Simplicius on the *Handbook* of Epictetus: towards the life of a sage.

Simplicius was a Platonic philosopher of the early 6th century – he was part of the group of Platonic pagans who left the Roman empire when the Christian emperor, Justinian, declared the teaching of non-Christian philosophy illegal (529 CE). Most of his surviving writings deal with the treatises of Aristotle (but very much from the Neoplatonist perspective, which treated Aristotle as part of the Platonic tradition). But in his *Commentary on Epictetus' Handbook*, we have an important exploration of the foothills of the Platonic ascent to the intelligible world: because the Handbook was aimed at beginners in philosophy, Simplicius is happy to ignore the doctrinal problems when the Stoic view of the soul clashes with the Platonic one.

What are the differences between these two psychologies? In brief, the Stoics understood the soul to be a material entity, and one subject to mortality, as befits something material. It was also denuded of its life-giving characteristic, so that its cognitive power was left in a more isolated state. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* makes this point:

> "In severing the deeply entrenched, Greek ordinary-language connection between soul and life in all its forms, the Stoic theory is taking an enormously momentous step, one that obviously restricts rather dramatically the proper subject matter of a theory of soul. In fact it is arguable that the Stoics, in limiting the functions of soul in the way they did, played an important role in a complicated history that resulted in the Cartesian conception of mind, according to which the mind plainly is not something that animates living bodies. This narrowing of the conception of soul is one of two aspects of the Stoic theory that, for our purposes, deserve particular notice."

The Platonic understanding of the soul is very different: it is immortal and truly non-material, although able to form sympathetic relations to material bodies. As Socrates says in the *Phaedrus* (246b), "Every soul takes care of everything which is inanimate, and revolves about the whole of heaven, becoming situated at different times in different forms." The rationalism of the Stoic is, therefore, closer to modernism, and difficult to incorporate it as an active agent in the providential universe: the aim of the Stoic is ensure that the human being is simply *human*; the aim of the Platonist is to be *divine*.

But at the outset of the Platonic path, as the soul develops its habituated and civic virtues, it is required to moderate the impulses that arise from the passions and desires, and this entirely aligns with the Stoic training. The next step will be to enter the cathartic phase of development, and this too will more or less align with Stoicism; it is only when the contemplative, paradigmatic and hieratic life is embraced that the two teaching diverge. But, for the present, Simplicius only supplements Epictetus' advice with a gentle imposition of a wider frame. So, he writes:

> The aim of the book - if it meets with people who are persuaded by it, and do not merely read it but are actually affected by the speeches and bring them into effect - is to make our soul free, as the Demiurge and Father, its maker and generator, intended it to be: not fearing anything, or distressed at anything, or mastered by anything inferior to it. It is entitled 'The Handbook', because it ought always to be to hand or ready for those who want to live well (just as a soldier's 'hand-sword' should always be to hand for its user). The speeches are very effective and stirring, so that anyone not totally deadened would

> be goaded by them, become aware of his own afflictions, and be roused to correct them. Some are affected more and some less; but someone who is not affected by these speeches could only be corrected by the courts of Hades.
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> His teaching is directed towards human beings as having their essence in accordance with a rational soul and using the body as an instrument. For this reason he permits both marriage and child-raising, and the enjoyment of the other choice-worthy things in life. But at every point he wants the rational soul to keep itself unenslaved by the body and the irrational emotions, by referring even their use towards its proper good. And while he allows the measured enjoyment of the external things that seem to be goods, provided that they are consistent with the genuine good, he enjoins a thoroughgoing abstention from those which are inconsistent with it.
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> One feature of these speeches that may be surprising is that they render the people who believe them and put them into practice blessed and happy without the need to be promised the rewards of virtue after death - even if these rewards always do follow too. For something which uses its body and its irrational emotions as instruments has an essence altogether and wholly separated from them, and persisting after their destruction - and its perfection obviously persists as well, since it is coordinate with its essence.

In this comment, Simplicius has not only emphasized the souls connection with the Demiurge (Socrates has said in the *Phaedrus*, the soul is to assist this God, for "while it is perfect, indeed, and winged, its course is sublime, and it governs the universe.") but also established the separability of the soul – which in the *Phaedo* is shown to be the basis of its immortality. His commentary will explore the Platonic view of the soul's relationship with the body at some length, incorporating Socrates' initial examination of it in the *First Alcibiades*. These foundations having been laid, Simplicius is content to follow Epictetus teachings concerning 'what is up to us and what is not up to us':

> "Of existent things, some are up to us, some are not up to us. Up to us are belief, impulse, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is our work. Not up to us are the body, possessions, reputation, political power, and, in a word, whatever is not our work. And the things that are up to us are by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded; whereas the things that are not up to us are weak, servile, hindered, and not our own. Remember then that if you think things that are servile by nature are free, and think that things that are not our own are our own, you will be impeded, and grieve, and be disturbed; and you will blame both the gods and human beings. But if you consider only what is yours to be yours, and consider what is not yours just as it is, i.e. not yours, then no one will ever compel you, no one will ever hinder you, you will blame no one, you will accuse no one, you won't do a single thing against your will, you won't have an enemy, and no one will harm you, because you won't suffer any harm." (Epictetus, *Handbook,* ch 1)
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> By 'up to us' (*eph' hêmin*) he means those things which we are in control of and over which we have authority. After all, we say that those things are 'up to' each person which he does not have from someone else, and which cannot be impeded by anyone else. The motions of the soul, which arise internally from itself according to its judgment and choice (*proairesis*), are like this. For choice can't be moved from outside. Rather, even if the object of choice is external, the choice itself and the motion towards the object of choice are internal. Having a belief of one sort or another about things - for instance, that wealth or death or something else is good or bad or indifferent - is also like this. Even if we form a judgment this way or that way about it after we've heard someone else, providing we do form a judgment, rather than speaking like trained birds (which say 'I drink spiced wine' without knowing what they are saying), this opinion or belief is our

> own movement; it may sometimes be provoked from the outside or elicited by someone teaching us, but it is not implanted by him. Impulse towards something is also like this, since it too is internal. Even if the object of our impulse is external, and even if our impulse has some origin, still the impulse itself is wholly internal. Our motion isn't like that of people moved externally by being shoved by someone else, but instead like that of people who wake up in accordance with their vital force. Desire is also like this since it is a stretching of the soul towards the object of desire; and aversion (the opposite of desire) too, since it is a turning away and flight from the object of aversion.

This is really Epictetus' key to the philosophic life – the correct identification of what is up to us, and what is not: this tight focus underpins the Stoic agency, and the acceptance of whatever in not up to us as being just that, allows the Stoic to follow the prompting of his or her reason. Simplicius, however, does require the philosopher to see further:

> But to learn more accurately what it is for something to be 'up to us', the thing it is found in, and that it is the root and origin of every sort of good or wretched life for human beings, we must start again from a higher level. The fountain and origin of all beings is the Good. For what everything strives for, and what everything stretches up towards, is the origin and goal of all things. The Good produces everything from itself, both the first things, and the intermediate things, and the lowest things. But it produces the first things contiguous to it and like itself. One Goodness produces many goodnesses, one Simplicity produces many simplicities, one Henad above all henads produces many henads, and one Origin produces many origins.

Simplicius traces the unfolding of the Good (or the One) through these Goods (or the Ones, *Henads*) and thence onwards to through the order of unmoving and eternal intellects, until it brings into being things which are self-moved – that is to say, souls. He says:

> So because this self-moving substance [soul] has descended from the unmoving and is made good by participation, although it does move (i.e. towards the good), it is moved by itself, and not by another, in its striving and intense desire for the good. (The motions that are peculiar to souls are these: striving, desire, impulse, and choice.) But the first souls desire the good connately and inseparably, and have their choice uniformly directed towards the good, and never decline towards the inferior. (They were produced contiguously by the goods-in-themselves and so are congenital with them, even if they stand at a somewhat lower level of descent than them, in that they are not goods-in-themselves, but only desire the good.) And given that '*prohairesis*' means the choice of one thing instead of another, i.e. the better instead of the worse, then perhaps there won't be *prohairesis* in these souls (unless one were to call it *prohairesis* because it is a choice of pre-eminent goods).
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> Human souls, however, are given their form of existence so that they can be a bond between the things that always remain above, and the things that always remain below; and this is why it is in their nature to turn both towards the higher and towards the lower. When they incline their whole selves towards the higher things, their desires and choices are simple and unconflicted. But sometimes they are incapable of this upward turning, because they wish to activate their turning towards the things below. This turning is also something they have in virtue of the soul's essence; its purpose is to animate and move bodies, which are *per se* inanimate and moved by other things, and to put in order the things that by nature share in the good only when moved by other things. (For things of this sort are rather it is always borne towards its object of choice and good, but 'good' in the sense either of what is genuinely a good, or in the sense of a deceptive good that entices us through some pleasure that accompanies it.

> For the true pleasure accompanies the true good; but when the soul perceives a pleasure (a shadow-tracing of the good), and does not judge whether it is a true pleasure and akin to the true good, or a deceptive pleasure and falsely named shadow of the good, it runs after it as after the good, without attending to the fact that it contains many times as much pain.

In all of the twists and turns of life, the advice is to keep one's attention on what is 'up to us' and not to be sway either by the good or bad in external things, for only in *what is up to us*, and our proper response to that, is our good. The philosopher has a long path of education in this and Epictetus has this to say:

> "What disturbs people is not the things, but their beliefs about the things. For instance, death is nothing terrible - otherwise it would have seemed like that to Socrates as well - rather it is the belief about death (the belief that it is terrible) that is terrible. Whenever, then, we are impeded, or disturbed, or distressed, we should never blame someone else, but rather ourselves (that is, our own beliefs). It is the work of an uneducated person to accuse others in cases in which he himself does badly. It is the work of a person whose education is underway to accuse himself. And it is the work of an educated person to blame neither someone else nor himself." (Epictetus, *Handbook,* ch 5)