Freedom, Slavery, and Self in Epictetus

Glenn Øystein Wehus
Cand. theol., Associate Professor, MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society
Glenn.O.Wehus@mf.no

Sammendrag
For stoikeren Epiktet, som selv hadde vært en slave, bestod målet med filosofi i å oppnå frihet. Artikkelen undersøker hans forståelse av frihet, sammen med hans forståelse av det tilhørende temaet slaveri, og diskuterer særlig hva slags syn på et menneskelig selv som kommer til uttrykk i disse forestillingene. Det konkrete, kroppslige slaveriet i Romerriket undersøkes som et viktig bakteppe for Epiktets metaforisk-filosofiske forståelse av frihet, og artikkelen drøfter Epiktets utfordringer for selvforståelsen til både slaver og frie.

Nøkkelord
Epiktet, stoisisme, frihet, slaveri, selv

Abstract
The goal of the philosophy of the Stoic Epictetus, himself a former slave, consisted in attaining freedom. The article explores his notion of freedom, along with the accompanying notion of slavery, and discusses what concept of a human self is brought out in these notions. The real, physical slavery of the Roman Empire is explored as an important backdrop for Epictetus' metaphorical-philosophical understanding of freedom, and the challenges of Epictetus to the self-understanding of both slaves and free are investigated.

Key words
Epictetus, stoicism, freedom, slavery, self

The Christians were not alone in the ancient Mediterranean world in thinking that they had a gospel, or "good news", to proclaim. The Greco-Roman schools of philosophy also saw their own message as an aid to people in their struggles. As Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault have thoroughly demonstrated, an important aspect of the teachings of these schools, primarily the Stoics and the Cynics, consisted in not only conveying theoretical information on various philosophical topics, but more importantly in offering practices and exercises in order to make these theoretical insights shape the students' character and guide them in their practical living.[1] The good news of these philosophers was that through a formation of

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1. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995); Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982* (New York: Picador, 2005); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), and *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 3: The Care of the Self* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988); Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton; London: Tavistock, 1988).

the human being as such – a formation of the self by the self – the individual person could experience the happiness for which nature had originally intended them.

The topic of this article is to explore the "gospel" of one these philosophers, the Stoic Epictetus (ca. 55–135 CE). Since he was a former slave, it will come as no surprise that the goal of his philosophy consisted in freedom (ἐλευθερία), and the aim of this article is to analyse his understanding of this concept—and, by implication, also of the complementary and contrasting theme of slavery. As I will show in more detail later, Epictetus has a message to people of both groups: to the slaves—those who never thought that they could be free, and to the free—those who never thought that they could be slaves.

In order to sharpen the perspective, the investigation of freedom and slavery will be carried out by seeing the material through a specific lens, namely Epictetus' understanding of self, thereby contributing to an ongoing discussion on ancient self-perception among scholars of ancient philosophy and theology.[2] Moreover, this connection between freedom/ slavery and self will be explored not only in a strictly philosophical context (i.e. the *texts* of Epictetus), but also in the socio-political context of ancient Roman slavery. As will be seen, Epictetus' notion of freedom and slavery is metaphorical, not physical, and concerns freedom from inner states of turmoil and flawed reasoning that can destroy one's ethical character and integrity.[3] However, as with all metaphors, such a metaphorical or attitudinal understanding of freedom and slavery is nevertheless based on and informed by the world of real, bodily slavery and takes its imagery and rhetorical power from this material reality.[4] The article will therefore explore aspects of this bodily freedom and slavery that have bearings on the notion of self. Such a procedure marks a relatively new perspective in comparison with other studies on freedom in Epictetus, which move more traditionally within a purely textual-philosophical realm.[5]

The term "self" is of course difficult to define. In modern Western languages it functions also as a noun ("the self"), but in ancient Greek, no such noun existed, only the emphatic pronoun αὐτός = *self*, as in expressions like "the man himself" (ὁ ἀνὴρ αὐτός), and the compounded reflexives, such as "myself" (ἐμαυτόν).[6] Even so, it is commonly used in modern scholarly philosophical and theological works on ancient anthropology,[7] and this article follows that practice.

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2. See for example Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology and Self. The Material Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010); Shadi Bartsch and David Wray (eds.), *Seneca and the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Christopher Gill, *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Richard Sorabji, *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights about Individuality, Life, and Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

3. Even though I use the term "metaphorical" for Epictetus' understanding of freedom/slavery, I do so somewhat reluctantly. The term "metaphor" may, wrongly, be understood to imply something that is only imaginary or exists only in the realm of language. For Epictetus, however, I would argue philosophical freedom is an actual and real humanly experienced condition. Used in connection with this philosopher, then, freedom is both a metaphor, and at the same time much more than a metaphor.

4. See, for example, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, *The Slave Metaphor and Gendered Enslavement in Early Christian Discourse: Double Trouble Embodied* (London/New York: Routledge, 2018), 37. See also Catharine Edwards, "Free Yourself! Slavery, Freedom and the Self in Seneca's *Letters*," in *Seneca and the Self* (ed. Bartsch and Wray), 139–159.

5. For example Samuel Vollenweider, *Freiheit als neue Schöpfung: Eine Untersuchung zur Eleutheria bei Paulus und in seiner Umwelt* (FRLANT 147; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989); Susanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Lincoln E. Galloway, *Freedom in the Gospel: Paul's Exemplum in 1 Cor 9 in Conversation with the Discourses of Epictetus and Philo* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004). One who has pointed out the importance of bodily aspects of slavery for the philosophy of Epictetus is Jennifer Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 30–34.

6. One of the best candidates in the ancient texts for this term αὐτός also having a nominal (noun) meaning, is Plato's dialogue *Alcibiades 1* (129b and 130d). See the discussion in Gill, *Structured Self*, 344–359.

7. See note 2.

As an analytical tool in my discussion of self, I will use a model developed by Anthony A. Long that differentiates between three forms of self: objective, subjective, and normative self. Objective self means those traits that are beyond the control of the individual, such as age, ethnicity, and parentage, while subjective self concerns traits that are at least to some extent under one's own control, such as agency, intentionality, attitudes, beliefs, likes and dislikes. By normative self, Long means the universal norm of human life, the true self that is intended by nature for all individuals alike.[8]

Before delving into the main topic of freedom and self, I will present a brief biographical overview of the life of Epictetus since his personal experience as a slave is highly relevant to this article. I will also give a rudimentary sketch of the basics of Stoic philosophy generally and highlight some specific and important innovations in Epictetus' version of this philosophy.

Epictetus: Slave and Philosopher—a Biographical Overview

Epictetus was born a slave in Hierapolis in Asia Minor, and taken to Rome at an early age. There, he grew up as a slave in the household of Epaphroditus, himself a former slave of the emperor Nero. While still a slave, Epictetus got the opportunity to study philosophy with the famous Roman Stoic, Musonius Rufus. Eventually, Epictetus was set free and started to teach Stoic philosophy in Rome. When, in 90 CE, the emperor Domitian expelled all philosophers from Italy, Epictetus went east and established his own school of philosophy at Nicopolis in Western Greece, a school he headed until his death. Since Epictetus did not write anything for publication, we owe our knowledge of his teaching primarily to one of his students, Arrian. This student originally wrote eight books (called *Diatribai*, or *Discourses* in English), of which four are still extant, and in addition a short compilation, the famous *Encheiridion* or *Handbook*, containing in 53 short paragraphs the basics of Epictetus' message.

As a Stoic, Epictetus shared the fundamental convictions of this tradition, which traced its roots back to Zeno of Cyprus, who set up his school in Athens around 300 BCE. Stoicism was a very ambitious philosophy that tried to give a coherent account of all of reality, ranging from the most general and overarching structures to the minutest details. From the early fifth century philosopher Heraclitus, the Stoics had taken over the idea of an all-pervasive *logos* (reason) providing structure and order among all apparent opposites. This *logos*, which the Stoics further identified with god or the creative element in reality at large,[9] was present in different versions in all types of species and phenomena. The centrality of this unifying universal reason, together with the notion that everything ultimately consists of matter, provided Stoicism with a fundamentally monistic outlook. Since universal *logos*, as a function of its very identity, aims at creating order and thereby carries the potential for a good life, the Stoics could be rather optimistic, not necessarily for a positive development of human history at large, but at least for the potential of individuals for living a "logical" and reasoned life, in accordance with the benevolent reason of god.

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8. Anthony A. Long, "Seneca on the self: why now?" in *Seneca and the Self* (ed. Bartsch and Wray), 20–36 (26).
9. Diogenes Laertius *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 7.134 (text 44B in Anthony A. Long and David Sedley [LS], *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), or 2.300 in Hans von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* [SVF] (4 vols.; Stuttgart: Teubner, 1978–1979).

Epictetus' Stoicism: Two Important Innovations

Building on these common points of agreement, I want to highlight two things that are of seminal importance in Epictetus's philosophy generally, and for his understanding of freedom specifically, and that seem to represent his own creative interpretation and development of earlier Stoicism.

The first point concerns Epictetus's notion of the categories of "what is up to us" and "what is not up to us" (τὰ ἐφ᾽ ἡμῖν and τὰ οὐκ ἐφ᾽ ἡμῖν). Versions of talking about these categories also existed in the Stoic tradition before Epictetus, but as Susanne Bobzien has shown, Epictetus sharpens these notions and is interested in what *specific* things are under our control or not.[10] The distinction between these two categories becomes fundamental to all of Epictetus' philosophy. "Up to us" and thereby under our complete and absolute control are, according to Epictetus, only our ethical and intellectual evaluations of what happens in the world. "Not up to us" and thereby in principle not under our control is everything that pertains to the outer physical world, including our own bodies.[11] For example, health, wealth, honour, family etc. are always in some way precarious in that something outside one's power may ruin it. What is never precarious, though, is how you evaluate such things, for example the loss of a child, or the humiliation by a superior. All such inner evaluations are yours and yours alone. The ethical values of good and evil, then, are not located in the outer world, in the incidents and actions in themselves; they are located in one's own evaluation of and responses to such incidents.

That brings us to the second point, the term προαίρεσις (*proairesis* = *preference* or *choice*). This term, which has its philosophical roots in Aristotle, refers to exactly those evaluative choices that Epictetus reserves as the only thing that is solely under our control as individual human beings. As such, this term encapsulates all of Epictetus' anthropology, and he can even rhetorically identify a person with one's *proairesis*.[12] And most importantly for our interest in the understanding of self in Epictetus, the character of the individual self is revealed by this *proairesis* – that is, by the choices performed by the value system of the individual.[13]

The Goal of Epictetus' Philosophy

Both earlier Stoic thinkers and Epictetus describe the general goal of Stoic philosophy as that of living in accordance with nature (φύσις), or in accordance with reason (λόγος).[14] For Stoics in the orthodox or classical period of Stoic philosophy, the third and second centuries BCE, this general goal would result in the individual becoming a sage, an all-wise person (σοφός). This wisdom would in turn be expressed through several different virtues, such as fearlessness (ἀφοβία), and passionlessness (ἀπάθεια). Epictetus, though he completely agrees with prior Stoics on the array of virtues that will arise out of the practice of living

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10. Bobzien, *Determinism*, 330–345.
11. See, for example, *Handbook* 1.
12. For example *Disc.* 4.5.12. See also *Disc.* 1.1.23 and 3.1.40.
13. Elizabeth Asmis, "Choice in Epictetus' Philosophy," in *Antiquity and Humanity: Essays on Ancient Religion and Philosophy* (ed. Adele Y. Collins and Margaret M. Mitchell; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 385–412. See also Anthony A. Long, *Epictetus: a Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 28–30 and 210–220. *Proairesis* is singled out also by Charles Taylor as one of the primary sources of the modern notion of self (Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 137.
14. On the earlier Stoics, see Stobaeus 2.75.11–76.8 (text 63B in LS), and Diogenes Laertius 7.87–9 (text 63C in LS). On Epictetus, see *Disc.* 1.6.12–22 (text 63E in LS).

in accordance with nature or reason, only rarely refers to the Stoic concept of the sage or of wisdom as the unifying concept of such virtues and as the goal of Stoic philosophy. For Epictetus, the unifying concept of Stoic ethics is freedom:[15]

> Pay attention, therefore, to your sense-impressions, and watch over them sleeplessly. For it is no small matter that you are guarding, but self-respect (αἰδώς), and fidelity (πίστις), and constancy (εὐστάθεια), a state of mind undisturbed by passion (ἀπάθεια), pain (ἀλυπία), fear (ἀφοβία), or confusion (ἀταραξία)—in a word, freedom (ἐλευθερία). *Disc.* 4.3.7[16]

To Epictetus then, freedom sums up everything that Stoic philosophy has to offer. All the teachings of Epictetus as we have them in the *Discourses* and the *Handbook* are infused with a vigorous longing for this goal.[17] Arguably, freedom and the concomitant notion of slavery is the overarching theme in all of Epictetus's philosophy, even in contexts where the words or word groups themselves do not occur, and it provides an underlying structure for all of his thinking.[18] Moreover, it is difficult not to see his own life story as a relevant factor in explaining this obsession with freedom.[19] As a slave in the formative early years of his life, he will have felt the restraints and boundaries that such a status imposed on a person. To what extent he himself also experienced physical punishment or moral degradation is difficult to say,[20] but these typical aspects of ancient slave existence would certainly have been close at hand, either for him to experience for himself or to observe in others.

Physical Slavery and Self

In what follows, I want to highlight some aspects of physical slavery in the Roman world that impinge on the notion of self. Among the three spheres of Roman law—the law of persons, the law of things, and the law of actions—the slaves had their place in the law of things (*res*). This means that they were considered in the same juridical category as animals used for heavy labour: oxen, horses, asses and mules.[21] A slave, then, was not a person juridically speaking. Legally he was a "pro nullo", a "nothing" with no civic rights – for example the right to inheritance, to marriage, to parenthood, or to property.[22] The slave could also not

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15. Interest in freedom among the Stoics does not, of course, originate with Epictetus. According to Diogenes Laertius (7.174), already Cleanthes, the second head of the Stoic school, had written a book on the topic.

16. All translations of Epictetus are from William Oldfather *Epictetus* I–II (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1925] and 1996 [1928]), with some alterations.

17. "… in youth he must have been almost consumed by passion for freedom. I know no man upon whose lips the idea more frequently occurs. The words "free" (adjective and verb) and "freedom" appear some 130 times in Epictetus, that is, with a relative frequency about six times that of their occurrence in the New Testament." Oldfather, "Introduction," in *Epictetus* (LCL), p. xvii. Such longing may initially seem anomalous for Stoics for whom ἀπάθεια was a goal, but the Stoics differentiated between good (legitimate) and bad (illegitimate) feelings (εὐπάθεια and πάθος).

18. Long, *Epictetus*, 27–31, also gives pride of place to this theme of freedom, putting it first in his suggestion of "four unifying concepts" in the philosophy of Epictetus (the three remaining being judgement, volition, and integrity.) See also Vollenweider, *Freiheit*, 24; Peter A. Brunt, "From Epictetus to Arrian," *Athenaeum* 55 (1977): 19–48 (24).

19. See also Long, *Epictetus*, 11, and Vollenweider, *Freiheit*, 85.

20. On whether his lame (χωλός) leg mentioned in *Disc.* 1.8.14 and 1.16.20 is to be explained by harsh treatment of his master (Origen *Contra Celsum* 7.53) or by illness (*Suda*), see the discussion in Oldfather, "Introduction", in *Epictetus* (LCL), footnote 5.

21. Gaius, *Institutes* 2.14a; see Alan Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 47.

22. As Buckland emphasizes, the pro nullo concept of the slave as used in Roman law is only an analogy, and also does not in itself pertain to the *person* of the slave. In other words, it does not deny the slave's humanness. Its sphere of reference is juridical and social, and it is mainly in this social meaning of not being accorded an integrated role in society as other human beings that Orlando Patterson refers to it in his magisterial 1982 study *Slavery as*

appear in court as a proper juridical subject, and if he or she were required to give testimony in court, their statement would be considered lawful only if procured under torture. However, this does not mean that a slave in practice could not be, and often was, considered a human being and a beloved person by the owner, but in terms of law, he or she was essentially a thing, an object.[23]

This juridical commodity aspect of the slave, his or her "ownedness", meant that they in practice were delivered into the hands of their masters. While earlier scholarly work on ancient slavery has tended to downplay or overlook the physical traumas of slaves,[24] more recent historians have rightly emphasized the fact that slaves lived precarious lives on the margins of society and were exposed to all kinds of physical, sexual, and psychological maltreatments. As a papyrus from Roman Egypt shows, a slave mistress whose slave was abused by an intruder could consider this not as something done to the slave, but as an affront to the mistress herself: "For Thonis (…) rushed into my house and dared to carry off my slave Theodora, though he had no power over her, so that I am subjected to unmitigated violence."[25] The self, the I of the slave, is absent from the juridical consideration of the mistress. The important thing is the self, the I of the mistress. The slave's body and person function as a stand-in, a body double[26] for the owner whose only concern is her own person and honour.

Likewise, a slave who happened to be abused by a third party would not necessarily be vindicated by the courts. As a member of the lowest status group, such abuse of a slave was to a large extent accepted by the legal system. According to Ulpian, a jurist of the early third century CE, only if the character of the slave was of morally high standing could there possibly be retribution. The character or person of the slave was only deemed important *post eventum*, as a criterion for gaining the attention of and recompense from the jurors, not as something valuable in itself, hedged and protected by the law.[27] The two examples given above concerned the abuse of slaves by those other than the owner. Even worse was the juridical protection for the slaves when submitted to the brutality of their own masters. Jennifer Glancy summarizes both these situations in the following manner: "Legal considerations of the vulnerability of slave bodies to insults and affronts covered only the injuries that could be visited on the slave by a person who was not the slave's owner. The slaveholders' right to abuse their slaves at will was almost beyond question."[28]

Social Death. See William W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery: The Condition of the Slave in Private Law from Augustus to Justinian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 [1908]), 4–5; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018 [1982]); for pro nullo, see p. 40.

23. For nuances also in terms of law, see Watson, *Roman*, 46, 67–101.

24. For example Jérôme Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1941]).

25. P.Oxy 8.1120, early 3rd cent. A.D. Translation in Glancy, *Slavery*, 12.

26. Glancy, *Slavery*, 11.

27. Ulpian: "Thus, the praetor does not promise an action for every affront in respect of a slave; if the slave be lightly struck or mildly abused, the praetor will not give an action; but if he be put to shame by some act or lampoon, I think that the praetor's investigation into the matter should take into account the standing of the slave; for it is highly relevant what sort of slave he is, whether he be honest, regular, and responsible, a steward or only a common slave, a drudge or whatever. And what if he be in fetters, branded, and of the deepest notoriety? The praetor, therefore, will take into account both the alleged affront and the person of a slave said to have suffered it and will grant or refuse the action accordingly." *Digest of Justinian* 47.10.15.44 (translation in Glancy, *Slavery*, 12).

28. Glancy, *Slavery*, 14.

Naming of Slaves

Interesting for our topic of the understanding of the self of a slave in the Roman world is also the way the Romans went about naming their slaves. In republican times, when the slave population was lower, the slaves had no names of their own, and were often given only an adjectival form of the name of the owning family.[29] Later, as slave numbers grew, names were needed to differentiate between the slaves, but according to Mary L. Gordon this practice resembled the naming of a dog more than of a human being. The owner "could re-name the slave at his pleasure, as arbitrarily and fancifully as we name our pet animals or 'villa residences.'"[30]

In some ancient authors, we get a glimpse of such naming procedures and their rationale. According to Varro, an owner named his slave 'Ephesios' since he was bought in Ephesus. Another was named 'Artemas' after an Artemedoros, the slave seller from whom he was bought. And if we are to believe Philostratus, Herodes Atticus named the slaves of his son after the letters of the Greek alphabet in order to make it easier for the child to learn to read and write.[31] We may also see an instance of such un-personal naming procedures in the name of Epictetus. Being derived from the verb ἐπικτάομαι (*epiktaomai*) = *to gain or win besides, acquire additional property,* the adjective ἐπίκτητος (*epiktētos)* means *gained besides/in addition* (LSJ). In Heikki Solin's onomastic work on Greek personal names in Rome, the name Epictetus is attested 122 times. Of these, only one belongs certainly to a freeborn; all the remaining are either uncertain in terms of socio-political status (81), or probably manumitted slaves (4), or certainly slaves/manumitted slaves (36).[32] These statistics point in the direction of Epictetus being predominantly a slave name. As such, the carrier of this name, just as the Ephesios and the Artemas above, would constantly, by the very uttering of or hearing his name, be reminded of the fact that he was another man's property, lacking the freedom and independence of the freeborn. A final example may also be Epaphroditus, Epictetus's former owner, who was himself once a slave. The name alludes to Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, and may hint at why this man was bought in the first place—to cater to the sexual desires of the master.[33] Such sexual exploitation of beautiful young boys (the so-called *delicati*) and girls would have been very common,[34] and the slave markets themselves were set up with such considerations in mind, the slaves being paraded naked on the platform for the potential buyer to study the goods.[35] In such naming procedures, one is reminded of Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery as "permanent, violent domination of *natally alienated* and generally dishonored persons" (emphasis added).[36] In the city of Rome, a Greek name was an indication of slave status.[37] With names highlighting their imported and foreign origin, the slaves were cut off from their natural families and were without paternal lineage and roots to provide them an objective identity and standing.

29. Mary L. Gordon, "The Nationality of Slaves under the Early Empire", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 14 (1924): 93–111 (106).

30. Gordon, *Nationality*; the citation is on p. 104; the comparison with naming dogs is on p. 106.

31. Ephesios and Artemas: Varro *De Ling. Lat.* 8,21; The Greek alphabet: Philostratus *Vit. Soph.* 2.1.23. The examples are found in Gordon, *Nationality*, p. 99, 104, and 107.

32. Heikki Solin, *Die Griechischen Personennamen in Rom: Ein Namenbuch* (3 vols.; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1982), 2:990.

33. Glancy, *Slavery*, 53. Solin, *Griechischen*, 1:324 gives a total of 294 attestations. The important numbers are: 111 slaves/manumitted, 164 uncertain, 1 freeborn.

34. On sexual exploitation of slaves, see Glancy, *Slavery*, 9, 23.

35. Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A study in Social Control* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 115.

36. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 13.

37. Gordon, *Nationality*, 105.

The Negated Self of the Tattooed Runaway

One aspect of ancient Roman physical treatment of slaves that has important implications for our interest in the ancient understanding of self is the practice by slave owners of marking (στίζω, στίγμα(τα)) the bodies of slaves by pricking with needles and ink (tattooing). This has been described in a fascinating article by Christopher P. Jones, and one of those practices consisted in the marking of recaptured runaway slaves.[38] Such fugitives could have a text inserted in the skin on their forehead, and as a scholion on Aeschines 2.79 shows, the text was presumably the following: "Stop me, I am on the run" (κάτεχέ με, φεύγω).[39]

The sentence is phrased in the first person singular, and in that respect there is an I speaking. Technically and grammatically, this I is the I of the slave himself. But in reality, in its underlying meaning and ideology, it is the voice of the owner. The intended goal of the utterance, its performative aspect, is located wholly in the value system of the master, and the slave has lost control of not only his own body, but also of his own voice and will. His self has been invaded, superseded and replaced by a foreign self. The tattooed slave is forced to proclaim the opposite, the negated version, of what he really desires. He has become the carrier of a negated self. The juridical "pro nullo" has become also a personal "pro nullo". The placement of the tattoo in the face, above the eyes, the most obvious and publicly oriented aspect of a person and also the primary expression of individuality, of course adds to the dramatic effect of the substitution of self.

This sentence on the forehead functions on two levels. Firstly, in an actual attempt at escape, at the very moment of freedom, the slave is forced with his or her body to express the values of the master. Secondly, after the recapture, in the future day-to-day dealings with others in the household or the wider community, the slave and everyone around are reminded of this past and (from the point of view of the ruling class) undignified behaviour.. And, by that constant recourse to memory, to the past, the master also attempts to control the future behaviour of the slave.

I have presented these physical aspects of ancient slavery because they provide a material backdrop for and give rhetorical force to Epictetus' notion of freedom and self, and I would like particularly to dwell on the last item mentioned, the negated self of the tattooed slave. If we picture a person's degree of self-determination as a scale with two opposite ends, this negated self of the tattooed slave marks one extreme end of that scale. Interestingly, it is with Epictetus, another slave, that we find statements on the opposite end of that scale. In *Disc.* 4.12.8 Epictetus reiterates the core essence of his philosophy on *proairesis*, and he presents it by using the terminology of slavery and freedom:

> No man is master (κύριος) of another's moral purpose (προαίρεσις) … In its sphere alone are to be found one's good and evil. It follows, therefore, that no one has power either to procure me good, or to involve me in evil, but I (ἐγώ) myself (αὐτός) alone (μόνος) have authority over myself in these matters.

While conceding the control of externals to others, Epictetus claims for himself, and for himself only, the control of the one true, worthy and valuable realm of good and evil. And he phrases his self-control over this domain in the most emphatic terms. Not only does he

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38. Christopher P. Jones, "Stigma: Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987): 139–155. An updated version of the article is found in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History* (ed. J. Caplan; London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 1–16.

39. Jones, *Stigma*, 148. The Latin equivalent would have been "Tene me ne fugiam"; see Giovanna Sotgiu, "Un collare de schiavo rinvenuto in Sardegna," *Archeologica Classica* 25/26 (1973/74): 688–697.

use the explicit personal pronoun ἐγώ (*I*), but he also adds the emphatic pronoun αὐτός (*myself*), and places them both in the prominent first position in the sentence. In addition, at the very end of the sentence, at the opposite prominent position, he completes the self-referentiality by adding a third emphatic, the μόνος (*alone*), creating a rhetorical effect such as this: "I myself have authority over myself in these matters—alone". In contrast to the negated self of the tattooed fugitive, this ἐγώ of Epictetus is one of the most pronounced, self-conscious, and self-authoritative ἐγώs to be found in ancient Greek writings. According to Epictetus, it is possible for everyone, also a slave, to live without a master. And it is possible for everyone to reclaim the control of one's own history. By attending to one's own value system, limiting oneself to one's inner ethical character (subjective self) to the exclusion of external possessions and body (objective self), and by practising the character-constitutive choices of one's *proairesis*, a person may become the author of one's own fortune.[40]

In all the examples given above of treatment of slaves (law, naming, and tattooing) we encounter the perspective of the free, slave-owning majority, which emphasizes the objective self of the slave—the mere fact that someone has a slave status—and sees that objective identity as a main aspect of the person. In addition, in the case of the tattooed runaway, the owners even attempt to make this objective self become the subjective self of the slave, forcing him to define himself by the same objective standards as the masters. To Epictetus, however, the slave's normative identity as fully partaking of cosmic reason represents an antidote to such a false self-understanding. The power of self-definition lies with the slave, not with the master.

Epictetus' Rhetoric of Freedom

The themes of freedom/slavery and self also shape the rhetoric of Epictetus, as is shown by the following examples. The first concerns his use of diminutives, such as σωμάτιον "paltry body", γυναικάριον "frail wife/woman", παιδίον "little child", and κτησίδιον "petty property."[41] The semantic point of these diminutives is of course not their physical smallness, but their moral-evaluative insignificance. In Epictetus' philosophy of independence from all externals, such externals are classed as *adiaphora*, indifferents, and their reduced importance is highlighted by being assigned to their own linguistic domain. Especially interesting is the σωμάτιον, the diminutive of σῶμα (*body*). Σῶμα was one of the terms in the Greek language frequently used to denote slaves.[42] In Epictetus, this notion is given a twist. In seeing the body as something external, outside the absolute control of a person, Epictetus has effectively made the σῶμα a slave[43] and thereby reversed the perspective of the owner. As Glancy elegantly puts it: "while other ancient works characterize slaves as bodies, the *Discourses* characterize bodies as slaves".[44] By picking up this word and putting it in the diminutive, it is the slave, Epictetus, himself who re-appropriates the word, but now as a tool against the slave master: it is the slave's subjective self who diminishes the importance of his own

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40. I am not of course implying that Epictetus expresses himself having this tattooed text at the back of his mind. The comparison is on a conceptual and ideological plane, not in terms of historical dependence.
41. σωμάτιον *Disc.* 3.18.3; 4.11.27; γυναικάριον: *Disc.* 2.18.18, *Ench* 7; παιδίον: *Disc.* 2.1.16, *Ench.* 11; κτησίδιον: *Disc.* 1.25.23; 3.18.3.
42. As for example in the New Testament (*Rev* 18:13) where Rome, in the guise of a harlot, is scolded for her vices, among which is the selling of σώματα = *bodies*, i.e. slaves.
43. For the body as a slave, see *Disc.* 3.22.40–41.
44. Glancy, *Slavery*, 32.

body, and in doing so, deprives the master of his weapon of fear, the threats he has been used to level at his subjects. A further interesting usage of this word should also be mentioned. As Glancy has pointed out, σωμάτιον is used in the papyri as a term for the infant babies who were exposed on local rubbish heaps either to die or to be picked up by others and raised as slaves in a new household.[45] Regardless of whether this specific context has influenced the use in Epictetus, as a slave he would have known the precariousness of such things as body, wife, children and property, and consequently real freedom is attainable only if these values are redefined as indifferent.

The second example of such an active and self-determinative rhetoric of freedom is the way in which Epictetus handles the semantic categories of *agent* and *patient*. In a startling piece of teaching recorded in *Handbook* 11, Epictetus advises on how to view one's own authorial role in whatever happens in life:

> Never say about anything, 'I have lost it,' but only 'I have given it back'. Is your child dead? It has been given back. Is your wife dead? She has been given back. 'I have had my farm taken away.' Very well, this too has been given back. 'Yes, but it was a rascal who took it away.' But what concern is it of yours by whose instrumentality the giver [god] called for its return? So long as he gives it to you, take care of it as of a thing that is not your own, as travellers treat their inn.

By rejecting all notions of being a victim, passively exposed to the elements of chance or even malice, Epictetus opts instead for a radically active and self-centred agency. The objective self, the fact of being under the control of external factors, is to be discarded as irrelevant. Instead, one's subjective, self-chosen identity is to be informed by the normative ideals of rational nature. The individual is a self-authoritative person who has taken upon himself to shape himself in line with these ideals.

Epictetus and His Students: the Slavery of the Free

As I hope to have shown above, the Roman world of real physical slavery forms an important backdrop for Epictetus' philosophy. However, there is an even more explicit context for Epictetus in his teaching of the goals of Stoic philosophy that constantly mingles with this first context, and that is the Roman world of freedom and the values of the free population, or more precisely, of those who according to Epictetus imagine themselves to be free. The fact of Epictetus being a teacher and delivering lectures would already imply that his primary addressees are people from the free, and even from the elite, strata of Roman society. As Raffaella Cribiore and others have shown, the number of pupils and students would have decreased the higher one got in the educational system, and in a similar way, the contexts of recruitment would be narrowed.[46] As a teacher of philosophy, an institution at the highest level of learning, Epictetus would have had students coming almost exclusively from the topmost elite strata of the Roman social, political and economic hierarchy.[47] According to Joseph Hellerman, the governing elite of the Roman empire (senators, equestrians and decurions) consisted of only 2 percent of the total population, and it was the members of

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45. Glancy, *Slavery*, 11.
46. Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton, N. J: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3.
47. Epictetus is himself an example of the opposite, having studied under Musionus Rufus while still a slave, but such examples are merely the exceptions that prove the rule.

this group who vied with each other in the so-called *cursus honorum*, the competition for the most important political offices (quaestor, aedile, praetor, and finally consul).[48] At the outset, then, we have to imagine that it was sons from such families who frequented schools of philosophy and rhetoric, being sent by their fathers to prepare them for a life of public service and distinction.

This picture is confirmed by Arrian's depiction of the student body of Epictetus. Arrian himself may serve as a good example. Coming from a wealthy aristocratic family in Bithynia in Asia Minor, and after studying with Epictetus, he advanced in both his political, military and literary career, even achieving the office of consul. In addition to Epictetus' regular students, the occasional visitors mentioned by Arrian, for example the procurator of Epirus (*Disc.* 3.4), also confirm the same picture.[49] Epictetus, then, would have been surrounded by people who under no circumstance would have looked upon themselves as slaves. This, though, is how Epictetus looked upon them, and this theme of the slavery of the imagined free is both a recurrent theme throughout, and also becomes the explicit subject in an important passage in *Disc.* 4.1.6–10.

Metanarrative and Life Story

Before we get to that text, I will introduce two terms that are important for our discussion, namely, those of a metanarrative and a life story. As Marianne Bjelland Kartzow stresses in her splendid book on the slave metaphor and gender, a metaphor will be understood differently depending on the metanarrative and the life story of the listener or reader. Citing John Stephens and Robyn McCallum's definition, Bjelland Kartzow says that a metanarrative is "a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience."[50] A metanarrative operates on the cultural level and is the overarching paradigm with which a group of people identifies. It represents the shared social values of groups or society at large. A life story, on the other hand, operates on the individual level and consists in the experiences, thoughts, and values of the single person, but these two concepts are related, since "[t]he metanarratives offer a system or a schema where the little stories, the life stories, are given meaning."[51]

As Bjelland Kartzow rightly claims, "[w]hen we attempt to interpret ancient texts, the (fictive or real) life stories of the ancient authors, the characters in their texts, and the hearers/readers are generally unknown."[52] In Epictetus, however, this is not the case. Both the life stories of the source of the text, Epictetus, and of the author, Arrian, and even more importantly, of the addressees of the lectures, are identifiable, at least to some extent. And now we come to *Disc.* 4.1.6–10. Here Epictetus is engaged in an imaginary conversation with a person who has twice been consul, and the subject is slavery and freedom:

> If you tell him [the consul] the truth: "In point of being a slave, you are not a whit better than those who have been sold three times," what else can you expect but a flogging? "What, how am I a slave?"

48. Joseph Hellerman, *Recontructing Honor in Roman Philippi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.
49. See V. Henry T. Nguyen, *Christian Identity in Corinth* (WUNT 2.243; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 85–87.
50. Bjelland Kartzow, *Slave Metaphor*, 34, from John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature* (New York/London: Garland Publisher, 2013), 6.
51. Bjelland Kartzow, *Slave Metaphor*, 35.
52. Bjelland Kartzow, *Slave Metaphor*, 30.

(πῶς γὰρ ἐγὼ δοῦλός εἰμι) says he. "My father was free, my mother was free. No one has a deed of sale for me. More than that, I am member of the Senate, and a friend of Caesar, and I have been consul, and I own many slaves."

In this dialogue Epictetus lets the consul tell his own life story, which is at the same time expanded to become the story of his family. By claiming his friendship with the emperor, the consul widens the circle even more and situates himself in a larger cultural and social context, and by his speech he has in effect presented the metanarrative of freedom and slavery as seen by the social elite in-group to which he belongs.

The reason why Epictetus tells this fictitious dialogue is that he assumes it will resonate with his students. The metanarrative of his students would be a version of the same narrative as that of the consul, and also their life stories would in many respects resemble that of the consul, themselves being by birth destined to acquire positions of rule and domination. A central aspect of such a metanarrative and life story would include their notion of their not only being free, but being the most obviously free of all, far removed from the rest of the population, which could not boast such a lineage or high profile associates.[53]

Grovelling: Selling One's Integrity and Self-worth

Epictetus levels many criticisms against these self-styled free people, portraying them instead as de facto slaves. Many of these criticisms can be subsumed under the heading of grovelling, as giving up one's inner character, one's self-worth, and one's naturally given virtues—in order to procure something that is not oneself, or foreign to the real, "genuine" or "authentic self"[54] that one was meant to be by rational nature. To Epictetus, this attitude represents a kind of core vice, back to which many human miseries may ultimately be traced. And this selling and buying of integrity[55] includes all people, both the small and the great, the only difference being in quantity, not quality, as Epictetus states in *Disc.* 4.1.55:

> Whenever you see a man grovelling (ὑποπίπτω) to another, or flattering (κολακεύω) him contrary to his own opinion, confidently say that he too is not free; and not only if he is doing it for the sake of a wretched dinner, but even if it be for a governorship or indeed a consulship. And those who are acting in this way for the sake of little things, you should call 'micro-slaves' (μικρόδουλος), and the rest you should call, as they deserve, 'mega-slaves' (μεγαλόδουλος).

Slavery and freedom, then, is to Epictetus something that comes about as a consequence of one's own doings, of one's own preferences or choices (the subjective self). In this perspective, the formation of oneself may potentially go both ways—a formation towards freedom, and a formation towards slavery.

To Epictetus the vice of grovelling is ubiquitous, and he detects it both locally, regionally, and internationally. As a consequence of the socio-economic status of his addressees, Epictetus' examples are derived primarily from an elite context. The following examples show how Epictetus sees this vice spelled out in the Roman world of his day on the three levels just mentioned.

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53. In the words of William Fitzgerald: "Like shadows, slaves were a supplement necessary to the self-image and identity of their masters and mistresses"; William Fitzgerald, *Slavery and the Roman Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.
54. Nguyen, *Identity*, 103–104; Engberg-Pedersen, *Cosmology*, 113.
55. *Disc.* 1.2.11; 3.3.11–13; 4.3.8.

In *Disc.* 1.19.19-22 Epictetus gives us a self-experienced, eyewitness account of the manoeuvrings and pragmatic changes of value-opinions on the part of the freedman Epaphroditus, the master of the elite household to which Epictetus himself once belonged.

> Epaphroditus owned a certain shoemaker [Felicio] whom he sold because he was useless. Then by some chance the fellow was bought by a member of Caesar's household and became shoemaker to Caesar. You should have seen how Epaphroditus honoured him! "How is my good Felicio, I pray?" he used to say.

> Then if someone asked us, "What is your master doing?" he was told, "He is consulting Felicio about something or other." What, had he not sold him as being useless? Who, then, has suddenly made a wise man out of him?— This is what it means to honour something else than what lies within the province of the moral purpose (προαίρεσις).

This same attitude of self-imposed slavery of opinion, Epictetus also finds on a regional, polis-level in his eventual home city of Nicopolis. This was a city that had historically been closely attached to the Roman emperor since it was founded and named by Octavian, later Augustus, in the first century BCE in commemoration of his victory in the battle at Actium, which was fought close by, a victory that laid the foundation for the long period of peace and prosperity in the Roman world known as the *Pax Romana*. In *Disc.* 4.1.12–14, in the aftermath of the fictitious dialogue mentioned above, one of the students asks Epictetus:

> "Who can put me under compulsion, except Caesar, the lord (κύριος) of all?"

> —There you have it, you have yourself admitted that you have one master (δεσπότης). Realize that you are a slave in a great house. So also the men of Nicopolis are accustomed to shout: "By the fortune of Caesar, we are free men! (νὴ τὴν Καίσαρος τύχην, ἐλεύθεροί ἐσμεν)"

This dependence on the figure of the emperor for one's prosperity also played out internationally in the Roman provinces. In gratitude for the *Pax Romana*, the provincial council of Asia in 9 BCE announced a competition for who could design the most distinguished honour to the emperor Augustus. The provincial governor Paullus Fabius Maximus won the contest with his proposal to make the birthday of Augustus (23rd of September) the New Year's day in Asia, claiming that "we could justly consider that day [the birthday of Augustus] to be equal to the beginning of all things (…) He gave a new appearance to the whole world, which would gladly have accepted its own destruction had Caesar not been born for the common good fortune of all. Thus a person could justly consider this to be the beginning of life and of existence, and the end of regrets of having been born."[56] In their final decision to give the victory to Maximus, the council followed suit and stated that "the providence that ordains our whole life has established (…) that which is most perfect in our life by bringing Augustus (…,) a savior who put an end to war and brought order to all things" and that "the birth of the god was the beginning of good tidings (εὐαγγέλια) to the world".[57]

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56. Translation in Stephen J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 33.
57. Friesen, *Imperial*, 34.

Epictetus does not comment on these statements from the province of Asia specifically, but he does comment more generally on this empire-wide dependence on the emperor and his *Pax Romana*:

> Behold now, Caesar [the Emperor] seems to provide us with profound peace (εἰρήνη), there are no wars any longer, nor battles, no brigandage on a large scale, nor piracy, but at any hour we may travel by land, or sail from the rising of the sun to its setting.

> Can he, then, at all provide us with peace from fever too, and from shipwreck too, and from fire, or earthquake, or lightning? Can he give us peace from love? He cannot. From sorrow? From envy? He cannot—from absolutely none of these things.

> But the doctrine of the philosophers promises to give us peace from these troubles too. And what does it say? "Men, if you heed me, wherever you may be, whatever you may be doing, you will feel no pain, no anger, no compulsion, no hindrance, but you will pass your lives in tranquility (ἀπαθεῖς) and in freedom from every disturbance." When a man has this kind of peace proclaimed to him, not by Caesar—why, how could he possibly proclaim it?—but proclaimed by god through the reason, is he not satisfied (…)? *Disc.* 3.13.9–13

Around him, Epictetus observes a majority culture of individuals, cities and provinces who consider themselves free and who savour in the glories of their objective selves—their family background, wealth, power, and friendship with Caesar—making these objective facts the central aspect also of their subjective selves, the stories they tell about their lives. But as with the slaves, Epictetus challenges the free to reevaluate the importance of their objective selves and instead to let their subjective selves be formed by one thing only, their true normative identity and self.

The Value and Power Game

Let us sum up Epictetus' notion of freedom and slavery, and his understanding of self. For Epictetus a human being is the carrier of a normative, natural, god-given character.[58] In line with Stoic monism, for Epictetus there are no fundamental differences between humans. They all have the same normative identity as rational creatures. The differences between slave and free are not, contrary to Aristotle, rooted in nature.[59] They operate solely on a conventional level, in the objective facts told about peoples' lives and in the subjective identity that is most often falsely informed by such facts. Of course there are differences between humans in that everyone has different roles to play (as father, mother, politician, soldier, athlete etc.), but for Epictetus there is only one role really worth playing—the role of a human being, and only one value worth loving—the value of human dignity, of yourself never breaching your own god-given self-respect.[60] As Glancy has pointed out, the Roman notion of *dignitas*, which consisted in "a peculiar combination of birth, character, virtues, access to power, material resources, and legal status"[61] was a virtue that excluded the slave.

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58. For example Long, "Seneca and the self: why now?" 26–29.
59. Aristotle *Politics* 1254B.
60. *Handbook* 17. On the roles (πρόσωπον/persona) performed by a human being, see Nguyen, *Identity*, 92–114.
61. Glancy, *Slavery*, 27.

In Epictetus we see the slave claiming his rightful *dignitas*—based solely on the character of his own rational self. For Epictetus, then, slaves and free are ultimately in the same existential situation—as moral-attitudinal slaves with a potential for freedom. For both groups, there is the same path to an authentic human self-esteem, since they are both involved in the same value and power game where the task of the free consists in unmasking the emptiness of their own worthless values, while the task of the slaves is that of unmasking the worthless values of the free.

The Self: How Modern is Epictetus?

As mentioned, in recent decades there has been a debate among scholars in ancient philosophy and also in New Testament theology on what kind of understanding of self we find in the ancient sources, and some have tried to trace the history of the modern concept of the self from the ancient Mediterranean world through the Middle Ages until the present age.[62] This article is not the place to delve into this discussion in full, but I would like to provide a few general comments. As we have seen, Epictetus displays a pronounced use of an ἐγώ—an "I" or "self"—who has his own choice (his subjective self), and who exhibits a potential for shaping himself into being who he wants and ought to be (his normative self). This may sound very modern, even post-modern, and could be interpreted as a kind of self-constructive individualism where you forge an identity which is uniquely and singularly your own. However, as Hadot, Gill and others have emphasized, Epictetus and ancient philosophers in general thought in more universalistic categories than anything to be found in modern radical individualism.[63] In order to explain an important aspect of how I understand Epictetus' view of self-formation, I use an analogy from ancient sculpture.[64] In carving out a figure from a block of stone, an ancient sculptor did not see his task as that of *creating* a form that was not present in the stone before. Rather, his task was simply to carve out the form, the character that was already present within the stone. In the same way, Epictetus does not 'create himself' in a (post)modern sense. Instead, he finds, or rediscovers, the normative, universal self that has been placed in him by nature/god.[65] As a Stoic, Epictetus sees himself as a part of the structured cosmos, a part of the all-encompassing logos (reason), and the joy of Epictetus, and the basis for his exceeding optimism, is not that he can 'sculpture' a truth about himself that is different from the truths of all others and available only to himself as a unique individual. It is rather because he has returned to the same pre-ordained truth, identity and freedom to which every human being was, from the very beginning, intended to belong.

What About the Body?

One final question should also be addressed concerning the status of the body and the human being as a physical creature. This bodily aspect of human beings has lately received markedly increased interest in scholarship generally, and also in discussions of ancient slavery in particular. Sometimes these newer contributions not only criticize earlier scholars,

62. Taylor, *Sources*; Sorabji, *Self*.
63. Hadot, *Philosophy Way of Life*, 206–213; Gill, *Structured Self*, 371–391.
64. This image is found also in Hadot, *Philosophy Way of Life*, 102.
65. Epictetus accords god a central role in the process of attaining freedom (*Disc.* 1.19.8–9; 4.7.17), a role that has not been elaborated in this study.

but also contain an explicit, morally based dismissal of the ancient primary sources themselves. Epictetus is one of those authors who are accused of belittling bodily pain, and who has thereby contributed to the Western idealistic and intellectual degrading of the body. For example Glancy, in her discussion of Epictetus' arguments for the primacy of the mind over body, concludes that "[r]espect for the bodies of ancient slaves, coupled with acknowledgment of the harm that enslavement caused them, demands that we ultimately reject those arguments."[66]

On the other side, we find scholars such as Long who takes a more emic, insider perspective on Epictetus and contextualizes his views: "As a person who knew the indignity of slavery from direct experience and who had also lived under the tyrannical regime of Domitian, Epictetus' philosophy acquires an experiential dimension that removes from it any vestige of mere theorizing or posturing."[67] In my view, even though I do not disagree with Glancy, such a perspective as Long's seems the more relevant, historically and philologically speaking, trying as it does to understand the stance of Epictetus from the context of Epictetus himself. Living in a pre-Marxist society where substantial political system critique was unknown, and being himself a (former) slave with no civic rights, Epictetus employs an individual perspective in his quest for attaining the goal of a normative and free self.

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66. Glancy, *Slavery*, 34.
67. Long, *Epictetus*, 11–12.