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The Rich Man and the Thief: Moral Responsibility in Epictetus' Discourses

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The Robbed Man and The Thief
Moral Responsibility in Epictetus' Discourses

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Introduction

After Epictetus, a former slave, acquired his freedom, he went to Nicopolis, where he established his own school for stoic philosophy.¹ From his *Diatribai* or *Discourses*, handed down by Arrianus, it becomes clear that Epictetus is mostly interested in ethics and the application of the theory to real life.² Epictetus mainly aims at persuading his students that they should practice what they were taught during his classes, rather than showing that they fully understand the theory and are able to recite the opinions of others. His purpose is to improve the lives of his students in practice and he emphasizes the importance of training in order to make moral progress. When it comes to reaching happiness, however, an understanding of stoic moral theory is necessary.³

According to Epictetus, happiness can only be achieved if a person acquires what he desires and avoids the things which he considers as bad or painful. Therefore we should not strive for things that we cannot control, nor try to avoid events that are natural and unavoidable. We should live in accordance with nature, since that is the only way to reach happiness: if all we want are the things that would happen anyway, we attain everything we desire. Furthermore, we would never be disappointed or hurt by the things that occur, if those are the events that we want to happen.

As a stoic philosopher, Epictetus believes that the circumstances in which we live do not influence the happiness we experience during our lives. Since we do not control the circumstances of our lives, we should not search for happiness within those circumstances nor other external factors, such as money or health. The Good cannot lie in these materialistic and external elements, since it would result in a situation of scarcity, whereas the Good is always sufficient and it is not possible for people to become happy when they lack the Good. All external things do not fall under the scope of our power and therefore it is impossible for those things to attribute to our happiness, since desiring something that is not in your power, means desiring something that might not happen. And, as Epictetus claims, happiness can only be reached by desiring what happens and by avoiding the things that would not happen anyway. Happiness therefore can only be found in things that we can control. This also means that our happiness could not be diminished by the actions of other persons, because those actions are external to us and therefore do not attribute to our happiness. Since happiness cannot be found in money, the amount of happiness someone experiences does not decrease if another person would steal his money. The same counts for all other external things. If health is not important regarding happiness, it would not matter if someone would physically hurt another and since all circumstances of our lives are external, it would not matter if someone would change the circumstances of the life of another person whatsoever. This poses an important question concerning moral responsibility. If the consequences of our actions are indifferent, why should human beings be held morally responsible for their actions? If there is no crime, how can there be a criminal?

The subject of moral responsibility in Epictetus' *Discourses* has often been examined. Both Bobzien (1998) and Braicovich (2010) deal with the problem of moral responsibility, mostly focussing on the contradiction between the idea of free will on the one hand and the idea of determinism on the other hand. Although this question of compatibilism is important regarding the issue of moral responsibility, it will not be the main interest of this thesis. Besides this issue of compatibilism, there seems to be another contradiction, as Annas (2007) points out. According to Annas it appears that there is a friction between the duty of a philosopher to consider himself as a rational citizen of the universe and the duty of that same person to adjust his way of life to the specific role to which he has

¹ Boter and Brouwer (2011: 7).

² Engels (2012).

³ Cooper (2007: 19). In this article, Cooper gives an account of the steps a student has to make in order to become a morally good person and to be able to reach the good life.

been designated. This is problematic since the circumstances of someone's life should not influence his virtue and rationality, which would mean that this person would not take an interest anymore in his personal life. This is in contradiction to the fact that Epictetus focusses on a practical moral theory that could help improve the lives of individuals, all with their own specific circumstances. To solve this problem, Annas suggests that a rational person understands that he cannot be disconnected from his particular context, and therefore applies the virtues of a rational citizen of the universe to his own life. In this way personal circumstances are still important, even though the truly virtuous person understands that there is more than his own private life. Besides this, Annas states that we can use our circumstances to practice in order to become good or virtuous. Epictetus emphasizes the importance of practicing and he states that everyone can become a better person if he would devote himself to the practice of virtue. According to Salles (2007) this duty to practice is exactly what makes human beings morally responsible for their actions. Salles argues that we distinguish ourselves from animals by our rationality, which makes it obligatory for human beings to deliberate before they act. Since it is possible for everybody, according to Epictetus, to act in a right manner if a person is used to it, and since everyone can be accustomed to it by training, it is our duty to practice and thereby improve ourselves. This results in the fact that we are responsible for our moral progress and thereby for our actions as well, because if we fail to act rightly that is due to the lack of practice that we ought to have exercised.

Epictetus claims that people who act unjustly, do so because they are mistaken about what is right and what is wrong. If a person makes a mistake and does something unjust, he does not consider the action at that moment bad at all, but he mistakenly regards his action to be good. In this thesis I examine where our moral responsibility lies according to Epictetus and what it is that makes us responsible for our actions. In the first chapter I elaborate more on the issue. I analyse what moral responsibility means in general and what it means according to Epictetus. Furthermore, I analyse *Discourses* I.18, a passage that deals with the subject of responding to criminals and their actions. There are two factors in this passage that seem to contradict the idea of moral responsibility. In the first place Epictetus states that we should not be angry with criminals, because they only act in a way that seems right to them, even though they perform immoral deeds. Rather than despising a criminal, we should pity him, because he is mistaken about the most important thing, namely what is right and what is wrong. This would mean, however, that criminals cannot be held accountable for their felonies and that there can be no such thing as moral responsibility. He goes even further in stating that despising a criminal for his immoral deeds is just as bad as committing the immoral deed itself. This becomes clear when the crime of theft is considered, which Epictetus treats in *Discourses* I.18. The action of a thief is wrong, because the thief mistakenly thinks that the notion of 'Good' should be applied to something material. A person who condemns the thief for stealing, is making the same mistake, because he cares for the stolen material, which is in fact neutral, just like the thief. If they are both blameworthy to the same extent, the action of theft is not necessarily wrong, but rather the mistaken application of the notion of 'Good'. This passage in Epictetus' *Discourses* thus leads to two questions, which I discuss in the next chapters respectively, in order to resolve the seeming contradictions in I.18.

In the second chapter I examine where moral responsibility lies and I argue that moral responsibility cannot depend on the consequences, since those are neutral and morally unimportant according to Epictetus. A logical conclusion could be that it is dependent on the intention of the agent, but this is also not possible, since everyone has good intentions according to Epictetus. It is only because of an error that people act in a wrong manner. If moral responsibility does not lie in the consequences of actions, nor in the intention of agents, it must lie somewhere else. In order to answer this question of placing moral responsibility, I look into the nature of human beings. A typical characteristic of humans is their rationality. According to Epictetus we have the duty to apply this

rationality and therefore we are morally responsible, even if the cause of our wrong actions is a misstep, since we could and should have avoided the error to begin with. Other than Salles and Annas, however, I state that our moral responsibility does not lie in the duty to practice, since people are morally responsible from the beginning, even without practicing. Even though Epictetus' philosophy aims at improving the practical life of his students and of people in general, the reason why we are morally responsible has to do with theory rather than practice.

In the third and final chapter I examine what Epictetus means by the notion of 'Good'. In *Discourses* I.18 it seems as if the only wrong aspect of theft is that someone considers something neutral as good. Therefore it is the wrong application of the notion of 'Good' rather than the fact that someone is stealing and thereby hurting another individual, that should be considered as wrong and even immoral. By analysing these two contradictions in *Discourses* I.18, as discussed in chapter two and three, I try to reconcile the ideas that come forward in this passage regarding moral responsibility with the rest of Epictetus' *Discourses*, such as the idea that we do in fact have a moral responsibility, which also includes a responsibility concerning our actions.

Chapter 1 – Moral responsibility

1.1 The meaning of moral responsibility

In order to examine the place of moral responsibility within Epictetus' philosophy, it is important to describe what is meant by it in general and what Epictetus intends by it. Conventionally, moral responsibility is associated with moral praise and blame.⁴ Someone can only be disdained in regard to an action, if that person is morally responsible for the deed he has committed. This means that someone who committed a morally wrong deed, is only blameworthy for this action if he is also responsible for it. The same counts for a good or just action. Solely if someone is morally responsible for a good action, the person can be praised for it. This is evident, because it would be illogical to praise or blame someone for an action that he is not responsible for. It is often suggested that people are morally responsible for something that occurs if they are the cause of that occurrent event. However, it is very difficult to determine the extent to which someone is the cause of an event, considering the fact that there are always external factors that play a role in the outcome of an action. This means that it is possible that a person intends to do something, but something else is established because of another incident. It can also be the case that a person fails to do what he ought to have done, but his failure is due to external circumstances rather than to himself. According to some, people are only morally responsible for an action, if that person could have acted otherwise. This is known as the Principle of Alternate Possibilities.⁵ An important aspect of moral responsibility seems to be the liability of the agent, which means that a person can only be held accountable for his actions if that person was fully aware of the consequences of his proceeding and deliberately chose to act in a certain way.⁶

Regarding moral responsibility, it is important, according to Epictetus, to make a distinction between things that are in our power and things that are not. As stated above, it is often argued that people are morally responsible for something, if they are the cause of it. This is also what Epictetus claims, by dividing everything in the two categories just mentioned.⁷ To the first category belongs

⁴ Talbert (2016: 9). It is important to note here that this description of moral responsibility is often used in contemporary philosophy.

⁵ Stump (1994: 237).

⁶ Talbert (2016: 13-16).

⁷ Salles (2014: 171).

everything that we are able to control, such as our opinions. To the second category belongs everything external to us, such as wealth, health, life, death and everything else that we have acquired or happens to us by fortune, but can always be taken away again.⁸ Epictetus states that we should only apply the notion of 'Good' to things which are under our control. This means that family, possessions and everything else that people cannot control, are not to be considered as good, but should be regarded as neutral. In a moral sense, this is obvious, since it would not be reasonable to claim that people are responsible for things that are not in their power.

Epictetus states that the way people deal with impressions does belong to the things that are under our control. According to Epictetus, impressions come to us all the time and it is our duty to consider them in a right way. This means that people should assent to right impressions and reject impressions that are wrong. In most cases people are capable of considering the impressions that come to them correctly, but when it comes to moral impressions,⁹ people often make mistakes. When people experience something that is in fact neutral, such as the loss of a family member, they tend to evaluate this as bad or painful and thereby they misinterpret their experience¹⁰ and they assent to a false impression, namely the impression that the loss of a family member is a bad thing. The way people analyse their impressions and decide whether they should judge an impression as good and another as bad, is morally relevant, because if someone is capable of judging the impressions in the right way, he will know which things are good and which are bad. Therefore it is important that people are capable of valuing their impressions correctly. The faculty that enables human beings to determine whether something should be valued as good or as bad, is προαίρεσις, by which is meant the moral choice that people have and the preference of the Good. Through προαίρεσις people are able to decide which things are in our power and which things are not.

As stated above, according to Epictetus we are morally responsible for the things that are in our power. In order to see whether humans are morally responsible, it is therefore important to examine the extent to which our moral choice is under our control. The προαίρεσις is entirely in our power and cannot be influenced by anything external.¹¹ Epictetus repeatedly mentions the fact that the gods gave us the faculty to value our impressions in the right way, which means that this is something we can control.¹² It cannot be influenced by anything other than ourselves. This is even more emphasized by Epictetus when he states that not even the gods can influence this faculty:

⁸ Epictetus *Discourses* I. 22.11. οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμῖν δὲ τὸ σῶμα, τὰ μέρη τοῦ σώματος, κτήσεις, γονεῖς, ἀδελφοί, τέκνα, πατρίς, ἀπλῶς οἱ κοινωνοί. 'Not under our control are our body, the parts of the body, property, parents, brothers, children, fatherland, in short everything around us' (All translations are my own).

⁹ By moral impressions is meant impressions that include a value judgment. Most people are not misled by impressions concerning facts, such as the fact that a person lost his possessions, but they are often mistaken when they value those facts. In the case of the deprivation of possessions, this would mean that people value the deprivation as a bad thing. This would be a mistake, since a person who values deprivation in this way, is considering the impression as if it concerns something moral, even though the deprivation of possessions is morally irrelevant.

¹⁰ Here it should be observed that Epictetus uses a moral connotation for the words 'good' and 'bad'. In general the word 'good' can often also be used to describe things that are morally irrelevant, but have to do with circumstances. People could for example consider the weather to be good, or food to taste bad. Whereas they are neutral in regard to morality, it is not unusual to consider these things as good or bad. According to Epictetus however, it is not possible to apply the notions of 'Good' or 'Bad' to things that are morally insignificant, because the word 'good' always has a moral connotation and the same counts for the word 'bad'.

¹¹ Rowe (2016: 60).

¹² Epictetus *Discourses* I.1.2. Ὡσπερ οὖν ἦν ἄξιον, τὸ κράτιστον ἀπάντων καὶ κυριεῦον οἱ θεοὶ μόνον ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἐποίησαν, τὴν χρῆσιν τὴν ὀρθὴν ταῖς φαντασίαις, τὰ δ' ἄλλα οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμῖν. 'As was suitable, the gods only put the most powerful and dominating of all in our power, the right use of impressions, all the other things they did not put in our power.'

καίτοι ὁ γε θεὸς οὐ μόνον ἔδωκεν ἡμῖν τὰς δυνάμεις ταύτας, καθ' ἃς οἴσομεν πᾶν τὸ ἀποβαῖνον μὴ ταπεινούμενοι μηδὲ συγκλώμενοι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ, ἀλλ' ὁ ἦν ἀγαθοῦ βασιλέως καὶ ταῖς ἀληθείαις πατρός, ἀκώλυτον τοῦτο ἔδωκεν, ἀνανάγκαστον, ἀπαραπόδιστον, ὅλον αὐτὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἐποίησεν οὐδ' αὐτῷ τινα πρὸς τοῦτο ἰσχὺν ἀπολιπών, ὥστε κωλύσαι ἢ ἐμποδίσει.

And yet, God did not only give us these faculties, by which we will endure everything that happens without being dejected nor being shattered by it,¹³ but he was a good king and truly a father, and he gave this unhindered, unconstrained, free from interference, he put the whole thing in our power, not leaving something of this power for himself, to hinder or obstruct.¹⁴

The fact that not even God is able to control this capacity, means that it is completely in our power and also that we are fully responsible for it. This does not only extend to our προαίρεσις, but to our actions as well,¹⁵ because of which it must be concluded that we are also responsible for our actions.

1.2 The contradictions in Discourses I.18

As becomes clear from the previous section, we do have moral responsibility according to Epictetus. This means that people should be praised when they have done something good and blamed when they have done something wrong. In *Discourses* I.18 however, Epictetus states that we should not be angry with people who commit crimes or morally wrong deeds, because the reason why people perform these malefactions is that they are mistaken about what is right and what is wrong. The fact that we are not allowed to be angry with people who perform immoral actions, means that those people should not be blamed for their wrongdoing. Since being responsible for actions means that people are blameworthy when they have done something wrong, it seems as if it is necessary to conclude that people cannot be morally responsible.

According to Epictetus, the reason why people commit crimes, is because they think it will lead them to something good. In the case of stealing, people take away what belongs to another person, because they reckon they will achieve something beneficial by stealing. They apply the common notion of 'Good' to materialistic possessions and in that way they make an error. Epictetus states that people who judge the crime of theft, make the same mistake, because they value the materialistic possessions just as much as the thief, otherwise they would not have been angry. Therefore, Epictetus claims that people should not consider their possessions as important, but as neutral since everything that is not in our power should be regarded as indifferent. In doing so they will not be angry any longer if their belongings would be stolen:

διὰ τί οὖν χαλεπαίνομεν; ὅτι τὰς ὕλας θαυμάζομεν, ὧν ἡμᾶς ἀφαιροῦνται. ἐπεὶ τοι μὴ θαύμαζε σου τὰ ἱμάτια καὶ τῷ κλέπτῃ οὐ χαλεπαίνεις· μὴ θαύμαζε τὸ κάλλος τῆς γυναικὸς καὶ τῷ μοιχῷ οὐ χαλεπαίνεις. γνῶθι ὅτι κλέπτης καὶ μοιχὸς ἐν τοῖς σοῖς τόπον οὐκ ἔχει, ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἀλλοτρίοις καὶ τοῖς οὐκ ἐπὶ σοί. ταῦτα ἂν ἀφῆς καὶ παρὰ μηδὲν ἠγήσῃ, τίτι ἔτι χαλεπαίνεις;

¹³ Epictetus describes which faculties he means. The faculty that is concerned here is the ability of people to endure any circumstances. This is relevant for the current discussion, because the way by which people would be capable of enduring anything, is realising that those circumstances are not under our control and therefore should not be considered as hard at all. From this it becomes clear that Epictetus is referring to the capacity of people to discern what is in our power and what is not.

¹⁴ Epictetus *Discourses* I.6.40.

¹⁵ Epictetus *Discourses* I.22.10. ἐφ' ἡμῖν μὲν προαίρεσις καὶ πάντα τὰ προαιρετικὰ ἔργα. 'In our power is moral choice and all actions concerning moral choice.'

Why then are we angry? Because we admire the material, of which they deprive us. For do not admire your clothes and you are not angry with the thief; do not admire the beauty of your wife and you are not angry with the adulterer. Know that neither the thief nor the adulterer has a place in your belongings, but in those of others and in the belongings that do not pertain to you. If you turn away from these things and consider them to be nothing, with whom will you be angry yet?¹⁶

Thus, Epictetus states here that considering something neutral to be good is the mistake that a thief makes, which is in fact the same mistake of someone being angry with the thief, since the latter person is also admiring the stolen objects, even though these things are neutral. Epictetus goes even further in claiming that the robbed person should be angry with himself as well, since he is making the same error as the thief and thereby he is in a way just as guilty.

μέχρι δ' ἂν ταῦτα θαυμάζῃς, σεαυτῷ χαλέπαινε μᾶλλον ἢ ἐκείνοις. σκόπει γάρ· ἔχεις καλὰ ἱμάτια, ὁ γείτων σου οὐκ ἔχει· θυρίδα ἔχεις, θέλεις αὐτὰ ψῦξαι. οὐκ οἶδεν ἐκεῖνος τί τὸ ἀγαθόν ἐστι τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀλλὰ φαντάζεται ὅτι τὸ ἔχειν καλὰ ἱμάτια, τοῦτο ὁ καὶ σὺ φαντάζῃ. εἴτα μὴ ἔλθῃ καὶ ἄρῃ αὐτά;

As long as you would admire these things, be angry with yourself rather than with others. Because look at it: you have fine clothes, your neighbour does not have them; you have a window, you want to dry them. He does not know what the good of a man is, but he imagines that it is having fine clothes, which is what you imagine as well. Would he then not come and take them?¹⁷

This is problematic, because it means that the only difference between the owner of the clothes and the thief, is that the first has fine garments whereas the latter does not. This difference is insignificant from a moral point of view, since it belongs to the things that cannot be controlled by a person, which becomes clear from this very example in which the clothes are stolen, obviously against the will of the owner. Since the only difference between the robbed person and the thief is neglectable from a moral perspective, the thief and the robbed man who is angry with the thief should indeed be blamed to the same extent. Because of this, the actual crime of theft is replaced for another unjust performance. From this example of Epictetus, it becomes clear that the only crime committed here, is that both the thief and the bereft man are concerned with something neutral and unimportant and wrongly claim that the clothes are to be considered as good. The fact that the clothes were stolen is morally insignificant, because the clothes itself do not matter either. Also the fact that a person got hurt is not what makes the action of the thief wrong. If anyone should be blamed for the way the robbed person got hurt, it is that person himself. The reason why he got hurt, was because he valued his clothes too much, which is the very same misstep that the thief made.

This passage raises two questions. In the first place it becomes clear that moral responsibility is not dependent on the consequences of ones actions, because they do not belong to the sphere of things an agent can control and therefore they have nothing to do with moral responsibility. Also,

¹⁶ Epictetus *Discourses* I.18.11-12.

¹⁷ Epictetus *Discourses* I.18.13-14. This quotation follows directly the previous cited passage. In the following part of the passage Epictetus claims that people should not show their belongings in front of people who do not have those belongings, but would like to acquire them. If a person would want those possessions and if another person would display his belongings openly, it is no wonder that his property would be stolen one day. From a modern perspective this becomes even more problematic, because it seems as if Epictetus claims here that the victims have provoked the crime of theft by displaying their possessions, whereas most people would agree that the guilt of a crime should not be attributed to the victim who is accused of having provoked the action of the offender.

moral responsibility cannot be based on the agent's intentions, because Epictetus claims that everyone aims at the Good. This raises the question where moral responsibility lies and what it is based on. In the second place it should be examined what Epictetus means by the notion of 'Good', because it seems to be problematic that a thief is just as blameworthy as the person he robbed and that the only blameworthy action they performed is applying the notion of 'Good' in the wrong way. This results in the fact that there is no difference between crimes anymore, nor between the extent to which different crimes are to be condemned. If the results of actions do not matter, but only the right application of the notion of 'Good', a thief should be punished in the same way as for example a murderer and they are guilty in the same amount. Furthermore, criminals are just as culpable as their victims, in the case that the victims consider the deeds of the criminals as hurtful and therefore wrong. If this is true, the crime itself does not matter whatsoever.

Chapter 2 – The basis of moral responsibility

2.1 Moral responsibility on the basis of consequences

According to Epictetus, people cannot control the circumstances of their lives and therefore these do not matter from a moral perspective. Anything that happens to us should be considered as neutral. This also counts for things that are done to us by other people, even intentionally. People can only influence the circumstances that do not fall under the power of the 'affected' people, but they cannot have an impact on the προαίρεσις of another person.¹⁸ This means that a person's happiness cannot be altered by the actions of others.¹⁹ This seems to result in a discrepancy. If it does not matter that the circumstances of someone are changed by another person, why would that other person be blamed or praised for changing the circumstances? If a person would for instance steal money from someone else and if it does not matter to the robbed person whether he has money or not, because money is neutral and does not contribute to his happiness, why would the thief be blamed for his action and why would stealing be considered as bad? In order to resolve this problem, it is important to demonstrate that actions and consequences should be considered separately, because of which it is possible to argue that actions can be considered as good or bad, even though the consequences cannot be valued in this way.

The fact that actions and consequences can be judged individually becomes clear from actions that turn out differently than the agent had initially intended. In these situations the consequences do not correspond with the intended action of the agent. An example of this is the case in which someone is aiming at shooting someone else, which is a wrong deed. If the shooter misses, the consequences of the intended victim are not altered and therefore the consequence of the event can be considered neutral, or even good if it is taken into account that it could have ended worse. Even though the consequences are not bad, the action of the shooter should be considered morally wrong, because he did intend to hurt another person, even though he missed. The fact that he failed does not decrease the wrongness of his action and he is still blameworthy for what he tried to do and therefore he is fully responsible for his intended action. This example demonstrates that

¹⁸ Epictetus *Discourses* 18.17-18. “Ἄλλ’ ὁ τύραννος δήσει” —τί; τὸ σκέλος· “ἄλλ’ ἀφελεῖ” —τί; τὸν τράχηλον. τί οὖν οὐ δήσει οὐδ’ ἀφελεῖ; τὴν προαίρεσιν. ““But the tyrant will chain” – What? Your leg; “But he will cut off” – What? Your neck. What, thus, will he neither chain nor cut off? Your moral choice.’ This idea that people cannot affect or hurt other persons, because they can only control their own moral choice, is repeatedly emphasized by Epictetus in different passages (see for example: *Discourses* I.15, I.19, I.29, III.18, IV.5, IV.7). Also the example of a tyrant who threatens to hurt someone is used several times throughout the *Discourses* (Chester and Starr, 1949: 20).

¹⁹ William (2007: 47).

people can be held morally responsible for their actions, even though the agent did not change the circumstances of the intended victim and he did not deteriorate his state of affairs. The fact that he intended to make the circumstances worse, makes him blameworthy and his action should be considered as bad. From this it can be concluded that moral responsibility cannot be based on the consequences of an action.

2.2 Moral responsibility on the basis of intentions

From the previous section it becomes clear that, even though the results of an action are not what the agent had in mind in the first place and the outcome of the action is not bad at all, people can be held morally responsible for their performances, because the action that the agent had intended was morally wrong. On the score of this, it would be plausible to conclude that the reason why people are morally responsible is due to the intentions they have on which their activities are based. According to Epictetus however, this inference is incorrect, because, following the arguments of Epictetus, it is not possible to conclude that people have wrong intentions at all.

Logically, people who act with wrong intentions are striving for something bad and therefore they are blameworthy and thus morally responsible for their actions, and also for the outcome of their actions inasmuch as the outcome was due only to the action and the intention of that agent.²⁰ The same counts for people who perform things with right intentions. In having good intentions they are trying to achieve something good. Therefore they are praiseworthy and also morally responsible for that act. This becomes clear from the fact that actions should be regarded independently of the consequences, as stated above. There are situations possible, in which people intend to do something wrong, but they fail. Their failure results in the fact that no harm is done, but they should still be condemned for what they tried to do, because they acted with a wrong intention. On the contrary, if a person tries to do something good, for example saving the life of another person, his action is praiseworthy, whether his performance of saving a life is successful or not. The praiseworthiness of his action is based on his intention rather than on the outcome of his action. This means that people can only be blamed for their wrongdoing when they intentionally did something wrong. When people are acting with a good intention, their action should be considered as good likewise, regardless of the outcome of that action. Striving for something bad and thereby having a bad intention is therefore blameworthy, whereas striving for something good is always praiseworthy, because the agent has a good intention. This is problematic with respect to moral responsibility, because Epictetus claims that people are always striving for the good, which means that they always have good intentions. It is only because of an error that people act in a wrong manner, but the fact that it is an error means that it was never intended by the agent and so it should not be taken into account when the moral responsibility of that agent is examined.

Epictetus argues that people are always aiming at the good, by comparing it to impressions to which people assent and impressions with which people do not agree. He states that people only assent to impressions that they consider to be true. They do not agree with impressions that are false in their opinion. Finally, they suspend their judgment when they cannot be certain whether an impression is true or false.²¹ From this Epictetus concludes that people only assent to something

²⁰ Evidently, people cannot be held morally responsible for the outcome of an action when the results have been influenced by external factors that could not have been controlled by the agent.

²¹ Epictetus *Discourses* I.28.1-3. Τί ἐστὶν αἴτιον τοῦ συγκατατίθεσθαι τινι; τὸ φαίνεσθαι ὅτι ὑπάρχει. τῷ οὖν φαινομένῳ ὅτι οὐχ ὑπάρχει συγκατατίθεσθαι οὐχ οἶόν τε. διὰ τί; ὅτι ἡ φύσις αὕτη ἐστὶ τῆς διανοίας, τοῖς μὲν ἀληθέσιν ἐπινεύειν, τοῖς δὲ ψευδέσι δυσαρρεσεῖν, πρὸς δὲ τὰ ἄδηλα ἐπέχειν. 'What is the reason of assenting to something? The appearing that it is a fact. Thus it is impossible to assent to something that does not appear so. Why? Because this is the nature of the mind, to accede to true things, to be displeased by false things, to be

which is untrue, when they assume they are confirming something true. In other words, people only assent to something false in the guise of an error. Epictetus compares this natural tendency towards truth with the tendency of human beings towards the Good. In this analogy the Good corresponds to the truth, whereas the Bad can be compared to the things that are false. The things that are uncertain and cannot be valued, correspond with everything that is morally neutral. The conclusion that should be drawn from this, is that people would always choose for the Good as long as they are capable of distinguishing the Good from the Bad, just like people would always assent to the truth as long as they are right about what they consider to be true. It is impossible to deliberately choose for the Bad, as becomes clear from the following citation:

“οὐ δύναται οὖν τις δοκεῖν μὲν, ὅτι συμφέρει αὐτῷ, μὴ αἰρεῖσθαι δ’ αὐτό;” οὐ δύναται.

“So someone cannot think that it benefits him and yet not choose this?” He cannot.²²

Right after Epictetus makes this strong statement, an interlocuter²³ replies that this cannot be true and he uses the example of Medea,²⁴ the woman who killed her own children in order to perform an act of vengeance towards her husband. Medea knew that her intended action was morally wrong and yet she executed it anyway, because she was not able to control her anger. Her emotions defeated her rationality. The interlocuter claims that Medea considered it to be better to give in to her anger and kill her children than to stay rational and therefore she deliberately chose for a wrong action. This statement is based on Medea’s awareness that she was about to perform a crime. Epictetus answers that Medea did indeed consider it preferable to perform the crime, but in doing so she made a mistake. If someone could have convinced her that the act of vengeance is in fact worse, she would not have committed the crime. This shows that Medea acted wrongly although she thought she was doing the right thing, which means she was aiming at the Good, but failed. Her intention should thus be considered as good and therefore, if moral responsibility is based on intentions, she cannot be blamed for what she did. This means that she is not morally responsible for murdering her own children; it was only due to an error that she committed this deed.²⁵

Just like this passage of Medea, in which Epictetus shows that people always have good intentions, there is another passage, where Epictetus uses the same argument of comparison to show that people always aim at the Good. In *Discourses* III.3 Epictetus makes this equation as well, in

silent when it comes to unclear things.’ Epictetus proves these statements by proposing to his interlocutors to believe that it is night. Because everyone knows for certain that it is daytime, they simply cannot believe otherwise. They know the truth and they cannot maintain the opposite of the truth, at least not to themselves. It is also not possible for them to reject the conviction that it is daytime. Finally, when it comes to something people cannot possibly know, they suspend their belief. In order to prove this Epictetus asks his audience to claim that the number of stars is even. They cannot know this and therefore they do not hold an opinion concerning this matter.

²² Epictetus *Discourses* I. 28.7. It is important to note here that the beneficial and the Good can be identified according to Epictetus.

²³ In most cases where there is an interlocuter involved, it is not certain whether this is an actual interlocuter, or only a hypothetical one in order for Epictetus to refute possible counter arguments (Boter and Brouwer, 2011: 37).

²⁴ It is not uncommon to use Medea as an example in stoic philosophy. Chrysippus also used the example of Medea just like Epictetus does in this passage (Dillon, 1997: 214). Epictetus also mentions her in other passages (see for example II.17.19 and IV.13.15).

²⁵ Epictetus *Discourses* I.28.8-9. δεῖξον αὐτῇ ἐναργῶς ὅτι ἐξηπάτηται καὶ οὐ ποιήσει· μέχρι δ’ ἂν οὐ μὴ δεικνύῃς, τίτι ἔχει ἀκολουθῆσαι ἢ τῷ φαινομένῳ; οὐδενί. ‘Demonstrate her clearly that she is deceived and she will not do it; As long as you do not demonstrate it, to what can she conform other than to what seems to be true? To nothing.’

stating that there is a similarity between the fact that people only assent to things which they think are true and the fact that everyone strives for the Good by their nature:

πέφυκεν δὲ πᾶσα ψυχὴ ὡσπερ τῷ ἀληθεῖ ἐπινεύειν, πρὸς τὸ ψεῦδος ἀνανεύειν, πρὸς τὸ ἀδελον ἐπέχειν, οὕτως πρὸς μὲν τὸ ἀγαθὸν ὀρεκτικῶς κινεῖσθαι, πρὸς δὲ τὸ κακὸν ἐκκλιτικῶς, πρὸς δὲ τὸ μήτε κακὸν μήτ' ἀγαθὸν οὐδετέρως.

Just like every soul is by nature in such a way that they accede to the truth, that they refuse the lie and that they are silent when it comes to something unclear, so is every soul by nature in such a way that they are moved eagerly towards the Good, aversely towards the Bad and neutrally towards something which is not bad nor good.²⁶

It becomes clear from these passages that people always intend to do something good. Bad actions are thus a result of a mistake.²⁷ If this is true, moral responsibility cannot lie in the intentions of an agent, because in that case there could be no space for wrong actions and therefore blameworthiness. Since it is certain that people do have moral responsibility according to Epictetus, there should be another factor on which moral responsibility is based, if not on consequences nor on intentions.

2.3 Moral responsibility based on the faculty of rationality

Epictetus states that people distinguish themselves from animals by their rationality, since they are the only creatures who have access to the faculty of reason. Human beings have a duty to use this rationality, because it was given to them by God with a purpose. Animals are capable of eating, drinking and dealing with impressions, just like humans, but they are not able to understand the meaning of these impressions in contrast to human beings. According to Epictetus everyone should act in accordance with their nature. For human beings this means that they should use their faculty of intelligence.²⁸ This is not just a preferable way of acting, but a duty imposed by divine power. Since everything in this world is distributed by great providence in order for all creatures to work with the faculties that were given to them, it would be wrong to depart from what is natural to someone by not using the faculties that God gave to them. To humans, God gave the faculty of understanding the impressions that they experience and to interpret them and therefore it would be wrong to be ignorant regarding this faculty.²⁹

τὸν δ' ἄνθρωπον θεατὴν εἰσήγαγεν αὐτοῦ τε καὶ τῶν ἔργων τῶν αὐτοῦ, καὶ οὐ μόνον θεατὴν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐξηγητὴν αὐτῶν. διὰ τοῦτο αἰσχροὺς ἐστὶ τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ ἄρχεσθαι καὶ καταλήγειν ὅπου καὶ τὰ ἄλογα, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἔνθεν μὲν ἄρχεσθαι, καταλήγειν δὲ ἐφ' ὃ

²⁶ Epictetus *Discourses* III.3.2-3.

²⁷ This claim that no one ever has a desire to do something wrong is strongly influenced by Socrates, as Long points out (2002: 71).

²⁸ Epictetus *Discourses* I.6.14-17. διὰ τοῦτο ἐκείνοις μὲν ἀρκεῖ τὸ ἐσθίειν καὶ πίνειν καὶ τὸ ἀναπαύεσθαι καὶ ὀχεύειν καὶ τᾶλλ' ὅσα ἐπιτελεῖ τῶν αὐτῶν ἕκαστον, ἡμῖν δ' ὅτις καὶ τὴν παρακολουθητικὴν δύναμιν ἔδωκεν, οὐκέτι ταῦτ' ἀπαρκεῖ, ἀλλ' ἂν μὴ κατὰ τρόπον καὶ τεταγμένως καὶ ἀκολουθῶς τῆ ἑκάστου φύσει καὶ κατασκευῇ πράττωμεν, οὐκέτι τοῦ τέλους τευξόμεθα τοῦ ἑαυτῶν. 'Because of this it is enough for them to eat and drink and to sleep and inseminate and all the other things of their own province that each one executes. To us, to whom he has given the ability of understanding, these things are not sufficient anymore, but if we do not act according to our way of living and in an ordered manner and in a way that is appropriate to each one's nature and equipment, we will not reach our own purpose.'

²⁹ It is reasonable to argue that moral responsibility is based on the duty to use the faculty of rationality, because this would mean that only human beings are morally responsible for their actions, since they are the only creatures who are capable of understanding and interpreting the things they experience.

κατέληξεν ἐφ' ἡμῶν καὶ ἡ φύσις. κατέληξεν δ' ἐπὶ θεωρίαν καὶ παρακολούθησιν καὶ σύμφωνον διεξαγωγὴν τῇ φύσει.

He introduced the man as a spectator of himself and of his works, and not just as a spectator, but also as an interpreter of these things. Because of this it is shameful for a man to begin and end where the irrational creatures do, but he should rather begin here and end there where nature has ended with regard to us. She ended at consideration and understanding and a way of life that is in accordance with nature.³⁰

Epictetus claims that every person always aims at the Good, because they all have good intentions. Therefore, every wrong action of a person is the result of an error, since it is not possible to aim at something bad instead of good. This means that, if a person acts in an immoral way, he did not intend to do so in the first instance, but he made a mistake, which signifies that he did not use his faculty of reason in the right manner. This leads to the fact that he acts wrongly, even though he had a good intention prior to his action, because he thought he was about to do the right thing, but he was mistaken about this. He can still be held morally responsible, because he should not have made the mistake to begin with, since people have the capacity to make the right decisions. If the person would have considered his action better, he would not have made the mistake. Therefore it is negligence that makes a person blameworthy for his action. According to this, people are morally responsible, because they have a duty to use the faculty of reason that was given to them.³¹

The duty of human beings to be rational is relevant regarding moral responsibility, because an understanding of the things that occur in their lives will automatically lead to morally good actions. Every person is already intended to act in the right way, which means that all immoral actions are the result of a mistake. If these mistakes can be avoided by the right use of the faculty of rationality, people will know how to act in a good way, and since they already want to do so, they will not act immorally anymore.

2.4 The duty to practice

According to Epictetus, people are morally responsible, because they are rational creatures who should avoid reckless deeds by deliberating before acting. However, as Salles points out, people can only be considered to be morally responsible if they are capable of avoiding these reckless actions.³² If a person is not able to deliberate before acting, he cannot be regarded as morally responsible, because a person cannot be blamed for something that he could not have avoided to begin with. According to Salles, Epictetus shows that people are indeed capable of avoiding recklessness, because they can learn how to act in the right way by exercising. This means that people can be taught not to respond immediately to impressions, but to consider those impressions first in order to think about the right way to deal with them. By practicing to withhold an immediate reaction towards an impression, a person will make a custom of deliberating before responding to an impression, which will lead towards good actions. The fact that every person is capable of practicing this, means that everyone is morally responsible. This indicates that moral responsibility is on the one hand based on rationality, the faculty that distinguishes human beings from other creatures. It

³⁰ Epictetus *Discourses* I.6.19-22.

³¹ Salles (2007: 250). Salles calls this the Normative Argument. People can be irrational concerning their actions, when they deliberated before acting, but decide to perform a deed that is not in accordance with their deliberation. This type of irrational action is weakness of will. Another way of acting irrationally is when people did not deliberate before acting at all, which leads to rashness. Epictetus argues that these people are still morally responsible for their actions, because they should have deliberated prior to their action.

³² Salles (2007: 257).

also shows that moral responsibility is on the other hand dependent on practicing with reactions towards impressions.

However, it is problematic to claim that moral responsibility is based on the duty to exercise, because this would mean that people who are better at philosophy and to whom the training is more effective, have more moral responsibility than people who find it more difficult to exercise. It is also troublesome, because the circumstances of an individual's life become relevant if moral responsibility is based on exercise, since some people might have better circumstances to practice with. It could for example be the case that someone experiences a lot of difficulties during his life, which will bring him more experience and therefore more material to exercise with. This may lead to morally better actions, which is indeed a good result, but it would be unreasonable to claim that this person has more moral responsibility, because he is more experienced in enduring troubles. Because of this, people should be considered to be morally responsible even before they have started to exercise, because moral responsibility is based on a faculty of human beings that they possess from the beginning and that does not need to be practiced in order for people to use it. This means that people, in order to be morally responsible, should be able to avoid recklessness even without exercising.

Nevertheless, Epictetus emphasizes the necessity of training in order for people to act in the right way, from which it may indeed seem that moral responsibility is dependent on exercise according to Epictetus. In *Discourses* II.18 for instance, Epictetus describes how people can learn to deal with impressions in the right way by exercising. Epictetus states that people should make a custom of dealing with impressions in the right way in order to become good at it, just as it is the case with all other things people try to be good at. On the other hand, if a person does not try to discourage bad habits, the person will become used to acting in accordance with these bad habits and it will be even harder to unlearn those wrong customs. Therefore it is important to exercise, in order to make a custom of acting in the right way.

It is crucial to note here, however, that Epictetus shows in this passage the way people should exercise in order to deal with their impressions.³³ Yet this is not the first step of exercise a person should make in order to be able to act in the right way. Rightly dealing with impressions is for people who have already exercised and are somewhat advanced. But if a person does not yet have this experience of training, he should start with focussing on what things he should strive for and what things he should avoid. If a person has mastered this first step, he can focus on the next step, which has to do with impulses. Finally, when a person is also able to control this, he reaches the third stadium, which concerns assent and difficult philosophical arguments. Epictetus thus distinguishes three stadia that people should pass.

Τρεῖς εἰσὶ τόποι, περὶ οὓς ἀσκηθῆναι δεῖ τὸν ἐσόμενον καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν· ὁ περὶ τὰς ὀρέξεις καὶ τὰς ἐκκλίσεις, ἵνα μὴτ' ὀρεγόμενος ἀποτυγχάνῃ μὴτ' ἐκκλίνων περιπίπτῃ· ὁ περὶ τὰς ὀρμὰς καὶ ἀφορμὰς καὶ ἀπλῶς ὁ περὶ τὸ καθῆκον, ἵνα τάξει, ἵνα εὐλογίστως, ἵνα μὴ ἀμελῶς· τρίτος ἐστὶν ὁ περὶ τὴν ἀνεξαπατησίαν καὶ ἀνεικαιοσύνην καὶ ὅλως ὁ περὶ τὰς συγκαταθέσεις.

There are three topics, in which the person who will be strong and good should be trained; one is about desires and avoidances, so that he may not lose something although he strives for it, nor plunge into misfortune although he avoids it; the other one is about impulses and repulsions and in general about duty, so that he may act with order, thoughtful and not

³³ Epictetus *Discourses* 2.18.24-25. τὸ πρῶτον δ' ὑπὸ τῆς ὀξύτητος μὴ συναρπασθῆς, ἀλλ' εἰπέ "ἔκδεξάι με μικρόν, φαντασία· ἄφες ἴδω τίς εἶ καὶ περὶ τίνος, ἄφες σε δοκιμάσω." "First of all, do not let yourself be dragged away by the acuteness, but say: "wait for me a little bit, impression; let me see who you are and what you are an impression of, let me examine you."

mindlessly; the third is about freedom from deception and levelheadedness and in general about assent.³⁴

Epictetus stresses repeatedly that a lot of people start with exercising things that belong to the more advanced elements of moral responsibility, although they did not take care of the first steps a person should make. When Epictetus claims that people should exercise in *Discourses* II.18, he states this regarding the way people should deal with impressions, which belongs to a later stadium. In this passage he does not mention exercising regarding the first stadium of striving and avoiding. This would mean that there is no exercise needed for the first stadium, which is the basis of moral responsibility, and therefore people do not have to exercise in order to become morally responsible.

In *Discourses* III.12 however, Epictetus deals with exercising regarding striving and avoiding as well. He states that people are not able to aim their desire and avoidance at what is in their power without training. If a person is not yet experienced enough in these matters, Epictetus advises to postpone the training that concerns the right way of striving, and focus only on the right way of avoiding in the beginning.

τίς γάρ ἐστιν ἀσκητής; ὁ μελετῶν ὀρέξει μὲν μὴ χρῆσθαι, ἐκκλίσει δὲ πρὸς μόνα τὰ προαιρετικὰ χρῆσθαι, [...].

For who is the one that trains? He who makes an effort of not using his striving, and of using his avoidance when it comes to his moral choice alone, [...].³⁵

This means that the very first step which a person who wants to become good should take, is to avoid only the things that are in his power to avoid and not the things that he cannot control. It is obvious according to Epictetus that people avoid what is bad, and since avoiding should only be aimed at what is in our power, which is our moral choice, people should avoid what is bad within themselves. This means that they should avoid to be bad or to choose the wrong things. Only after a person has learned how to do this, he can start exercising with striving in the right way. Again, this should be aimed at what is in our power and since all people strive for the Good, they have to learn that their striving should be aimed at becoming a good person, with a good moral choice.

It is reasonable that Epictetus states that people should first of all focus on the right way of avoiding, because this corresponds to the things that people are forbidden to do, which are generally called 'negative duties'. Most people would agree that we have a duty not to do the things that belong to this category.³⁶ This negative duty has mostly to do with the fact that we should not cause harm on others, for example by murdering or stealing. Epictetus also claims that we have a negative duty concerning these things, since he states that people should avoid the bad things that are under their control. Since people only have power over their moral choice, they have a duty to avoid being a bad person and having a bad moral choice, which means that they should avoid doing wrong things. On the other hand there are positive duties such as being friendly or helping others. These positive duties correspond with what Epictetus considers as striving in the right way. People should

³⁴ Epictetus *Discourses* III.2.1-3. Long (2002: 112-118) also mentions these three fields of study. He emphasizes that 'training one's desires and aversions, the topic of the first field of study, is the prerequisite for emotional health and for all subsequent advances in philosophy' (p. 114). (See also Cooper, 2007).

³⁵ Epictetus *Discourses* III.12.8. Epictetus states here that someone who is not experienced enough, should not strive for anything in the beginning, but should only focus on the fact that he should aim his avoidance at things that are under his control. He makes the same statement in *Encheiridion* 2.2: ἄρον οὖν τὴν ἐκκλισιν ἀπὸ πάντων τῶν οὐκ ἐφ' ἡμῖν καὶ μετὰθες ἐπὶ τὰ παρὰ φύσιν τῶν ἐφ' ἡμῖν. τὴν ὄρεξιν δὲ παντελῶς ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος ἄνελε: 'Lift the avoidance from all the things which are not under our control and move it to the things contrary to nature that are under our control. Withdraw the striving entirely for the moment.'

³⁶ Lichtenberg (2010: 557).

aim their desire at the good things that are in their power, which means that they should strive to be a good person with a good moral choice. Although most people agree on the negative duties, there is debate about what positive duties people have and whether there are positive duties at all. Therefore it is logical that Epictetus claims that people should start with aiming their avoidance at the right things before focussing on aiming their desire at the right things and concentrating on the other stadia that he distinguishes.

Epictetus says that people are not able to aim their avoidance at the right things without exercising. However, in stating this, Epictetus points at people who try to avoid things that are not under their control. In *Discourses* III.12 Epictetus gives the example of a person who tries to avoid effort. Because this is not in his power, he should not try to avoid this. Therefore he should exercise in order to learn that he should not evade these external matters. Although this has to do with avoiding in the right way, it is not what moral responsibility is based on. Moral responsibility has to do with the negative duties, which means the avoidance of bad things that are under our control. Whereas Epictetus does claim that people have to practice in order to learn not to avoid things that they cannot control, he does not state that people have to exercise in order to learn to evade things that are in their power. It is this last aspect of avoiding that moral responsibility is based on. Epictetus does not mention the necessity of training for this, because people are capable of understanding from the beginning that it is wrong to steal or to harm people in other ways. Therefore moral responsibility is not dependent on exercise.³⁷ The basis of moral responsibility lies in the fact that people should avoid becoming a bad person by harming other people. Since this is in general clear to everyone because of their faculty of reason, all people are morally responsible from the beginning, even before they have started exercising.

Chapter 3 – Moral responsibility and philosophical training

3.1 The right application of the notion 'Good'

Returning to the passage of the thief in *Discourses* I.18, it becomes clear that both the thief and the person who was robbed have a moral responsibility to avoid being a bad person. It is also possible for them to avoid this, because their rationality will tell them what actions should be avoided. This would mean that the thief is morally responsible for his action of stealing and also blameworthy, because he could have known that it was a bad thing to take away the belongings of someone else.³⁸ This

³⁷ This does not mean that people do not have a duty to exercise. Even if people are morally responsible from the beginning without practice, training is required to become a better person, because Epictetus distinguishes other stadia that do need exercise.

³⁸ Not stealing is a negative duty, because people are not allowed to hurt someone else. As stated earlier, negative duties correspond with the very first step that Epictetus distinguishes regarding moral responsibility, namely the task to aim our avoidance towards the things that are in our power instead of aiming it towards external things that we cannot control. The next step would be to aim our striving towards the things that are in our power rather than to try to achieve the external things that we cannot influence. Here it could be argued that stealing is closer to striving than to avoiding, because people try to achieve the belongings of another person when they steal. From this it could be concluded that negative duties do not necessarily have to correspond with the first step in Epictetus' philosophical program, namely the right way of avoiding, since the prohibition to steal is a negative duty, but it does not seem to belong to the task of avoiding in the right way. However, stealing does belong to this first category of avoiding. Epictetus states that we should learn how to avoid what is in our power and to stop evading what is not in our power. As soon as we become proficient in this, we occupy ourselves with striving for what is in our power and with not striving for what is not in our power. Both the positive and the negative duties belong to the category of striving and avoiding in the *right* way respectively; they do not have to do with our task to prevent that we strive and avoid in the *wrong* way.

does not explain however, why Epictetus would blame the robbed man and the thief in the same amount. Epictetus claims that the robbed person is just as blameworthy for condemning the crime of the thief, as the thief is for committing the crime. The thief stole the possessions of the other person because he was striving for the Good and falsely considered the belongings of the other man as the Good he should strive for. Therefore it was the wrong application of the notion 'Good' that caused him to steal. The robbed man, in being angry with the thief because he considered himself to be hurt, made the same mistake. Just like the thief, he mistakenly applied the notion of 'Good' to his own possessions, which is the reason why he was angry with the thief for stealing. Because they made the same mistake, they should both be blamed to the same extent. As stated earlier, this is problematic because the robbed person did not really perform a wrong action, but only judged the performance of another, whereas the thief actually did something wrong.

According to Epictetus, the right application of the notion 'Good' is morally relevant, which is the reason why he blames the thief and the robbed man in the same way. Why this is so important regarding moral responsibility, he explains in *Discourses* I.22, a passage that deals explicitly with these general notions. He explains that everyone accepts the preconceptions they have in their minds and he states that these preconceptions can never be in conflict with other general notions. Although not all people agree on what the Good is, they do have a preconception about this matter, since they understand that it is what should be strived for. This general notion tells people that the Good is something that is preferable and brings advantage. This is everyone's opinion in the matter and there is no discussion about this. The trouble arises when people apply this general notion to concrete instances. Epictetus gives a few examples of situations in which disagreement arises when applying the preconceptions to specific cases. For instance, Epictetus states that different religious groups agree on what piety is, since they all know that it is something to strive for. When it comes to something concrete however, for example the question whether eating pork is pious, the opinions of the different religious groups diverge. The wrong application of the preconceptions is also what caused the problem between Agamemnon and Achilles according to Epictetus. They both agree that it is a good thing to do what is necessary and to perform duties, but they do not agree on whether giving Chryseis back to her father belongs to what is necessary or not.

After giving these examples, Epictetus argues that we should only apply the notion of 'Good' to the things that we can control. Everything that is not in our power should neither be regarded as good nor bad. He realizes that most people would not agree on this statement, because they do consider external things, such as family or health as good things. In order to prove that this is a mistake, Epictetus suggests to pretend for a moment that the notion of 'Good' should be applied to the things that are not in our power. If people would do that, it would result in a lot of conflicts. This has to do with the fact that every person tries to achieve the Good, but they want to achieve it for themselves.

μεταθῶμεν οὖν αὐτὸ πάλιν ἐνθάδε. ἐνδέχεται οὖν βλαπτόμενον καὶ ἀποτυγχάνοντα τῶν ἀγαθῶν εὐδαιμονεῖν;—Οὐκ ἐνδέχεται.—Καὶ τηρεῖν τὴν πρὸς τοὺς κοινωνοὺς οἷαν δεῖ ἀναστροφήν; καὶ πῶς ἐνδέχεται; ἐγὼ γὰρ πέφυκα πρὸς τὸ ἐμὸν συμφέρον. εἰ συμφέρει μοι ἄγρὸν ἔχειν, συμφέρει μοι καὶ ἀφελῆσθαι αὐτὸν τοῦ πλησίον· εἰ συμφέρει μοι ἱμάτιον ἔχειν,

Of course stealing external objects has to do with desiring things that we should not desire and therefore it could be said that stealing belongs to the category of striving for the *wrong* things. Although this has to do with striving, it does not belong to the positive duties, because positive duties are about striving in the *right* way rather than in the *wrong* way. Stealing also means that a person becomes immoral and bad. Because this is something that belongs to what is in his power, he should avoid being a bad person and therefore he should not steal. This means that negative duties, including stealing, indeed correspond with the first task that Epictetus distinguishes, namely the task of aiming the avoidance at the things that are in our power.

συμφέρει μοι καὶ κλέψαι αὐτὸ ἐκ βαλανείου. ἔνθεν πόλεμοι, στάσεις, τυραννίδες, ἐπιβουλαί.

Therefore, let us replace it³⁹ on the other hand hither. Is it possible that the person who is harmed and fails to achieve the good things is happy? – It is not possible. – And that he observes his way of life with regard to the people around him as he should? And how is this possible? Because I am by nature inclined towards my own benefit. If it is beneficial for me to own land, it is also beneficial for me to deprive my neighbour of it; if it is beneficial for me to own a cloak, it is also beneficial for me to steal it from the bathhouse. This is where wars, quarrels, tyrants, conspiracies come from.⁴⁰

According to Epictetus, the Good is everything that people generally associate with the word ‘good’, for example useful, beneficial, worth pursuing and so on. This means that he uses a broad definition that contains a lot of positive things. Naturally every person is inclined towards the Good, which means that immoral actions are the result of a mistake and are not due to unwillingness. If the mistake is removed, a person would always be focused on the Good in the right way. However, as Epictetus states in this passage, everyone is focussed on what is good for themselves. Although striving for something good generally means having a good intention, this seems selfish and not a good source for moral actions at all. Usually, people who only pay attention to their own interests are not considered to be good people. Therefore it seems incorrect to claim that people would perform good actions if only they would be able to apply the notion of ‘Good’ in the right way, because they are naturally inclined towards the Good. Their natural inclination is towards what is good for themselves and it is curious to state that this selfishness causes good actions.

However, this is exactly what Epictetus wants to demonstrate with this hypothetical situation in which the notion of ‘Good’ is applied to external things. People try to achieve what is best for themselves and this leads to problems if they all think that they should strive for external things such as clothes or estates. These problems would go away if people would realise what the notion of ‘Good’ truly means. It should be applied to what is in their power, and since people can only control their moral choice, it means that they should strive to be good and to perform good actions. In this sense, striving for your own good does not seem to be selfish anymore, because it will result in the fact that everyone treats each other in a good way. If people would be able to apply the notion of ‘Good’ properly, they would understand that pursuing their own interests, is the same as pursuing the interests of others, since they would simply be striving for the Good in general, rather than trying to achieve good things for themselves. Because of this, it is reasonable that Epictetus argues that the wrong application of the notions of ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ leads to immoral actions, whereas the right application leads to good actions.

³⁹ By αὐτὸ the notion of ‘Good’ is meant.

⁴⁰ Epictetus *Discourses* I.22.13-15. From this passage it becomes clear that people are able to understand from the beginning that some actions are bad and should be avoided, which means that people do not have to exercise in order to understand this. Epictetus states that the notion of ‘Good’ cannot be applied to external things, because it would lead to crimes of theft, since everyone would strive for these external things that are considered good. The fact that Epictetus considers this as proof that it is not possible to apply the notion of ‘Good’ to external things, shows that he believes that it is beyond discussion to state that stealing is bad. The statement that stealing is wrong could be regarded as an axiom. This means that Epictetus considers it to be generally accepted by everyone that some things should not be done. There is no exercise needed to understand this and therefore people are morally responsible from the start, because they can comprehend the negative duties they have by their rationality, which is natural to them.

3.2 The blameworthiness of the robbed man and the thief

Although it is clear why Epictetus states that the wrong application of the notion 'Good' leads to immoral actions, considering the argument he provides for this claim in *Discourses* I.22, the problem with the thief and the robbed man still remains. The reason why they are blameworthy to the same extent becomes clear from this passage, but it still feels counterintuitive to blame both the perpetrator of a crime and the victim. It is true that the thief as well as the robbed man make a mistake with regard to the notion of 'Good', since they both think that this notion should be applied to external things like garments, but it seems a bit extreme to claim that there is absolutely no difference between these two persons regarding moral responsibility. This claim of Epictetus turns out to be even more problematic when the heaviness of the crime increases. Because of this the question arises whether there is a factor that could make a distinction between the wrongdoer and the harmed person in order to reconcile Epictetus' strict condemnation of the wrong applications of the preconceptions with the intuitive tendency to oppose a criminal to a victim and to support the latter.

To answer this question it is important to examine the differences that are morally relevant according to Epictetus. In the case of the robbed man and the thief, there are no differences other than the fact that the robbed man owned something that the thief did not, as stated earlier. The possession of something is external and does not belong to the things that a person can control, which is exactly the reason that the thief is able to take the clothes away against the will of the other person. Although the thief had some influence in the circumstances of the robbed man, the possession of the recently acquired clothes does not belong to the sphere of things the thief can control either. It could have been the case that he intended to steal the clothes, but failed. Furthermore it is not at all certain whether the thief will be able to maintain the stolen possessions. Therefore, the clothes are not in the power of the robbed man nor under the control of the thief. According to Epictetus, only the things that are in our power are morally relevant, because of which this distinction between the robbed man and the thief, namely the possession of clothes, can be excluded from the current discussion. It is not morally relevant and therefore it does not have to be taken into consideration with regard to moral responsibility. This means that there is no important difference left between the person who stole and the person he stole from.

From a moral perspective, the thief and the robbed man are the same. There are no relevant differences, whereas there is a similarity that is important with regard to moral responsibility, namely the fact that they both apply the notion of 'Good' in the wrong way. Because this is the only relevant information in comparing these two persons, it is reasonable that Epictetus claims that they should be blamed to the same extent. In a moral sense they are the same. In judging the thief and the robbed man, Epictetus looks beyond the circumstances and irrelevant aspects and focusses on what really matters. They make a mistake that has sincere consequences from a moral perspective. The mistake leads to theft, something that should be regarded as despicable without discussion. It is important to note here, that the robbed man also makes this mistake, which has the potential to result in the same crime of theft. This is the reason why Epictetus claims that he is just as wrong as the thief in this situation. Naturally every person is inclined towards the Good, and since the thief and the robbed man both think the possession of nice clothes is equal to the Good, they would do everything that is necessary in order to reach this, including stealing. The only reason why the robbed man is not the person who steals, is because he already possesses the clothes and therefore it is not necessary for him to perform this immoral action. But the fact that he applied the notion of 'Good' in the wrong way, just like the thief, could have resulted in the fact that he would have stolen something himself. Only the trivial detail that he already owns the garments ensures that he would not turn to theft. This means that the circumstances are the only reason that he does not steal, whereas the thief does. The circumstances however, do not matter in a moral sense, because they

are external and are not in the power of an agent. It might as well have been the case that the robbed man did not possess the fine garments. He would still consider the clothes to be good and therefore he would try to acquire them, by theft if necessary. Therefore it is reasonable that Epictetus claims that they are both blameworthy. He examines what is inside a person rather than what is outside, because the outside does not matter with regard to moral responsibility. The fact that the robbed man thinks that clothes are the Good he should strive for, creates a chance that he would commit theft and this possibility is enough for Epictetus to condemn him, just like everyone would do with the thief who actually stole something.

Even though it is clear why Epictetus judges the thief and the robbed man in the same way, it is still questionable whether there is no relevant difference at all between stealing and judging a person who steals, even if they both make a mistake with regard to the notion of 'Good'. As stated earlier, the distinctions between the two persons should be considered in order to solve the issue. The reason why Epictetus claims that they are equally blameworthy, is because there is no important difference. However, besides the irrelevant fact that the robbed man used to possess clothes, in contrast to the thief, another difference occurs between these two persons, which is the crux of the story and the very reason that it feels so counterintuitive to blame them to the same extent. The distinction has to do with the performed actions. The thief steals somethings, whereas the robbed man does not. The robbed man gets angry with the thief, whereas the thief does not get angry with the robbed man. They act in a different way and yet they are blamed in the same manner. Off course the reason for this according to Epictetus, is the fact that they could have acted in the same way, if the circumstances would have been the other way around and the thief would have owned the clothes and the robbed man would not. But this does not mean that there is in general no difference between stealing and applying the notion of 'Good' in the wrong way.

Epictetus is aware that there is a distinction between these two actions. Furthermore it is clear that this distinction is in fact relevant with regard to moral responsibility. The two actions do not only differ in the content, but it could also be argued that the action of stealing should be regarded as worse than the action of applying the notion of 'Good' in the wrong way. The reason for this has to do with the schedule of exercises that Epictetus explains in *Discourses* III.2, as discussed earlier. The right application of the notion 'Good' belongs to a later stadium in Epictetus' training schedule, a phase that requires exercise in order to become sufficiently good at it. People make a lot of mistakes with regard to this part of the philosophical training and it often leads to wrong actions. Therefore people have a duty to exercise in order to prevent this, since it is only possible to reach an understanding about this matter by training. However, since this is a later stadium of the training, people should first learn how to aim their desire at the things that are in their power, as well as their avoidance. This is the first step people should take. This is also the category to which the prohibition of stealing belongs. From this it becomes clear that people should first learn that stealing is not allowed, before they can understand what the Good is and what the notion of 'Good' should be applied to. They must know what they should not do, before they can comprehend what they should do and what the true meaning of the Good is. With regard to the right application of the notion of 'Good', it is possible to make mistakes, as is often the case, since it is dependent on the amount of training a person has endured whether he is able to apply this notion in the right way. When it comes to aiming our avoidance to the things that are in our power, training is not necessary, because people are capable of understanding by their rationality that some things are not allowed. This means that the thief should have known that stealing was not permitted, whereas it is understandable that both the thief and the robbed man were not aware that the notion of 'Good' should not be applied to the garments, since this might be due to the fact that their training was not sufficient during the moment of stealing. The fact that the prohibition of stealing belongs to an earlier stadium of the training that Epictetus prescribes than the right application of the notion

'Good', means that a person who steals is more blameworthy than a person who is mistaken about the notion of 'Good'. In fact, the prohibition of stealing does not even belong to the prescribed training since people already know that theft is forbidden. From this it becomes clear that it is still possible to blame a thief more than a person who becomes angry with the thief, which reconciles our intuition with Epictetus' ethics.⁴¹

Apparently the thief is blameworthy for his action, because he should and could have known that stealing is prohibited. This means that he intentionally chose to steal, despite his awareness of the fact that theft is not allowed. However, this seems to be contradictory with Epictetus' statement that people always have good intentions and that immoral actions are the result of a mistake. If the thief knows that stealing is wrong and deliberately chooses to steal anyway, his intention cannot be good. Although this seems to be contradictory, it does not have to be problematic. It is clear that people generally know that stealing is bad, but most people do not know that the Good does not lie in the stolen objects. Because they strive for the Good, they steal it anyway, despite the fact that it means they have to violate one of their negative duties. The reason for this is that people tend to start with things that belong to a later category of training as if they have already mastered the things that they ought to begin with.⁴² This means that people think about the notion of 'Good' and they apply it to something of which they think it is good, before they have dealt with the aim of their avoidance. People should first be occupied with the negative duties, after which they can turn to think about what the Good is. Many people do this the other way around, which results in immoral actions. They know from the start that stealing is bad, but because they think it is the only way to achieve the Good, they do it anyway. If they would listen to their common sense however, they would realise that stealing is bad and they would not do it, even if it means they will not reach what is the Good in their eyes. After their philosophical training they will understand that they were mistaken about the Good and they will realise that it is not something that can be achieved by stealing. Therefore, if someone steals, he does it while knowing that it is wrong, since everyone knows it is not allowed by means of their rationality. The reason why he decides to neglect this however, is because he thinks he is pursuing the Good, which means he still has a good intention. Nevertheless he is blameworthy, because he commits the crime of theft even though he is aware of the fact that this is wrong.

Conclusion

According to Epictetus, people have a moral responsibility. However, this seems to conflict with *Discourses* I.18, the passage of the robbed man and the thief. Being morally responsible implies that a person can be blamed or praised for his actions. In *Discourses* I.18 however, Epictetus claims that people should not be angry with the thief, because his crime is caused by a mistake. From this it

⁴¹ The reason why Epictetus claims that they should be blamed in the same amount has to do with the fact that the only information that is provided in this example, is that they are both mistaken about the notion of 'Good'. Based on this information they are indeed equally blameworthy, since there is no other relevant difference. In general however, stealing is worse, because it is a violation of the basis of moral responsibility, whereas valuing something that is neutral as good, is an error and the proof of a person's lack of training.

⁴² Epictetus *Discourses* 3.2.6. Οἱ δὲ νῦν φιλόσοφοι ἀφέντες τὸν πρῶτον τόπον καὶ τὸν δεύτερον καταγίνονται περὶ τὸν τρίτον 'The philosophers nowadays disregard the first and second topic and they deal with the third.' This passage is explicitly directed to philosophers, but since the training that Epictetus prescribes in order to become a good person is philosophical, any person who makes a statement about what the notion of 'Good' should be applied to, is already being occupied with philosophy and dealing with a later stadium of the philosophical training.

seems as if he is not blameworthy and therefore not morally responsible for his action. According to Epictetus the thief mistakenly applies the notion of 'Good' to the clothes of another person and decides to steal them, due to the fact that he naturally strives for the Good. The robbed person also considers his clothes to be the Good, which causes him to be angry with the thief. Since they make the same mistake, they should be blamed in the same way according to Epictetus. He explains that the application of the notion of 'Good' is morally relevant, because the wrong application leads to conflicts and immoral actions. Considering clothes to be good for example, causes someone to steal them, since every person is naturally inclined towards the Good and always strives for it.

Although the robbed man and the thief are equally blameworthy, since they both apply the notion of 'Good' in the wrong way, in general the wrong application of this notion is not as bad as stealing. Whereas considering neutral things as good is due to a mistake, stealing is something of which people are aware that it is not allowed. Human beings are able to understand this by their rationality. Epictetus argues that people need philosophical training in order to become morally good persons. During this training people will learn what the notion of 'Good' should really be applied to. Since this is something that should occupy only the people who are rather advanced, it is not surprising if people are mistaken about this. Epictetus distinguishes different stadia in his philosophical training and it is reasonable to claim that people who are wrong with regard to an earlier stadium, are more blameworthy. This is even more the case when it comes to the very first step that precedes the philosophical training. To this category belongs the task of human beings to aim their avoidance at things that are in their power rather than at things they cannot control. Since Epictetus argues that the only thing people can control is their moral choice, and since people naturally want to avoid the Bad, it becomes clear that people should avoid becoming bad persons and performing bad actions. This corresponds with negative duties, because avoidance tells people what they should not do, in contrast to the positive duties that focus on what people should do. Stealing is prohibited and therefore it belongs to the negative duties that are inflicted on rational creatures. Because of this it should be regarded as one of the things that people should try to avoid. People are able to understand this and do not need philosophical exercise with regard to this first step of Epictetus' ladder of training.

The thief and the robbed man are equally blameworthy when it comes to the application of the notion of 'Good', since they are both mistaken about this. When it comes to the right aim of avoidance however, the thief is the only one who is blameworthy. Since this is the basis of moral responsibility, his action of theft is regarded as worse than the fact that the robbed man was angry with the thief for stealing. The latter is due to a mistake, whereas the first is a violation of a prohibition that the thief was well aware of: "Thou shalt not steal."

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