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Thinking and Political Considerations: *Gnômê* in the Stoic Political Philosophy of Epictetus

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Introduction: Virtue without Institutions

Much ink has recently been spilled on the status of liberalism in the twenty-first century. Liberalism, we are told, may well be following those other twentieth-century ideologies, fascism and communism, into the dustbin of history. The failures of fascism and communism should be obvious to anyone with even a tenuous grasp of reality. The outrageous and vicious slaughter of human beings that inevitably accompanies these ideologies is plain as day. The failure of liberalism, however, is more subtle. At bottom, liberalism depends on a certain set of virtues that allows for a free and responsible citizenry. The problem, however, as Patrick Deneen writes, is that "the cultivation of virtue requires the presence of virtue forming and virtue supporting institutions, but these are precisely the institutions of practices that liberalism aims to hollow and eviscerate in the name of individual liberty."[1]

This contradiction has not been lost on liberal theorists, who have, over the last forty years or so, endeavored to reconcile this by cataloging the list of "key" liberal virtues. In the 1980s and 1990s, in the wake of John Rawls's indictment of "perfectionism" and

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suggestion that a strong state should substitute for a virtuous citizenry,[2] theorists like William Galston, Benjamin Barber, Stephen Macedo, Michael Sandel, Stephen Salkever, and Peter Berkowitz responded by doubling down on a set of virtues that best align with liberalism. Galston, for example, emphasized commercial virtues, such as work ethic and self-denial, not to mention independence, tolerance, delay of gratification, adaptability, discernment, moderation, patience, empathy, resolve, and practical wisdom.[3] Such cataloging, however, never seems to have reconciled the inherent contradiction at the heart of liberalism that individuals are free to choose virtue or vice and that we must shield ourselves from the state imposing any particular set of virtues on us, not to mention any comprehensive doctrine, be it a religion or an ideology.

In light of this, a school of thought emerged that suggested a more subtle imposition of virtue on a liberal populace. The New Institutionalists, for example, suggest that policy can, and almost always will, affect the capacities and character of a people. Leading this school, Theda Skocpol demonstrated that redistribution policies will almost necessarily create new constituencies.[4] Andrea Campbell points to Social Security and Medicare,[5] Suzanne Mettler to the G.I. Bill,[6] Joe Soss to welfare payments,[7] Richard Avramenko and Richard Boyd to federal mortgage and housing policy[8]— all as examples of federal and state policy nudging citizens toward a certain set of virtues or, conversely, vice. The suggestion, however, that an oblique or backdoor fostering of virtue is acceptable for liberal citizens does not resolve the problem of which set is preferable.

In this vein, some theorists suggest that rather than bickering about which set of virtues should be imposed or subtly nudged on a people, we can instead identify a virtue that would be powerful for preserving a liberal regime. Most famously, perhaps, Judith Shklar points to toleration as the central liberal virtue.[9] More recently, Aurelian Craiutu and Paul Carrese identify moderation as the supreme political virtue.[10] Jacques Derrida, Allan Bloom, and John von Heyking make the case for friendship.[11] Richard Avramenko points to courage.[12] Stephen B. Smith looks to

patriotism.[13] Alternatively, Ryan Hanley has identified magnanimity as the quintessential civic virtue.[14]

What is striking about these efforts to identify the key virtue for liberalism is that so many of these theorists harken back to the not-very-liberal ancient Greeks, usually Plato, but often Aristotle. Theorists make the case that modern liberalism has much to learn about particular virtues, especially as they were discovered and theorized in ancient Athens. Whether it be a Platonic twist on courage, humor, music, or wisdom, or an Aristotelian interpretation of magnanimity, courage, toleration, friendship, eudaimonia, justice, and so on, modern liberal theorists have come to lean heavily on the fifth- and fourth-century Greeks. And rightly so. Thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, and Thucydides were first-rate thinkers from whom we can continue to learn.

In this article, however, I plumb another corner of the ancient world for resources that might shed light on the problem of liberalism. Specifically, I bring to the table the Stoic philosopher Epictetus and a virtue that has mostly been ignored by modern liberal theorists: *gnômê* (γνώμη). Among modern political theorists, the Stoics have, generally speaking, lost the credibility that thinkers from Blaise Pascal to Thomas Jefferson once gave them.[15] However, there has been a resurgence of interest in the Stoics in recent years as a result of the widespread appropriation of the practical Stoic teaching of resilience and non-perturbation against bodily adversity. These invocations of the Stoics, however, usually only circle around essential Stoic ideas like nature (*physis*) and reason (*logos*) and appropriate certain Stoic teachings as "life-hacks."[16] Moreover, when Epictetus is invoked, the central concept of *gnômê* has been almost entirely overlooked. This nearly ubiquitous neglect of *gnômê* is unfortunate because it is precisely the virtue that could save liberalism from itself. *Gnômê* has a variety of meanings depending on the context in which it is invoked. In some instances, it refers simply to the capacity for thought, while in others it refers to the activity of deliberative thinking. For this paper, I focus on *gnômê* as the virtue of thinking that allows its practitioners to discern which of their impressions lay in accord with nature. As the

virtue of thinking, *gnômê* allows us to resist the impulse of our unnatural passions to believe what contradicts external reality.

Why, then, is *gnômê* indispensable for contemporary liberal society? Deneen argues that liberalism has failed because it is founded on self-contradictory and ultimately self-defeating principles.[17] In particular, liberalism promotes the plurality of beliefs. Pushed to its limit, in the name of toleration, liberalism suggests that all opinions are equally valid, even when they are fully disconnected from reality.[18] *Gnômê*, I argue, speaks directly to this problem because its utility lies in penetrating self-contradictory beliefs that yield mistaken understandings of our basic external realities. Absent the influence of virtue-supporting institutions, the gnomic citizen can identify and reject what Eric Voegelin calls "second reality," an imaginary conception of reality that is indifferent to how things really are.[19] The embrace of pluralism in liberalism has permitted no shortage of beliefs ungrounded in lived reality, as well as "reasonable" beliefs yielded by the soft despotism of "GroupThink" rather than the strength of their reasoning.[20] *Gnômê* allows citizens to ascertain which beliefs are true and which are distortions of basic human reality on the basis of whether the assertions are reasonable. In this vein, the purpose of a gnomic education is to allow its practioners to recognize the facticity of commonsense reality that is no longer taken as common sense. *Gnômê* thus allows a liberal citizen to disassemble false perceptions of the truth and assent to things as they are.

I present this argument in four sections. The first identifies *gnômê* as Epictetus thought it to be—that is, as the act of thinking that should be conformed to the Stoic concept of nature. In so doing, *gnômê* allows one to discern what beliefs about reality are true and false through its conformity to nature. The second section interprets what Epictetus means by orienting *gnômê* in accord with nature. The third examines Epictetus's "gnomic education," where individuals learn how to place their will in accordance with nature by properly orienting their judgment toward the truth of reality. Finally, the conclusion offers suggestions about how this understudied ancient idea might provide recourse for extracting ourselves from the difficulties within liberalism itself.

Gnômê in the Thought of Epictetus

The term "*gnômê*" has been used in a variety of ways throughout its history. Most often, it is translated in two senses. Liddell and Scott render *gnômê* as the "means of knowing," referring to the faculty of mind that faciliates humanity's capacity to ascertain truth. A literal translation from the Greek renders the word as an "opinion," referring to a judgment itself rather than the faculty that makes judgments.[21] Relatedly, it can also refer to mistaken judgments rather than authoritative judgments and to a voted resolution or decree.

In the writings of Epictetus, *gnômê* has several meanings. In both the *Enchiridion* and the *Discourses*, Epictetus employs the term differently in different contexts.[22] In the *Enchiridion*, *gnômê* refers to the mind as the source of the activity of thinking. The philosopher advises his students to pay attention to their "intellect" (*tēn gnômên*) rather than their passions and other nonrational impulses that are often beyond our control (*Enchiridion* 41). In addition, he cautions against letting someone else control one's "mind," which is up to us, just as we would be disgusted at someone who gives up control over his own body, which is not up to us (*Enchiridion* 28). In both these passages *gnômê* refers to a person's rational capacity, which is up to the person, in contrast to nonrational things, which are not up to the person. The *Discourses* suggest that *gnomē* resembles reason (*logos*). As Epictetus puts it, God intermingled two components into human beings: the animalistic part, on the one hand, and reason (*logos*) and intellect (*gnômê*), on the other (*Diss*. 1.3.3). While it may seem that Epictetus considers *logos* and *gnômê* to be indistinguishable from each other, his phrasing directs us to understand the two in light of each other. *Logos* refers to the divine capacity within humans to understand abstract truth, and *gnômê* to our capacity to apply those abstractions to particular situations and, in so doing, restructure our assumptions about reality. Epictetus's suggestion of a symbiosis between the two makes sense with the monism of Stoic philosophy in toto, where every faculty can be traced back to the rational activity of thinking.[23] In this sense, *gnômê* is another word for the rational activity of the

mind—that is, thinking. Thinking, for Epictetus, is not simply the capacity of the mind to move by itself, so to speak, to create abstract ideas. It refers instead to a process of thinking with oneself *about oneself*. As Epictetus teaches, a Stoic is a self-reflective thinker.[24] Still, in other places *gnômê* just refers to an opinion or judgment made (e.g., *Diss.* 3.9.1; 3.21.14). Most remarkably, *gnômê* is most frequently used in reference to aligning one's mind with God, nature, or "everything that happens" (see, e.g., *Diss*. 1.12.17).

Thus *gnômê*, in the teachings of Epictetus, refers to (1) the rational faculty, like *logos*; (2) the mind or the intellect—that is, the capacity of humans to make judgments, especially moral judgments; (3) the process of deliberative thinking; and (4) an opinion or judgment made. The variety of uses for *gnomē* suggests that Epictetus uses the word haphazardly. However, I posit that in fact there is a strategy to how he employs it. It would, after all, be strange for someone so well versed in Aristotle to make sloppy uses of an Aristotelian virtue. In particular, it is worthwhile to concentrate on *gnomē* as the act of deliberative thinking, a capacity that all people possess but few perfect.

The activity of thinking through what is up to us is indispensable to the philosophy of Epictetus. Rationality, for Epictetus, is among the things that are "up to us" (*eph'hemin*). As he says in the famous opening of the *Enchiridion*, the things that are *eph'hemin* include the "faculties of judgment, motivation, desire, and aversion; in short, whatever is our own doing" (*Enchiridion* 1.1). Elsewhere he notes that *prohairesis* (the will), *to hêgemonikon* (the ruling faculty), and *hē dunamis logikē* (the rational faculty) are also *eph'hemin*. Our intellect (*gnômê*), which is inextricable from reason, is hence also *eph'hemin* and ought to be governed properly.

As mentioned, I treat *gnômê* here at once as an intellectual capacity as well as an intellectual virtue—that is, our rational capacity well used. While someone well versed in the intricacies of Epictetus's philosophy may object that *gnômê* is never listed as one among the virtues, I argue that *gnômê*, in fact, depicts the same activity of all virtues in his thought. Every particular virtue is for

Epictetus simply a different description for the activity of thinking. For instance, *phronêsis* is the perfection of rationality acquired by the Stoic sage (*ho phronimos*). Thus *gnômê* can be understood as the act of thinking through something.[25] There is a great beauty to such Stoic thinking in that the practice of it and the opportunity for moral improvement it offers are readily available to anyone. All people have the capacity for knowing and, indeed, reflecting on their own actions (*Diss*. 1.20). A skilled reasoner would learn to constantly ask himself, "Should I have done that? Should I have done that *then*, or *in that way*?"

To repeat, while all humans have the capacity for self-reflective reasoning, this does not mean that we reflect well. Particularly of interest for Epictetus is conforming our thinking to God/nature (detailed further in the next section). However, there is also an element of *gnômê* that guides us in judgments pertaining to good and bad by testing our impressions of reality. To quote Epictetus,

> Should we do away with this person because he's mistaken and misled about matters of supreme importance, and because he's become blind—not in the sense that he's lost the ability to distinguish white and black by sight, but because he's lost the intellect (*gnômê*) to distinguish good and bad? (*Diss*. 1.18.6)

This selection demonstrates the mercy with which Epictetus treats someone who fails to apply his *gnômê* to nature. Epictetus suggests here that those who fail to apply their intellect to nature are mistaken and misled about the highest things, not from their own intent. The non-gnomic person is therefore to be treated as an ignorant lost soul rather than a contemptuous villain. This selection also hints at the activity of *gnômê* as a virtue that distinguishes between good and bad. How does it accomplish this? As Epictetus suggests here, *gnômê* tests our impressions of reality. Impressions (*phantasiai*) refer to stamps on our soul.[26] The existence of impressions as the origins of empirical knowledge is a distinguishing feature of Stoic thought. The Stoics rejected *a priori* knowledge

and held that all cognitive knowledge derives from experience. For Epictetus, knowledge begins with empirical impressions (*phantasiai*), but it is not the impressions themselves that are our knowledge. Rather, it is through our judgment of those impressions after submitting them to rational scrutiny and assenting to them that they become knowledge. To test impressions is to think through our experiences. Epictetus provide a telling example of this point:

> If someone gave your body into the keeping of a passerby, you'd be furious. But you give your mind (*gnômê*) into the keeping of any random person, so that, if he maligns you, it becomes troubled and confused. Doesn't this make you feel ashamed? (*Enchiridion* 28)

In this passage, Epictetus gives an imaginary student a lesson on his failure to test his impressions. Epictetus notes that his student—and really any ordinary person—would be furious to let a stranger do as he wished with his body. Given this, he observes that his student allows himself to become preoccupied with any person who upsets him. This, Epictetus suggests, is a source of great shame. The Stoic lesson from this passage is for his student to recognize that his mind (*gnômê*) truly belongs to him, whereas his body does not. Yet much of the time, people act as though their body, not their mind, is up to them. According to these Stoic insights, nature has provided humans with reason so that they can not only make use of their impressions—as other animals do—but also observe and reflect on them. Epictetus states that "God has brought man into the world to be a spectator of himself and his works, and not merely a spectator, but also an interpreter" (*Diss*. 1.6.19–20). As A. A. Long writes, "Testing impressions is the way Epictetus recommends his students to manifest rationality and commitment to Stoicism. He is asking them to subject every situation and thought to their reflexive rationality and understanding of what is good or bad or merely neutral."[27] Rationality, Epictetus makes clear, is something that all human beings possess. This, unfortunately, does not mean that all human beings know how to

reason well. To quote Long again, "[O]ur capacity to reason reflexively is both fundamental to our human nature and also a capacity that our nature requires us to exercise *correctly*."[28]

Reflecting on the judgments (*dogmata*) of the intellect plays a crucial role in the thinking of Epictetus because our judgments frame our understanding of reality. Epictetus instructs us that our judgments about things, not the things themselves, oppress us. There are three classes of Epictetan judgments: (1) philosophical doctrines and tenets, (2) practical judgments that lead to action, and (3) judgments that are too general to lead to action but are not taught by philosophy.[29] For example, a sailor standing on the ship's deck and looking out into the water might think that he is going to drown even when he is perfectly safe. The error, according to Epictetus, arises not from the ship but from his judgments (*dogmata*), in particular his moral judgment, about his circumstances (*Diss.* 2.16). For the Stoics, it is our judgments that harm us, not the things themselves. Our judgments are in our control, whereas the things that happen to us are external to the will. Hence, no matter what happens to us, we must redirect our attention to our will (*prohairesis*) and choose to act in accordance with nature so that our emotions do not overpower us. This applies to extreme scenarios, like the death of a child, or to more mundane things, like the breaking of a prized jug (*Enchiridion* 3). What oppresses a man about an upsetting event is his judgment about it, not the event itself. Moreover, if you are someone who fears upsetting children, you need not fear that, since what is upsetting is your judgment of them, not the children themselves; likewise, their judgment of you is what upsets them (*Diss.* 2.16).

For Epictetus, our judgments guide whether we assent to an impression, but sometimes we hold onto self-contradictory opinions that deceive and oppress us. One key cause of self-inflicted oppression arises when our passions cloud our reason. That the passions arise from poor judgments is a common position in Stoic thought. Seneca, for example, says this in *On Anger* (*De Ira*), where the passion of anger arises from reasoning oneself to have been wronged. As Nancy Sherman puts it, for the Stoics, the

emotions are an assent to a mistaken perception of what the good is.[30] Emotions can deceive us into believing that things outside our control are worthy of care and attention, whereas reason reveals that externals are not in our control and thus should not be troubling. However, Epictetus's view on emotions is more nuanced than Seneca's. Where Seneca saw all emotion as an aberration from reason, Epictetus makes a helpful distinction between emotions and passions. The passions do indeed cloud our judgment, but some emotions are natural to us because of our roles. Epictetus illustrates this point in a discussion with an imaginary student who claims he could not watch his son bear pain. Epictetus suggested that, to the contrary, it was unnatural for a father not to watch his son's pain (*Diss*. 1.11.1–5). The unreasoning passions, however, require a different remedy. We should respond to the passions as we do to poor judgments: by parsing them and questioning them.[31] But how does this help us? The next section discusses how *gnômê*, understood as thinking through one's actions, should be conformed with nature.

Gnômê and Nature

Argued thus far is that according to Epictetus, *gnômê* refers to the process of thinking itself. This section defines what Epictetus the Stoic means by asserting that one ought to conform one's judgment to nature (*physis*).

"Nature" has become an ambiguous term as a result of the plethora of its academic uses. The concept of nature was ubiquitous in the ancient world, but its meaning was subject to immense debate. Epicurus, the founder of that other great school in the ancient world, appeals to a conceptualization of nature in which the ultimate human pursuit is pleasure. Others like Aristotle and Plutarch, despite their disagreements about what sort of things are natural, have, broadly speaking, considered nature an appeal to the natural order of things.[32] How, then, does Epictetus conceive of nature according to his Stoic worldview?

There are two parts to the Stoic meaning of nature: (1) external realities and (2) our role within the cosmic drama. As is well known, the Stoics were a physicalist school who conceived of the

world as a cosmos composed of physical matter and providentially designed by an intelligent agent, which they call nature (*physis*) and identify with God (Zeus) or the gods. Politics, as Plato understood, is governed by *nomos*—that is, laws by convention. Nature (*physis*), or physics, in contrast, refers to the laws of the natural world. *Physis* refers to that which is given and which cannot be changed, no matter what laws we might pass. Thus, nature, for the Stoics, can refer to everything from historical facts to biological truths and economic realities—in other words, to realities that exist in the world even when we would like to believe otherwise.

Essentially, Epictetus's Stoic conception of nature is a role-based ethical system. For the Stoics, nature assigns every animal a unique nature (*physis*), understood as that animal's role within the cosmos. By following its nature, an animal can fulfill all the functions associated with its kind and fulfill its designated "end" (*telos*). Because the nature of human beings is rational, in contrast to the physical nature of animals, the *telos* of the human is to practice virtue, which consists in the constant fine-tuning of our rational capacities. This description, of course, places Epictetus in contrast with Aristotle, who argues that the desiring and appetitive part of the soul, in a sense, participates in *logos*—for instance, by its capacity to be persuaded by a father or a friend (*Enchiridion* 1.13.18). Moroever, Aristotle also suggests that *phronêsis* and moral virtue are mutually dependent, not separate (*Enchiridion* 6.12). Epictetus, in contrast, diverges from Aristotle by conceptualizing the passions (as distinct from the emotions) as wholly distinct from reason and asserting that they must be properly ordered by reason through the practice of virtue. Epictetus follows the Stoics in identifying happiness as *equivalent to* virtue. For Epictetus, to practice virtue makes humans happy, no matter their misfortune. Although Epictetus does not identify the virtues by name, becoming virtuous, within Stoic thought, involves acquiring the four cardinal virtues listed by Socrates in Book IV of the *Republic*: wisdom (*phronêsis*), courage (*andreîa*), justice (*dikaiosune*), and moderation (*sôphrosune*). The Stoics conceived these virtues as different kinds of knowledge.

Phronêsis, for example, can be understood as knowledge applied well to particular circumstances.

For Epictetus, there is an order of ranked importance to the study of nature, when compared with other academic disciplines. The study of nature, for the Stoics, which they categorized under the jurisdiction of physics, precedes the study of psychology, then ethics, and finally politics. As Julia Annas points out, Stoic physics—their understanding of nature's laws—directly influences their ethics.[33] The order of the natural world, for the Stoics, therefore tells us about our own place in the cosmos, which in turn directs how we ought to govern our lives. Stoicism is, in this sense, a philosophy about life, the universe, and indeed everything, where understanding the cosmic order precedes and informs the type of person we should aspire to become.

As demonstrated in the previous section, Epictetus often recommends conforming one's *gnômê* with nature, God, and everything that happens. But what occurs within an individual's soul when one conforms one's *gnômê* with nature? In the first place, to conform *gnômê* to nature means to educate the passions (which are not up to us) that lead us astray by turning our attention toward that which is up to us (*Enchiridion* 28, 41). In the second place, following the divine order of nature, *gnômê* teaches us to understand reality in opposition to the passions that obscure it. Reality, for the Stoics, is not something individuals believe for themselves without affecting other people; reality refers to conclusions about the truth that are held in common. Even so, reality is not simply an understanding of what one wishes the external world would be but also denotes how it really is. Part of external reality, for the Stoics, is that each individual has a certain role within it. The nature of reality, for Stoic philosophy at large, has for each of us certain roles appropriate to us depending on our relationship with other people. As argued in the previous section, our faculty of judgment, there identified as *gnômê*, allows for this. In this sense, *gnômê* is the process of thinking through a given situation. The interesting thing about *gnômê* is that Epictetus tends to use the term when talking about harmony with nature, God, and things that happen. For instance,

"This is what I find in the entrails," continues the diviner. "This is God's message to you. If you so wish, you are free. If you so wish, you'll blame no one, find fault with no one, and everything will be in accord not just with your will [*gnômê*], but with God's" (*Diss*. 1.17.28)

Epictetus expresses a similar sentiment elsewhere:

> "Well, if you appreciate this," Epictetus said, "in the future there's only one thing that you'll take seriously and to which you'll apply your intelligence [*gnômê*], and that's getting to know the criterion by which to judge whether or not things are in accord with nature, and putting this knowledge to use to decide about particular cases." (*Diss.* 1.11.15)

As rational beings, we need to place our thinking in accordance with nature, through which we will live virtuously.

One may notice that in certain respects *gnômê* resembles the most important faculty of soul in Epictetus's thought, *prohairesis*, as both pertain to judgment. However, I wager that these two concepts are better understood as distinct but interrelated things.[34] Scholars like Michael Frede and Robin Waterfield argue that in Epictetus's thought *prohairesis* refers simply to the will—the faculty that determines what we believe and, in so doing, influences action.[35] For Epictetus, we can choose to act in certain ways, but we also choose what we believe. Hence, the significance of the choosing capacity of *prohairesis* is that it is the individual's moral purpose whose action determines the type of person we are. Humans, for Epictetus, "are not flesh or hair, but *prohairesis*; if you keep that beautiful, you will be beautiful" (*Diss.* 3.1.40). While translators like Nicholas P. White might be tempted to see *gnômê* and *prohairesis* as the same thing, as White translates *gnômê* as the faculty of judgment in his version of the *Enchiridion*, they are better understood as different sides of the same coin.[36] Whereas *prohairesis* refers to the act of choosing, *gnômê* connotes the cognitive act brought to bear on questions of good and bad.[37] Judgments about morality are thus a crucial part of *gnômê*'s activity. What is more important, however, is that for Epictetus the search for

correct judgments on moral questions requires one to recognize that a standard of good exists beyond one's private judgments.

To act in accordance with nature, one requires the proper judgment on questions pertaining to external reality. As Epictetus remarks,

> After a thorough examination of these matters, then, a truly good person subordinates his intellect [*gnômê*] to the power that governs the universe, just as good citizens submit to the laws of the city. (*Diss.* 1.12.7)

As the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius noted, to live in accord with nature is to recognize each as sharing in God and hence you will be angry with no one.[38] Orienting *gnômê* with what is natural and what is not natural, then, is essential to a proper education, for Epictetus. But, as suggested previously, to receive this introduction to reality is quite challenging, especially in a community of people squelched by concern for externals. The next and final section elaborates the components of a gnomic education.

Epictetus and Gnomic Education

I have described *gnômê* as a virtue that teaches what is natural and reveals when, through errors in our judgment, we embrace what is incompatible with nature. On the one hand, it is an appeal to judgments based on commonsense reality; but on the other hand, alongside the famous rigor of Stoic life, it is a challenging virtue to practice and to perfect. Invoking Epictetus's reputation as a masterful teacher of practical axioms, this section explores the features of what I call a gnomic education within Epictetus's thought and how to practice it. While Epictetus was himself a famous teacher, undoubtedly with philosophical maxims that governed his teaching style, remarkably little information exists about his educational curriculum. He does, however, offer several maxims about what education is. Regarding the training of the will, Epictetus writes,

> So what is education? Learning to apply your natural preconceptions to particular instances in accord with

> nature, and also gaining the ability to recognize that some things are up to us and some aren't. Up to us are will [*prohairesis*] and everything that results from will; not up to us are the body, the parts of the body, possessions, parents, brothers, children, the country of our birth, and in short, all the people with whom we associate. So where will we find what's good for us? To what should we apply the concept? To what's up to us. (*Diss*. 1.22.9–11)

Regarding *gnômê* and the purpose of education, Epictetus writes,

> We should bear this dispensation of his in mind as we approach our education. Its purpose isn't for us to be able to change existing conditions (which is neither possible nor desirable) but rather, given that things around us are as they are and as they're constituted to be, for us to learn how to keep our intellect [*gnômê*] in harmony with everything that happens. (*Diss*. 1.12.17)

The purpose of education, for Epictetus, is to conform our *gnômê* to nature, thus revealing the reality of that which is (and is not) up to us. Unlike so many other ancient schools of thought that, as Epictetus argues, prioritized the development of abstract theoretical knowledge, Epictetus designed his educational philosophy to lead a student to complete freedom via practical self-mastery.

While the curriculum of this education is not spelled out in these two passages, he defines it at various points throughout the *Discourses*. Brian E. Johnson refers to this education as Epictetus's three "*topoi*." As Johnson has argued, at several points in Book II of the *Discourses*, Epictetus identifies three steps (*topoi*) of a Stoic education: (1) desire and aversion, (2) appropriate action and role ethics, and (3) Stoic logic.[39] While much debate has come from whether all three *topoi* are necessary for acquiring virtue, I follow Johnson's interpretation that only the first two are necessary to practice virtue, whereas logic is necessary to perfect virtue at the level of a sage. Hence, the first two steps are accessible by any

individuals simply by virtue of possessing the *logos*—a fragment of the divine—within them. My analysis of the three *topoi*, while borrowing heavily from Johnson's account, stresses the importance of conforming one's judgment to nature, which Johnson mentions, especially in his treatment of the second *topos*, but which he backgrounds in his analysis of the first and third *topoi*.

While the first two *topoi* are necessary for understanding gnomic education according to Epictetus, the most important and most difficult part the curriculum is the third *topos*: to understand nature as the standard of truth and entryway into reality for guidance in our lives. Following this maxim, a gnomic education allows one to understand the makeup of reality as well as how citizens and individuals should comport themselves within reality according to their roles. In this sense, a gnomic education provides a point of entry for viewing reality in practice, not just in theory. After all, the doctrines of Stoicism are useless if not applied to one's life. Epictetus famously scolded his students for knowing Stoic theories without living them: "Shouldn't you make this your starting point, the foundation on which, step by step, you construct your edifice, and learn how to ensure that nothing happens except what you want to happen, and that nothing that you want to happen fails to happen?" (*Diss*. 2.17.28).

Consider next the steps of Epictetus's gnomic education. To begin one's education requires one to recognize how desire and aversion rule the soul. As Epictetus writes, the student who not only recognizes that a life without obstruction and grief is desirable in theory but also seeks his own freedom is on the philosopher's path:

> Give me just one young man who has come to the school with this purpose, who masters the theory and then says, "Speaking for myself, I can do without everything else. It will be enough for me if I can live my life without obstruction or grief, hold my head up high in the world as a free man, and look up to heaven as a friend of God, with no fear of anything that might happen." Let one of you show himself to be this kind of person and then I'll say, "Come in, young man. You're home now. For you are destined to

> become an ornament to philosophy, and so all this property is yours, all these books, all these discourses." (*Diss*. 2.17.29–30)

Put otherwise, Epictetus is arguing that the one who seeks to live life free from obstruction or grief is not only distinguished among men but also a "friend of God," insofar as he acts as nature's providence has directed him to act. Recognizing that one suffocates when mastered by that which is out of our control is the first step to ascending in the ethical life because our own pursuit of freedom, devoid of external aid, requires our own initiative to come to fruition. Failure to learn this first step of education results in externals mastering one's will, as was the case with the Greek dramatic heroine Medea, who judged herself to have been wronged and insulted, which led her to kill her children (*Diss.* 2.17.19–22). As Epictetus notes, one should practice this first domain of study until having mastered it before beginning the next step.

The second step of a gnomic education is to recognize the existence of appropriate actions based on one's roles. This step instructs a student in Epictetus's Stoic role ethics. As Johnson argues, the second *topos* is not simply a reiteration of Stoic ethics but a "special course of study that connects good action to the concept of a person as a role-bound agent."[40] As Epictetus puts it,

> And then, once he's completed the first domain and mastered it, have him come to me again and say, "I do indeed want to have both equanimity and serenity, but, as a respectful, thoughtful, and punctilious person, I also want to know how to behave appropriately toward gods, parents, brothers, country, and strangers." Move on now to the second domain; it, too, is made for you. (*Diss*. 2.17.29–34)

In other words, after recognizing that one's desires and aversions are not up to us and hence should not concern us, we are ready to focus on what is up to us. This requires the practice of Stoic role-based ethics. One can discover what is reasonable (*eulogou*) or not reasonable by examining one's particular role.

The effects of this are twofold. First, one will know to act according to one's appropriate roles. A father, for instance, will know that he should act to his child as a father should act, not wincing at his child's pain but enduring it. Moreover, a citizen whose character is fit for politics will know that it would be appropriate for him, and perhaps only him, to criticize the will of Caesar (*Diss*. 1.2.19–24).[41] It turns us back to the world after we have turned away from the externals that had oppressed us. Second, this will dispel all vices that derive from mistaken judgments such as envy, pity, jealousy, and fear (*Diss*. 2.17.26). These particular vices are deadly precisely because they distort our judgment of reality. Envy, for instance, makes us believe that someone is better than us when the person simply has more money than us (*Enchiridion* 44). Hence, this second component of education not only teaches virtue but also protects against the cultivation of vices that control us.

The third step of Stoic education is not required to practice virtue but is required to master it. Step three is the mastery of Stoic logic. Epictetus tells us,

> "All right, I've now completed my training in the second domain as well. But I'd like what I've learned to be securely and unassailably available to me, not only when I'm awake but also when I'm asleep, drunk, and in a black mood." Man, these lofty ambitions made you a god! (*Diss*. 2.17.29–34)

This third step of Stoic education is for those who wish to become sages. The sage, for the Stoics, has surpassed the capacities of ordinary men. Epictetus goes so far as to call such a person "a god." Epictetus, frustratingly to some, does not offer great detail on how to practice our own roles, yet this is, in part, the point of a role-based ethic from the second *topos*. Only the person filling the role can discern what his duties are. Epictetus tells us that this is up to each individual to discover for himself. To illustrate this, Epictetus scolds a man who asks him how to perform his own particular role. What Epictetus can tell us is not how to perform our own roles but how he can perform his own role as a philosopher. Such a role requires practical

knowledge of nature's axioms lived out with our intellect (*gnômê*) conformed to nature. It is insufficient just to know what things are true and false; we must also know the facts of the world relating to a maxim. This is the most significant principle of a gnomic education. Epictetus gives the example that money changers must not just know not to accept counterfeit coins; they must also be able to distinguish between counterfeit and noncounterfeit coins. Hence, when practiced to perfection, a gnomic education produces citizens who are in touch with reality rather than diluted by things that are not their own.

Conforming one's *gnômê* to nature—that is, thinking through one's impressions with reference to reality—yields many fruits. First and foremost is a personal strength. Individuals who follow nature and in so doing choose a virtuous life can become free from the snare of misguided judgments. Yet this is no solipsistic virtue without communal benefit. Individuals do not attain this freedom in isolation from others, as many of today's Stoic popularizers imply with their half-Stoic self-help programs. Instead, educating citizens to conform their lives to nature creates a political community of knowledge seekers. Epictetus's gnomic education, and really the Stoic life in toto, is to be pursued so that one can recognize oneself to be no different from others, in so far as all humans share in the divine capacity for reason. This realization will lead us not to be envious of those around us. To succeed at this is to live in accordance with nature.

The practice of virtue, for Epictetus, cannot be done in isolation. It is best pursued within a harmonious community of reasoners. The mastery of virtue also requires a vision of the type of character one wishes to embody at the end of one's education. Hence, this section concludes with an insight about Epictetus's reflection of himself. For even though he credits Socrates, even more than Diogenes the Cynic, as the greatest Stoic sage, Epictetus is himself the greatest teacher of Stoicism, and his image of himself is a helpful guide for what we lack today and the ideal it should chase:

> What else am I, a lame old man, capable of except singing hymns to God? If I were a nightingale, I would do the nightingale's thing, and if I were a swan, the swan's. Well,

> I am a rational creature; so I must sing hymns to God. This is my task; I do it, and I will not abandon this position as long as it is granted me, and I urge you to sing this same song. (*Diss.* 1.16.20–21)

An education in right judgment (*orthos logos*) should not be an arduous task. As Epictetus describes, the master of virtue looks as though he is singing a hymn. Mastery is difficult, but it is possible, and to master the highest forms of the art of singing allows one to sing to the highest things. *Gnômê* teaches us to sing the hymn of reason to God.

Conclusion: Gnomic Insights for Liberalism's Future

Let us return to the original question for this paper: What virtue might offer relief to the present difficulties of liberalism? This paper has presented Epictetus's concept of *gnômê* as a candidate for a relevant but too frequently overlooked virtue that could save liberalism from itself. It is my position that *gnômê* should, at the very least, be added to the catalogue of virtues that liberalism needs to thrive, if not near the very top of this list. The virtue of thinking—of conforming one's mind with nature—I wager, is precisely what liberal citizens need to cut through the *dogmata*, the distortions of reality, and the outright mendacities to which liberal citizens are asked to conform today. To remedy the failings of liberalism, liberal citizens should be able to interrogate historical facts, biological truths, and economic realities that are routinely concealed or distorted by the media and politicians. This catalogue includes, for instance, contemporary attitudes toward slavery and confederate monuments as well as such phenomena as misinformation, conspiracy theories, Holocaust denial, and campus intolerance. These are distortions of truth that, as Epictetus teaches, arise from poor judgment. A gnomic citizen would enquire how something like the denial of unthinkable horrors of history could exist in harmony with a liberal regime and consequently reframe his actions on the basis of conclusions that comport with external reality. The practice of aligning one's *gnômê* to nature, then, might well yield free-thinking liberal citizens who reject any and all second-order realities, dogmas, and lies in which they are invited to participate.

The second major benefit of Epictetus's gnomic education is that it can bear effects without the present aid of mediating institutions and without resorting to state institutions that attempt to nudge virtue onto citizens. As a return to the practicality that the Stoic philosophy of Epictetus demonstrates, while the use of institutions to beget virtues in citizens is at once useful and necessary, the institutionalization of virtue is futile without understanding the need for individuals to cultivate virtue themselves so that they are self-motivated in their pursuit. If, as we are told, we can no longer rely on our institutions of public education to inculcate virtue in our youth, a gnomic education could be the fuel that ignites a liberal citizenry composed of individuals who understand, not just theoretically but practically, the importance of virtue for sustaining a liberal society. As Epictetus remarks about education,

> A student ought to approach his education with this objective: "How can I follow the gods in everything? How can I be content with the divine dispensation? How can I become free?" Because someone is free if everything that happens to him is in accord with his will and no one is able to impede him. (*Diss*. 1.12.7–9)

Notes

1. See Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), xvi. See also Joshua Mitchell, *American Awakening: Identity Politics and Other Afflictions of Our Time* (Encounter Books, 2020).
2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 371.
3. Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); William A. Galston, "Liberal Virtues," *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 4 (1988): 1277–90; Stephen Macedo, "Liberal Virtues: Citizenship, Virtue, and Community in Liberal Constitutionalism," *Mind* 100, no. 3 (1991): 398–400; Robert P. George, *Making Men Moral: Civil Liberties and Public Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public*

Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996); Stephen G. Salkever, "'Lopp'd and Bound': How Liberal Theory Obscures the Goods of Liberal Practices," in *Liberalism and the Good*, ed. R. Bruce Douglass, Gerald M. Mara, and Henry S. Richardson, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2019); Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

4. Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992).
5. Andrea Louise Campbell, "Self-Interest, Social Security, and the Distinctive Participation Patterns of Senior Citizens," *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 3 (2002): 565–74.
6. Suzanne Mettler, *Soldiers to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
7. Joe Soss, "Lessons of Welfare: Policy Design, Political Learning, and Political Action," *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 2 (1999): 363–80.
8. Richard Avramenko and Richard Boyd, "Subprime Virtues: The Moral Dimensions of American Housing and Mortgage Policy," *Perspectives on Politics* 11, no. 1 (March 2013): 111–31.
9. Judith Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum, 21–38 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
10. Aurelian Craiutu, *A Virtue for Courageous Minds: Moderation in French Political Thought, 1748–1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); *Faces of Moderation: The Art of Balance in an Age of Extremism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); *Why Not Moderation: Letters to Young Radicals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); and Paul O. Carrese, *Democracy in Moderation: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Sustainable Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
11. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 1994); Allan David Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); John von Heyking, *The Form of Politics: Aristotle and Plato on Friendship*, McGill-Queen's Studies in the History of Ideas 66 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016); See also John von Heyking and Richard Avramenko, eds., *Friendship & Politics: Essays in Political Thought* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008).

12. Richard Avramenko, *Courage: The Politics of Life and Limb* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011). See also Richard Avramenko and Michael Promisel, "When Toleration Becomes a Vice: Naming Aristotle's Third Unnamed Virtue," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 4 (2018): 849–60.
13. Steven B. Smith, *Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).
14. Ryan Patrick Hanley, "Aristotle on the Greatness of Soul," *History of Political Thought* 23, no. 1 (2002): 1–20. See also Jacob Howland, "Aristotle's Great-Souled Man," *Review of Politics* 64, no. 1 (2002): 27–56.
15. Jefferson remarked that Epictetus, in particular, "has given us what was good of the Stoics," since he, alongside Epicurus, gave laws for governing ourselves. See Letter from TJ to William Short, October 31, 1819.
16. Groups as diverse as Silicon Valley executives, internet podcasters, and media influencers to traditional academics and active-duty military have embraced Stoic principles of resilience against things outside of one's control. However, critics in the academy have noted that these people often do not practice orthodox Stoicism. Philip Bunn has examined the resurgence of interest in Stoicism among Silicon Valley executives and observes that they "take the useful parts [of Stoicism], strip away the inconvenient parts, and profit, whatever the external costs." See Philip Bunn, "Silicon Valley Stoics? Life-Hacking, Transhumanism, and Stoic Therapy," *Political Science Reviewer* 46, no. 1 (May 10, 2022): 23. Nancy Sherman echoes this point by critiquing those who embrace Stoicism as a means of personal "life hacking," which misses "ancient Stoicism's emphasis on our flourishing as social selves, connected locally and globally." See Nancy Sherman, "What Pop Stoicism Misses about Ancient Philosophy," Opinion, *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/opinion/stoics-self-help.html?smid=tw-share.
17. A key problem in Deneen's account is that he confounds the diversity of liberal theories with the principles espoused by John Locke in the *Two Treatises of Government*. For him, liberalism simply means Lockeanism (see Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*). Recent scholarship has made compelling cases that Locke should not be categorized as a liberal because he was not considered a liberal either among his contemporaries or by liberals after him. After Locke's death, philosophers celebrated him for his epistemology in the *Essay* while leaving his political theory largely untouched until the early twentieth century. See Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?," *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (December 1, 2014): 682–715.

18. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed*, 3. For an articulate critique of toleration within liberal societies, see Avramenko and Promisel, "When Toleration Becomes a Vice." In promoting the plurality of beliefs, liberalism itself does not seek to make an epistemological claim. Rather, it seeks to promote the socially egalitarian principle to tolerate conflicting beliefs about external reality without, in so doing, falling into the extreme of rejecting reality. However, in our time, liberalism has degraded from its original intent and now promotes not only respect for all positions but that all positions can be taken as true in the eyes of the beholder. In this sense, my point is not that liberalism's extremes deny a lived reality at all. Rather, liberalism replaces reality according to nature with an egalitarian version of reality that accepts all ideas as valid, no matter how dangerous or internally inconsistent. In this sense, it aligns with Voegelin's notion of second reality replacing the first.
19. For Voegelin, "first reality" refers to how the world really is and "second reality" refers to the way the pneumatically disturbed man views reality, which leads to the construction of a systematic view of reality. Since a system is not reality itself, "second reality" always conflicts with true reality. See Eric Voegelin, Deltev Clemens, and Brendan Purcell, *Hitler and the Germans* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 108.
20. For a recent account of the tendency toward untruth in the modern age, see Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021). See also Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).
21. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, Abridged: The Little Liddell* (Simon Wallenberg Press, 2007), 143. As Robert C. Bartlett notes, *gnômê*'s meaning as judgment allowed the term eventually to mean "generally held judgments," which contributed to its acquired meaning in poetry as a judgment from a wise person. See Aristotle, *Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 120n124. Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.20–21, 1393a22-1395b19.
22. Unless otherwise noted, I rely on Robin Waterfield's splendid translation of both the *Discourses* and the *Enchiridion*. See Epictetus, *The Complete Works: Handbook, Discourses, and Fragments*, trans. Robin Waterfield (University of Chicago Press, 2022).
23. For a masterful assessment of the monism of Stoic physics, see Samuel Sambursky, *Physics of the Stoics*, Princeton Legacy Library (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). One could also identify a slight distinction between *logos* and *gnômê* by recognizing that *logos* is an

abstract systematic arrangement of impressions, whereas *gnômê* applies this arrangement of impressions into practice.

24. As the activity of *thinking with* oneself, it is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's description of "conscience" ("thinking with") as in her essay "Thinking and Moral Considerations." Arendt makes the persuasive case that the reason for Adolf Eichmann's moral failure as leader of the Final Solution was because of his incapacity to think critically. See Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971): 417–46.
25. In the *Discourses*, Epictetus also places *gnômê* alongside *logos* as that which distinguishes humans from animals. This implies that *gnômê* is the beacon of human rationality.
26. Other authors like Robin Waterfield equate the faculty of assent (*sunkatathesis*) to the faculty of judgment. As Waterfield puts it, the faculty of assent or judgment is "designed to enable us to assent only to true or beneficial impressions–to avoid being deceived, as Epictetus occasionally puts it ([Diss.] 1.4.11, 3.2.7), even when 'asleep, drunk, and in a black mood' (2.17.33; see also 3.2.5)." See Epictetus, "Introduction," in *The Complete Works: Handbook, Discourses, and Fragments*, trans. Robin Waterfield, 46.
27. A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 133.
28. A. A. Long, *Epictetus*, 133.
29. Alex Long, "*Dogmata*, Epictetus and Socrates," *Aitia: Regards sur la culture hellénistique au XXIe siècle*, no. 12 (October 1, 2022), 19.
30. Nancy Sherman, *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy behind the Military Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 81.
31. For an account of the relationship between passions and judgment in Stoicism, see Margaret Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).
32. Stephen Salkever reads Aristotle's teleology offers functional explanations that do not presuppose a cosmic artificer. See Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy*, Studies in Moral, Political, and Legal Philosophy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).
33. Julia Annas, "Ethics in Stoic Philosophy," *Phronesis* 52, no. 1 (2007): 58–87.
34. As mentioned, *gnômê* is related both to *logos* and *prohairesis*. *Logos* is the ordering principle of the divine mind and something that humans, not animals, share with the divine mind. To live according to nature

is to live according to rational principle (*logos*). This is why the Stoic must order his faculty of choice (*prohairesis*) in accordance with nature. *Prohairesis* is not wholly distinct from reason (*logos*) and the ruling faculty (*to hegemonikon*) so much as a different side of it that emphasizes the act of choosing itself. *Gnômê*, it seems, also represents the act of thinking, guided by *logos*, through the act of choosing in *prohairesis*.

35. The precise meaning of *prohairesis* has long been debated. The great Epictetus scholar A .A. Long translates it as "volition." I follow Frede's and Waterfield's translations. See Michael Frede, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Robin Waterfield, "Introduction," from *The Complete Works: Handbook, Discourses, and Fragments* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 26–30.
36. Epictetus, *Handbook of Epictetus*, trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co, 1983), 19, 25.
37. This point is analogous to Aristotle's assertion that voluntary acts are distinct from chosen acts by the prior influence of deliberation (*boulê*) on choice in *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.2.3. While *Gnômê* readily plays the role of deliberation for Epictetus, the difference is that while Epictetan *gnômê* concentrates on conforming one's will to nature, Aristotle's ethics offers functional explanations that requires no assumption of a cosmic designer. See Salkever, *Finding the Mean.*
38. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Gregory Hays, Modern Library eBook ed. (New York: Modern Library, 2012), II.
39. Brian E. Johnson, *The Role Ethics of Epictetus: Stoicism in Ordinary Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).
40. Johnson, *Role Ethics of Epictetus*, 187–88.
41. Johnson, *Role Ethics of Epictetus*, 225–26.