

Inconsistencies in the Text of the *Enchiridion*

Stoicism was largely defined by way of a small manual called the *Enchiridion*. It worked its way into the lives of many prominent people in history, and has become a cornerstone of the Stoic belief system. To a first-time reader, or to any other unversed in the ideals and methods of Stoicism, the *Enchiridion* appears to have several logical flaws. Of these is the apparent discrepancy between the intents of Chapters One, Thirteen, and Thirty-three. On the one hand, there are precise instructions and suggestions on how to behave in many social and/or public situations, implying significant concern with other people's opinion of one's self. On the other hand, there are instructions to "be thought foolish and dull with regard to externals", and to say that it is "nothing to you" if it is not in your power¹. This seems to say to regard what people think, and to disregard what people think all at the same time. If this is in fact a contradiction in the text, then the foundation of Stoicism needs to be reworked. If it is not a contradiction, then what is the intended purpose of it? This paper attempts to explore this issue.

Chapter Thirty-three starts by saying that one must *begin* by defining a personal set of character and demeanor rules that can be kept at all times. Twelve recommendations follow this. Is this simply telling people how they ought to act in public, or is there more to it? With examination, the content of each of the recommendations reveals a common theme: self-control by means of avoiding excess. It

says to begin by defining and following rules that will build and reinforce self-control. In this light, Chapter Thirty-three is not a list of convenient acceptable social behaviors used to mold the opinion of others, as it first appears to be. The contradiction that exists at first glance is superficial. So then what is the purpose of Chapter Thirty-three in relation to Chapters One and Thirteen?

Stoicism appeals to the mind. It has concrete ideals of self-control and self-mastery that are desirable to the intellect. In the process of maturing, many people develop a vague sense of Stoicism within themselves. It is not a well-defined doctrine, but a fuzzy notion of the basic ideals of Stoicism picked up from other people, books, interpretations of personal experiences, etc. I happen to fall into this category, and was surprised by how much of the *Enchiridion* I could relate to and agreed with when I read it for the first time. I had matured into a partial self-created Stoic, without even knowing what Stoicism was. It is interesting to note that this self-created Stoic notion implies that the ideal of Stoicism is a fundamental behavior that is universal among people for the sake of its utility, and is not something that is only followed for the sake of having a letter of law to follow². From all of this, the purpose of Chapter Thirty-three emerges.

Both people who are self-created partial Stoics and people who are in training to become Stoics have a significant hurdle to overcome before the cake of Stoicism can be tasted. The hurdle must be cleared before that person can say with full integrity “You are but a semblance and by no means the real thing” to an unpleasing semblance. What then is this hurdle? Chapter One of the *Enchiridion* defines those things that are within our power, and also those things that are not. This definition holds a significant key to self-

¹ According to Chapter One, the opinion of others is not within our own power to control.

mastery. The hurdle is in knowing and *believing* that the things that are in our power are “opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in one word, whatever affairs are our own” and nothing else. In the case of a person who does not like to accept defeat, such as myself, a lifestyle of trying to fit more into the definition than what naturally is there is adopted. When a given approach to a problem fails, then instead of giving up, I try a different approach. This goes on ad infinitum with different approaches to the same problems. The thought process is this: “I know this can be controlled, I just don’t know exactly how to do it yet.” Imagine the frustration that this causes, assuming Epictetus was right and all-inclusive with his definition of things that are in our power. If a person’s self-image involves not quitting and not giving up, then this can cause significant internal friction. Resolve can be brought about (not necessarily easily) if the person comes to terms with Chapter One, and decides that Epictetus’ list is all-inclusive. This is a difficult thing to accomplish, but with enough desire to “iron out the wrinkles” in one’s character continuity, it is necessary to do. I must do it.

Then the purpose for how Chapters One, Thirteen and Thirty-three inter-relate becomes clear. By satisfactorily following Chapter Thirty-three, the student of Stoicism or the self-created partial Stoic is well on the road to self-command. By controlling his emotions and reactions to situations the meaning and intent of Chapters One and Thirteen can be realized and followed. But, until this first step is taken and understood to the fullest, the other chapters in the *Enchiridion* may seem like gibberish, or not seem completely consistent. These first steps are followed not because the person is concerned in any way with how people perceive him or her, but because they are the right way to go

² Although this certainly could be the case in any given situation where a person needed a set of rules to live by, and found Stoicism to be a convenient choice.

about behaving in any given situation and because practicing these behavior continuously as a lifestyle reinforces self-command. Then, having realized the meanings of Chapter One, and having the ability to carry it through and apply it, a person can come to the stage of inner freedom and tranquility as is described in Chapter One. Gone forever is the eternal struggle of trying to fit more things into the list of what is in one's power, and the subsequent repeated failures. The end result: more flowers get to be smelled.