

Apparent Contradictions in the Text of the Enchiridion

Stoicism was largely defined by way of a little manual called the “Enchiridion”. Written by a student of Epictetus, and based on content from his lectures, the Enchiridion has become a very valuable handbook used by many important people such as Montaigne, Fredrick the Great, and Francis Hutcheson, for example. It has become a cornerstone in the Stoics’ belief system. However, there seems to be a flaw in the basic logic introduced in the book. Chapters XXXIII and I seem to indicate to the reader that appearances do not matter, or are not real, and are not worthy of our attention. Yet, in Chapter XXXIII, he discusses in length how to behave in public, and how to appear to others. This, if a valid contradiction, would undermine all the validity that Stoicism has. Is there really a contradiction in one of the World’s most influencing manuscripts? This paper searches for an answer to that question.

Chapter I of the Enchiridion is the foundational chapter in the book, and rightly so that it is the first material a reader reads. Here, Epictetus lays the groundwork for giving the reader a definition on which to base all other chapters¹. Chapter one, compared to other chapters in the book, is fairly long. He went into sufficient detail and gave examples so that the student could take the point from it easily. He starts by immediately defining what is within our power, and what is

not. “Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in one word, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our power are body, property, reputation, office, and, in one word, whatever are not properly our own affairs.” If the student dwells on this idea, the difference between what is and what is not in our power is very clear. In the third paragraph of the chapter, the idea that things not in our power should not be pursued is clearly presented. Accordingly, if one tries to take such things as his own, then unhappiness will result. This seems to imply that the pursuit of the high opinion of others is a pitfall to be avoided in one’s life. In other words, one should avoid caring about what opinion others have of one’s self, since it is not in one’s power to change.

Chapter XIII is a short paragraph that reiterates on one of the points of Chapter I in more detail, specifically with respect to *externals*. He says “For be assured, it is not easy at once to keep your will in harmony with nature and to secure externals; but while you are absorbed in the one, you must of necessity neglect the other.” Chapter I contends that “... if you would have these [things which are not in your power], and possess power and wealth likewise, you may miss the latter in seeking the former; and you will certainly fail of that by which alone happiness and freedom are procured.” So here, he reiterates the fact that one cannot be happy securing externals while trying at the same time to secure internals. Externals can be defined to include things exterior to one’s self, such as physical and behavioral appearance.

¹ Epictetus didn’t actually compile the books under his own name. They were compiled by a student of his who took notes from the classes Epictetus taught, and then later compiled them into books.

Much later in the book, the ideas in Chapter XXXIII are presented. Here, Epictetus goes to great lengths using many example scenarios to explain how one should behave when under any public eye. This is a specific address to one's behavioral appearance to others that are to be avoided, or minimized, if at all possible. The impression is given that many examples are cited in a broad enough context that one could extrapolate the appropriate behavior from it for any other given situation. Epictetus is specifically addressing the *appearance* external in this chapter.

But, from first inspection, it seems here, contrary to what he taught in Chapters I and XIII, that he is saying appearance *is* in fact important. This apparent contradiction brings up questions concerning the integrity and continuity (and hence validity) of the Enchiridion and Stoicism in general. How is it that within the bounds of the same manuscript Epictetus could teach that appearances both do and don't matter? Which one is it? Do they matter or do they not matter?

To answer this question and therefore repeal the apparent contradiction, two points must be taken into account together. First, it must be recognized that the Enchiridion was written as a compilation of class notes by one of Epictetus' students. There is no evidence to indicate that the chapters are in the same chronological order that they were taught in, and there are reasons to believe that there in fact are *not* any sort of chronological dependence between the chapters. For one thing, none of the chapters have any direct relation to any of the others, with the exception of Stoic theme and that they are all based on the definitions from the first chapter. Each chapter is an independent philosophical discussion on

a particular topic, the total of which defines Stoicism. So it seems that Chapter XXXIII could have just as easily been written into the position of Chapter II. Along these lines, it must be assumed that Epictetus *did* in fact give lectures in some sort of order with an end in mind; this end being the production of Stoics from babes to maturity, through discrete stages of learning. Second, there is a very important word at the beginning of Chapter XXXIII: it reads “Begin by prescribing to yourself some character and demeanor, such as you may preserve both alone and in company.” The very first word, *begin*, implies that the focus for the first stage of learning for a student should be what is discussed in the remainder of the chapter. If this is a valid interpretation, then a student must first spend time in the attainment of self-control by these methods. This would be the first stage in the process of mastering the ways of Stoicism.

By satisfactorily following Chapter XXXIII, the student is well on the road to self-command. By controlling his emotions and reactions to situations, as explained, the meaning of Chapters XIII and I can be realized and followed. But until this first step is taken, the other chapters in the Enchiridion may seem like gibberish. When a student has taken the first steps, then the apparent contradiction no longer exists, as a follower of the Stoicism isn’t necessarily concerned with how others perceive him. He will follow the guidelines set out in Chapter XXXIII, not because he wants to give an impression of any sort, but because they are the right way to behave and because practicing these behaviors continuously reinforces self-command. Then, having realized the meanings of

Chapter I, and having the ability to carry it through, the student can come to the stage of inner freedom and tranquility as is discussed in Chapter I.