own decision, sits poorly with Epictetus' consistent emphasis on autonomous judgments that harmonize with one's own *prosōpon*. Epictetus was too savvy an epistemologist to think that a human being, whether a philosopher, an athlete, or one of his pupils, could make reliable guesses about what would count as a signal to depart willed by Zeus, independent of one's own sober assessment of the livability of one's own circumstances. Attentive reading of iii 24.101 reveals that the belief that Zeus is signaling the retreat from life is *predicated* upon one's own autonomous judgment that one is, in fact, in a situation in which living in accord with nature is no longer possible and it is a good day to die, that is, it is time to die in accord with nature.

I think it doubtful that Epictetus believes that Zeus could judge that there is too much smoke in the house for its human occupant contrary to the occupant's own judgment. Rather, I take Epictetus to be emphasizing that the occupant must reach this evaluation on his own, based on what *he* takes to be good reasons. Could Zeus know, independent of the inhaler's own judgment about the limits of what he can endure, that a certain amount of smoke is too much for him to take? The textual evidence in Epictetus seems insufficient to permit a confident answer to this question. In any case, Frede 2011, 79-80 on the free will of the Stoic sage supports my interpretation rather than Droge's:

the wise person is solely motivated by his correct understanding of the good and his attraction to it. What he chooses or decides to do, because it is the best thing to do, is what God wills him to do. However, his action is not motivated by what God wills but by his recognition and understanding that this is

the best thing to happen in these circumstances. And, because God himself also sees that this is the best thing to happen in these circumstances, God wills it to happen. So the wise person's will and the divine will coincide. But it is not the case that what motivates a free action is that God wills it.

Frede notes that the sage is not omniscient and so is limited to conjecture when, for example, he might decide to look after his health even when it is the divine plan that he is about to die. 'But the wise person will recognize from the futility of his best efforts to restore his failing health that he is about to die' (Frede 2011, 80). The Stoic wise person still might not comprehend *why* it would be best for him to die soon, but he would count on the fact that there are good reasons why God wills him to die, even if he himself cannot clearly identify those reasons. This, Frede 2011, 80 argues, is the logic behind Epictetus' repeated insistence that our willing should accord with God's (Long, Frede's editor, cites i 17.28; ii 7.13; ii 16.16; i 17.22; and ii 19.24). This confluence of human will with divine will preserves the autonomy of the Stoic's deliberations about suicide and his ultimate decision about whether, when, and how to exit life.³⁵ Consequently, (d) the justification of such life-or-death decisions is autonomous.

What of the friend whom Epictetus believed had no good reason for deciding to starve himself to death (ii 15.4-12)? Did Epictetus disrespect his friend's autonomy by trying to dissuade, and eventually succeeding in dissuading, him from exiting life? On my interpretation, Epictetus pointed out to his benighted friend that he had no good reason for suicide. His friend had suffered no grievous accident and had contracted no debilitating disease that undermined his agency. He was, to the contrary, fully capable of performing all of his social, familial, and civic roles and pursuing a virtuous life. Consequently, the texts in question can all be read as consistent on my interpretation with Epictetus' thanatology.

The importance of a proper understanding of Epictetus' open door policy is worth emphasizing. He holds that we have no cause to fear death when we recognize the autonomous power of suicide. Since the door to life's exit is always open, there is never a reason to fear being trapped alive inside the smoky house: we are always free to choose to exit. Nor, as I will argue in the next section, does Epictetus believe that is there anything terrible outside the house.

VIII. Only kids fear bugbears

Epictetus says that Socrates did well to call death and all such things that non-Stoics commonly fear 'bugbears' (μορομύκεια).

For just as masks seem fearsome and terrible to children because of their inexperience, we are affected in a similar man-

³⁵ Englert 1994, 74 seems to agree when he writes that any of the three situations, obligations to others, gross imbalance of indifferents, and avoidance of doing or saying shameful or immoral things, 'could be viewed, in the proper circumstances as the divine call. It was the job of the person, using his or her reason, to figure out if the case facing him or her could be viewed as the proper time to commit suicide, in harmony with fate and the divine *logos* controlling the universe'.

ner by events for much the same reason as children are affected by bugbears. For what is a child? Ignorance. What is a child? Lack of instruction. For where a child has knowledge, he is no worse off than we are. What is death? A bugbear. Turn it around and see what it is. See, it does not bite. (ii 1.15-17)

Stoics have examined death and understand it, and so they fear it no more than adults who have examined Halloween monster masks and see that there is nothing scary behind them. Epictetus also calls hardship (πόνος) a bugbear and reminds his students that if they do not find having their bodies treated roughly to be worth their while, then the door is open (ii 1.19). Epictetus offers this reminder to comfort his pupils and encourage them to cope with life's challenges, not to urge them to rush to the exit.

Erler 2007, 99-100 argues that this reference to Socrates' warning in the *Phaedo* not to let the child within man be frightened by 'bugbears' like death shows how Epictetus tries to explain the way Socrates accepted something as terrifying as death as confidently and calmly as one would expect from a Stoic and for reasons a Stoic could accept. Erler 2007, 107 asserts that in the *Phaedo*, Plato presents Socrates as the prototype of a philosopher who is confident about death because Socrates is convinced that the soul is immortal. Indeed, he makes the stronger claim that *only* if Socrates can prove the immortality of the soul can it be shown that death is a bugbear which is not to be feared (Erler 2007, 105). 'For if one were afraid that the soul might perish when separated from the body there would be no good reason to be confident while facing death' (Erler 2007, 107).

This interpretation of Epictetus' understanding of Socrates' confidence regarding death requires scrutiny. First, Erler ignores Socrates' constructive dilemma at *Apology* 40c-41c. There Socrates argues that death is one of *two* things: Either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything or death is a relocation of the soul from here to another place. Socrates reasons that if death is a complete lack of perception, then it would be like a dreamless sleep, and so a pleasant advantage (see Rudebusch 1991 and Calef 1992). This is the reasoning that Epicurus modified in posing his 'death is nothing to us' argument. While it is true that Socrates argues that the second horn of the constructive dilemma yields an equally welcome consequence or 'extraordinary happiness'—philosophizing and doing the *elenchus* with the demi-god judges and heroes who reside there—Erler is silent about the confidence the Socrates of *Apology* 40c-d draws from the possibility that the soul perishes when the body dies. One could object that my interpretive dispute with Erler cannot be settled by appeal to any Platonic texts, so let us return to Epictetus' *Discourses*, the *Encheiridion*, and fragments.

Erler 2007, 109 interprets *Discourses* ii 1.17, where we read that 'The paltry body must be separated from the bit of spirit (τοῦ πνευματίου) either now or later, just as it existed apart from it before', as evidence that Epictetus embraced the arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo* and adapted Socrates' 'true defense' in that dialogue to the Stoic system. Erler cites the view that 'the Stoics' pneumatic soul is capable of very much the same discarnate sur-

vival as Plato had defended in the *Phaedo*' (Sedley 1993, 326) to support his contention that Epictetus held that the soul survives the death of the body.

I contend that ii 1.17 does not imply that Epictetus holds that the human soul is immortal. Rather, there he is merely claiming that (1) the pneumatic substance that composes the soul of a human being, and the somatic material that composes that human being's body, both existed prior to their union as a psychosomatic whole constituting a living human being, and (2) upon death that psychosomatic union is dissolved. There is no suggestion here that the mind or consciousness of the human being continues to exist eternally after the separation of his soul and body. Indeed, Epictetus appears to believe that (e) the identity of a human being is a *union* of a particular body with a particular soul, neither of which survives death. This interpretation is supported by a number of texts in the *Discourses*. Epictetus says that if his ship sinks and he must drown, he should drown without shrieking or cursing god but simply recognizing that what is born must also perish (ii 5.12; cf. iv 7.27). Epictetus explicitly says that he is *not* eternal (αἰών), but a human being, and a part of the whole, as an hour is part of a day, and like the hour he must come and pass away (ii 5.13). Might Epictetus mean that it is only his *body* that passes away? No. He is explicit that a human being is a mortal (θνητόν) creature (ii 9.1-2; iii 1.25-26; iv 1.104). We ought to enjoy the festival of life for its finite duration until it is over (iv 1.105-110). Death is inevitable (ἀναγκαῖον, i 27.7) and cannot be avoided indefinitely (i 27.9). Far from arguing that it is or would be a good thing for human beings to have immortal souls, recall from section 2 that Epictetus argues for the opposite view, that just as it would be a curse for heads of grain to grow ripe, become dry, and *not* be harvested, so too it would be a curse for human beings never to die (ii 6.11-14).

Epictetus *embraces* human mortality rather than fearing or resenting that we must be 'harvested.' The death of human beings is as natural a cosmic process, and therefore as little to be feared, as the harvesting of heads of grain, the falling of leaves, a fresh fig drying out, and grapes becoming raisins (iii 24.91). All of these processes are natural changes, Epictetus insists, necessitated by the orderly management of the cosmos, which recycles all of the materials of all its organisms. The individual human being will cease to be upon his death, but something different will come to be from the deceased's material components (iii 24.94). This morphed thing is not, *contra* Erler, the person's disembodied mind, consciousness, or soul. When Zeus recalls the living to return to their origin, this is a return to nothing terrible (δεινόν), but to what is friendly and akin to you (τὰ φίλα καὶ συγγενή), to the elements (τὰ στοιχεῖα, iii 13.14). Whatever in you was of fire returns to fire, whatever was of earth returns to earth, whatever was of *pneuma* returns to *pneuma*, whatever was of water returns to water. There is no Hades, nor Acheron, nor Cocytus, nor Pyriphlegethon, but everything is full of gods and *daimones* (iii 13.15). *This* is the belief that Epictetus takes as consoling and ought to banish our fear of death, not any belief in personal reincarnation, immortality of the soul, or an afterlife. Epictetus' adherence to Stoic physics and a physicalist understanding of the cosmos, minds, and bodies anchor his confi-

dence that death is not scary, but merely a bugbear mask. Consequently, Epictetus' open door policy includes his belief that (f) knowledge that we mortals can opt for death is comforting.³⁶ Erler's interpretation of the reason for confidence in the face of death that Epictetus admires in Socrates is therefore untenable.

Epictetus tells his students that, since, as Stoics, they regard their bodies and bodily possessions as indifferent, no tyrant, thief, or court of law can intimidate them. Consequently, their lives are short enough and easy enough to endure, so they ought not to exit life without reason (i 9.17). Unfortunately, his students do not grasp their exalted kinship with the gods as rational citizens of the universe, so Epictetus addresses someone's worry that his poverty will lead to starvation:

As soon as you've eaten your fill today, you sit crying about tomorrow and how you'll get food. Look, if you get it, slave, you'll have it. If not, you'll leave this life: the door is open. Why complain? What room is left for tears? What occasion for flattery? Why should anyone envy another? Why should he admire those who have many possessions, or are in positions of power, especially if they are strong and quick to anger? What will they do to us? The things they have the power to do will be of no concern to us. The things we care about they cannot affect. Who, then, will ever be master over a person with convictions of this kind? (i 9.19-21)

This text sheds light on ii 15.4-12. There Epictetus disapproves of his friend's stubborn decision to starve himself to death without reason. If his friend had food available to him and no reason to die, then his choice of suicide by starvation is unjustified. Here, in i 9.17-21, Epictetus scolds the (presumably hypothetical) student—the 'slave'—who *fears* lack of food. If there is food to eat today, then there is no point in worrying about tomorrow's meals, whereas if there is no food and starvation becomes unavoidable, then the open door to exit life frees one from forced starvation. No bodily condition and no circumstance can burden the Stoic who remembers that the door is open for choosing a quick death by his own hand. The Stoic is concerned only with the things up to him. Consequently, he has no reason to flatter others since their favors provide him no psychic benefit. Their external possessions and positions of power are similarly not enviable.

Nagging worries about one's oil spilling, one's furniture being ruined, a fire destroying one's books, and again, having nothing to eat, are met with the same refrain: 'If I am so wretched (τάλας), death is my haven (λμήςν). This is the haven of everyone, death, this is our refuge (καταφυγή). That is why nothing that befalls us in life is difficult. Whenever you wish you can exit and no longer

³⁶ My position is also supported by Dobbin 1998, 71-72. Elsewhere, however, Dobbin sees in i 9.11-15 Plato's influence, and this inclines him to believe that, in this *solitary* passage, Epictetus adopts Platonic ideas concerning the afterlife (126). But affirmation of a disembodied survival of a person's mind after death of his body cannot, I think, be extracted from i 9.11-15 in light of the many other texts which straightforwardly deny it. Consequently, I side with Bonhöffer 1890, 35-36, 52-53, 65-66 that rejects ascribing such a Platonic eschatology to Epictetus.

be troubled by smoke' (iv 10.27). Epictetus indulges in no hyperbole when he asserts that nothing that befalls us in life is difficult. He insists that wretchedness is a failure to embrace a tough test as a challenge in which one can deploy the requisite psychic resources. Wretchedness is choosing to view that circumstance as a hardship, an occasion of suffering that defeats one's smooth flow of life. Events judged to make one wretched are only so much insubstantial smoke that cannot block one from exiting life and escaping to death's refuge. Thus understood, we always retain the power to vanquish our troubles, either by enduring them, overcoming them, and being strengthened through this ἄσκησις, or by choosing to exit life then and there. Therefore, (g) knowledge that death is an indifferent, a Halloween bugbear mask, frees us to pursue the virtuous life fearlessly. Neither the choice to live on and endure tough tests, nor the choice to exit to the refuge of death, precludes our making it cheerfully.

Epictetus approves of Diogenes' remark that the one sure means to freedom is to die cheerfully (iv 1.29-30; see Schofield 2007 on Epictetus' views on Diogenes). Epictetus' attitude about life and, as we have seen, death, is purely positive. For him the way to die well is to live well, that is, nobly, virtuously, benefiting others, and with gratitude for having lived (iv 10.11-17). So, despite his explicit criticism of Epicurus on other counts, Epictetus agrees with him that 'living well and dying well are the same practice' (*Letter to Menoecus* 126; Usener 1887, 61 [lines 20-21]). It is not fear of pain or of hardship that impels the Stoic to want to die. Rather, the Stoic reaches the calm realization that, given his current circumstances and his future prospects, having lived well in the past, the time for him to die well has arrived.³⁷

IX. The epitome of evils

Death, the Stoic believes, is not what motivates shameful deeds. Rather, the fear of death drives us to abandon our duties, betray our comrades, and act cowardly in order to save our hides. Epictetus says: 'It is not death or pain that is to be feared, but the fear of pain or death' (ii 1.13).³⁸ Death *ceteris paribus* is not dreadful, but only dying shamefully (αἰσχρῶς). So, Epictetus insists that our confidence (τὸ θάρσος) should be directed toward death, whereas our caution (τὴν εὐλάβειαν) should focus on the false judgment that death is fearful (ii 1.13-14). Death cannot rob us of our moral integrity, but fear can when, out of fear, we disgrace ourselves.

Will you, then, realize that this epitome (κεφάλαιον) of all human evils, and of meanness, and of cowardice is not death, but rather the fear of death? Against this, then, discipline your-

³⁷ For Tillich 1952, 12, 'the Stoic recommendation of suicide is not directed to those who are conquered by life but to those who have conquered life, are able both to live and to die, and can choose freely between them. Suicide as an escape, dictated by fear, contradicts the Stoic courage to be.'

³⁸ Compare ii 16.19: 'If, instead of death or exile, we feared fear itself, we would practice avoiding those things that appear to us to be evil.'

self, toward this let all your reasonings (οἱ λόγοι), your exercises, your readings tend, and you will know that only in this way are human beings liberated. (iii 26.38-39)

Freedom from the irrational, shameful judgments by which we inflict misery on ourselves is the paramount goal of the education Epictetus seeks to provide his pupils. They go astray when they fail to apply the general idea that death is nothing tragic, nothing shameful, and so nothing evil, to the particular instances of death they encounter so often.³⁹ Hence, removing the fear of death removes not only the greatest obstacle to the life of virtue and happiness, it also undermines all lesser fears. This is because all lesser troubles are so much smoke. Such smoke can either be vented away through the exercise of our courage, endurance, patience, forbearance, or whatever virtue is needed, or, if it stubbornly persists and is too thick to dissipate by acting virtuously, we can judge the irremediable situation as the right occasion to embrace our mortality by voluntarily dying.

I suggest that Epictetus believes that our mortality can be seen to be a blessing precisely because the exercise of our προαίρεσις in the act of suicide frees us from what we judge to be intolerable, incurable trouble. Suicide in such circumstances is thus the right choice for cheerfully ending a trouble-free, good, and happy life. For this reason I reject the criticism that Epictetus ‘takes showing the door to discontented or morally weak people too lightly, whereas he practically prohibits suicide to the educated people’ (Bonhöffer 1996, 244). Rather, Epictetus’ open door policy prods his students to consider seriously how burdensome and protracted their current challenging circumstances truly are, to assess carefully the kind of person they conceive themselves to be, to recognize their aretaic resources for effectively coping, and to celebrate their freedom to embrace their mortality cheerfully. If, after this painstaking deliberation, the person striving to live the life of a Stoic judges that he is ripe to die according to nature, and no one wiser provides him with better reasons not to exit, then his decision to die is unobjectionable. Having learned that (h) the false belief that death is bad grounds the fear of death, and that this fear cripples one’s ability to live virtuously, the last act of the Stoic progressor (*prokoptōn*) is cheerfully to accept his own death.

Conclusion

Epictetus’ thanatology can be summarized as follows. He holds that life and death are reciprocal phases of a cosmic pattern, the whole of which is rational, inevitable, and necessary. Death itself is too banal to warrant fear. So long as a person’s life can be put to good, respectable use, Epictetus thinks it reasonable for him to select what is needed to sustain his life. But if and when an agent’s vital conditions for the possibility of fruitful action (including fulfillment of one’s roles and responsibilities) are lost, suicide becomes a legitimate avenue of escape. Thus, Epictetus contends that death is nothing bad, since it can be a wel-

³⁹ Cf. iv 1.42: ‘for this is the cause of all human evils, that people are incapable of applying their general preconceptions to particular cases’.

come refuge from those circumstances in life judged to be unbearable. True evil, indeed, the epitome of all human evils, stems from the fear of death, which can and often does motivate vicious deeds. A decision to kill oneself for no good reason is an unwarranted suicide, which would also be a vicious act. The key role that the kind of person (πρόσωπον) one is plays in Epictetus' account of death distinguishes it from the other Roman Stoics.⁴⁰ Since Epictetus sees death as a harmless bugbear to be unmasked, he prods his students to become sensible adults who recognize that death is a dispreferred indifferent that is ordinarily to be avoided but never to be feared. In those unusual, extreme situations when the conditions necessary for living according to nature are stripped away and one can no longer preserve the roles that are vital to one's self-identity by performing the good deeds dictated by those roles, he consoles his students with the reminder that life's difficulties cannot trap us. In circumstances we (justifiably) judge to be unalterably intolerable, death becomes preferable. Our judgment that we can no longer live according to nature coincides with, but is not motivated by, Zeus calling for our retreat from life. This is not a heteronomous justification of suicide. Rather, it is a case of our autonomous judgment harmonizing with the providential belief that Zeus concurs with and approves of our own well considered decision about when it is best for us to die. Dying according to nature is simply a special case of living according to nature. With his perspicacious, consolatory, and distinctive Stoic treatment of death, Epictetus offers his pupils compelling reasons to free themselves from fearing being dead, fearing being mortal, fearing dying prematurely, fearing dying painfully, and fearing the deaths of others. Whether they accept those reasons is, naturally, up to them.⁴¹

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⁴⁰ And resonates with the four *personae* theory presented in Cicero, *De officiis* i 107-115, as noted by Griffin 1976, 381 and Englert 1994, 73. See De Lacy 1977 and Gill 1988.

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