

ON NOT BEING A PHILOSOPHER

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De vertaling betrof de eerste alinea's tot en met 'hotel lounge' van *On not being a philosopher* van de Ierse essayist en journalist Robert Wilson Lynd (1879-1949).

ON NOT BEING A PHILOSOPHER

Epictetus and the Average Man

By **Robert Lynd**

'HAVE YOU READ EPICTETUS LATELY?' 'No, not lately.' 'Oh, you ought to read him. Tommy's been reading him for the first time, and is fearfully excited.' I caught this scrap of dialogue from the next table in the lounge of a hotel. Like Tommy, I, too, felt 'fearfully excited,' for I had never really read Epictetus, though I had often looked at him on the shelf—perhaps even quoted him—and I wondered if here at last was the book of wisdom that I had been looking for at intervals ever since I was at school.

Never have I lost my early faith that wisdom is to be found somewhere in a book—to be picked up as easily as a shell from the sand. I desire wisdom as eagerly as Solomon, but it must be wisdom that can be obtained with very little effort—wisdom, as it were, that is caught by infection. I have no time or energy for the laborious quest of philosophy. I wish the philosophers to perform the laborious quest and, at the end of it, to feed me with the fruits of their labors; just as I get eggs from the farmer, apples from the fruit grower, medicines from the chemist, so do I expect the philosopher to provide me with wisdom at the cost of a few shillings. That is why at one time I read Emerson and, at another, Marcus Aurelius.

To read them, I hoped, was to become wise by reading. But I did not become wise. I agreed with them while I read them, but, when I had finished reading, I was still much the same man as I had been before, incapable of concentrating on the things on which they said I should concentrate or of being indifferent to the things to which they said I should be indifferent.

Even so, I have never lost faith in books, believing that somewhere one exists from which one can absorb philosophy and strength of character while sitting smoking in an armchair. It was in this mood that I took down Epictetus after hearing the conversation in the hotel lounge.

I read him, I confess, with considerable excitement. He is the kind of philosopher I like, not treating life as if at its finest it were an argument conducted in jargon, but discussing, among other things, how men should behave in the affairs of ordinary life.

Also, I agreed with nearly everything he said. Indifference to pain, death, poverty—yes, that is eminently desirable. Not to be troubled about anything over which one has no control, whether the oppression of tyrants or the peril of earthquakes—on the necessity of this, Epictetus and I are at one.

Yet, close as is the resemblance between our opinions, I could not help feeling, as I read, that Epictetus was wise in holding his opinions, and that I, though holding the same opinions, was far from wise. For, indeed, though I held the same opinions for purposes of theory, I could not entertain them for a moment for purposes of conduct.

Death, pain, and poverty are to me very real evils, except when I am in an armchair reading a book by a philosopher. If an earthquake happened while I was reading a book of philosophy, I should forget the book of philosophy and think only of the earthquake and how to avoid tumbling walls and chimneys.

This, though I am the staunchest possible admirer of Socrates, Pliny, and people of that sort. Sound though I am as an armchair philosopher, at a crisis I find that both the spirit and the flesh are weak.

EVEN in the small things of life I cannot comport myself like a philosopher of the school of Epictetus. Thus, when he advises us how to 'eat acceptably to the gods' and bids us to this end to be patient even under the most atrocious service at our meals, he commends a spiritual attitude of which my nature is incapable.

'When you have asked for warm water,' he says, 'and the slave does not heed you; or if he does heed you but brings tepid water; or if he is not even to be found in the house, then to refrain from anger and not to explode, is not this acceptable to the gods? 'Do you not remember over whom you rule—that they are kinsmen, that they are brothers by nature, and they are the offspring of Zeus?'

That is all perfectly true, and I should love to be able to sit in a restaurant, smiling patiently and philosophically while the waiter brought all the wrong things or forgot to bring anything at all. But in point of fact bad waiting irritates me. I dislike having to ask three times for the wine list. I am annoyed when, after a quarter of an hour's delay, I am told that there is no celery. It is true that I do not make a scene on such occasions. I have not enough courage for that. I am as sparing of objurgations as a philosopher, but I suspect that the scowling spirit within me must

somehow show itself in my features. Certainly, I do not think of telling myself: 'This waiter is my kinsman; he is the offspring of Zeus.' Besides, even if he were, why should the offspring of Zeus wait so badly?

Epictetus, I am sure, never dined at the Restaurant. And yet his patience might have served him even then. If so, what a difference between Epictetus and me! And, if I cannot achieve his imperturbability in such small affairs as that, what hope is there of being able to play the philosopher in the presence of tyrants and earthquakes?

Again, when Epictetus expresses his opinions on material possessions and counsels us to be so indifferent to them that we should not object to their being stolen, I agree with him in theory and yet in practice I know I should be unable to obey him. There is nothing more certain than that a man whose happiness depends on his possessions is not happy. I am sure a wise man can be happy on a pittance.

Not that happiness should be the aim of life, according to Epictetus or (in theory) to myself. But Epictetus at least holds up an ideal of imperturbability, and he assures us that we shall achieve this if we care so little for material things that it does not matter to us whether somebody steals them or not.

'Stop admiring your clothes,' he bids us, 'and you are not angry at the man who steals them.' And he goes on persuasively: 'He does not know wherein the true good of man consists, but fancies that it consists in having fine clothes, the very same fancy that you also entertain. Shall he not come, then, and carry them off?'

Yes, logically I suppose he should, and yet I cannot feel so at the moment at which I find that a guest at a party has taken my new hat and left his old one in its place. It gives me no comfort to say to myself: 'He does not know wherein the true good of life consists, but fancies that it consists in having my hat.'

Nor should I dream of attempting to console a guest at a party in my own house with such philosophy in similar circumstances. It is very irritating to lose a new hat. It is very irritating to lose anything at all, if one thinks it has been taken on purpose.

I feel that I could imitate Epictetus if I lived in a world in which nothing happened. But in a world in which things disappear through loss, theft, and 'pinching,' and in which bad meals are served by bad waiters in not very good restaurants, and a thousand other disagreeable things happen, an ordinary man might as well set out to climb the Himalayas in walking shoes as attempt to live the life of a philosopher at all hours.

IN SPITE of this, however, most of us cannot help believing that the philosophers were right—right when they proclaimed, amid all their differences, that most of the things we bother about are not worth bothering about.

It is easier to believe that oneself is a fool than that Socrates was a fool, and yet, if he was not right, he must have been the greatest fool who ever lived.

The truth is, nearly everybody is agreed that such men as Socrates and Epictetus were right in their indifference to external things. Even men earning £10,000 a year and working for more would admit this. Yet, even while admitting it, most of us would be alarmed if one of our dearest friends began to put the philosophy of Epictetus into practice too literally.

What we regard as wisdom in Epictetus we should look on as insanity in an acquaintance. Or, perhaps, not in an acquaintance, but at least in a near relation.

I am sure that if I became as indifferent to money and comfort and all external things as Epictetus, and reasoned like him with a happy smile over the loss of a watch or a (fairly) expensive overcoat, my relations would become more perturbed than if I became a successful company promoter with the most materialistic philosophy conceivable.

Think, for example, of the reasoning of Epictetus over the thief who stole his iron lamp:—

He bought a lamp for a very high price; for a lamp he became a thief, for a lamp he became faithless, for a lamp he became bestial. This is what seemed to him to be profitable!

The reasoning is sound, yet neither individually nor as a society do we live in that contempt of property on which it is based.

A few saints do, but even they are at first a matter of great concern to their friends.

When the world is at peace, we hold the paradoxical belief that the philosophers were wise men, but that we should be fools to imitate them.

We believe that, while philosophers are worth reading, material things are worth bothering about. It is as though we enjoyed wisdom as a spectacle—a delightful spectacle on a stage which it would be unseemly for the audience to attempt to invade.

Were the Greeks and the Romans made differently? Did the audiences of Socrates and Epictetus really attempt to become philosophers themselves, or were they like ourselves, hopeful of achieving wisdom, not by practice but by a magic potion administered by a wiser man than they?

To become wise without effort—by listening to a voice, by reading a book—it is at once the most exciting and the most soothing of dreams. In such a dream I took down Epictetus. And, behold, it was only a dream.

<https://robertlynd.wordpress.com/>

A Modern Elia Who Loved Mankind

By W.G.M.

NO modern essayist more ably maintained the Addison tradition than Robert Lynd, whose death last week at the age of 70 will be regretted by countless readers who were stimulated by his wit, charmed by his kindly wisdom and heartened by his urbanity and friendliness.

The essay has never fallen out of favour since the 18th Century masters made it popular by broadening its scope and deftly shortening it to a familiar, entertaining ten-minute gossip. Some of Bacon's essays are short enough, but they do not seek to be merry as well as wise; Cowley's have a cultured, leisured mellowness that makes no particular appeal to the man in the street.

But Steele and Addison brought the essay home to every man by simplifying it into a brief and easily readable article about his own affairs—dealing with current problems, with fashions and foibles of the moment, sketching a character, telling a story, criticising a book or a play, describing urban scenes and events, chronicling excursions into the country, moralising on vices or follies, philosophising on life at large—handling the gravest or most trivial themes, so long as they were of common interest, and doing it all, seriously or humorously, with a grace of style and plainness of language that pleased all sorts of readers.

Team of Titans.

Of distinguished writers who in our day have added fresh lustre to the essay-form, because they have used it without affectation or literary foppishness and have given it the grace of their own remarkable personalities, the most notable have been G. K. Chesterton, E. V. Lucas, A. G. Gardiner, C. E. Montague, Robert Lynd, J. B. Priestley, Max Beerbohm and Hilaire Belloc. It is a melancholy thought that within the last few years death has claimed all but the last three.

In this high company Robert Lynd held an honoured place for

close on half a century. For many years, as literary editor, first of the "Daily News" and then of the "News Chronicle," he wrote a Saturday essay and also one for the "New Statesman and Nation" (under the initials "YY," which became renowned throughout England), at the same time contributing regularly to "John o' London's Weekly," with which, apart from "John o' London" (the late Wilfred Whitten) himself, he was more closely associated than any other writer.

Robert Lynd infused his work with the interests of daily life in

the home, the street, the sports ground, and the human heart. He brought it into contact with problems of faith, of politics, of conflict against tyranny, of the dangers and excitements of a shifting civilisation. Above all, he used the essay as an instrument to assert the right of the individual, in a mass-producing world, to think his own thoughts, make with his own hands, and love or hate or laugh at the inclination of his own spirit.

Born at Belfast in 1879, son of a Presbyterian minister, Lynd has given us some delightful glimpses

of his childhood in his first book, published in 1908, "Irish and English: Portraits and Impressions"—a collection of essays he had contributed to divers weekly journals, most of them written, as he remarks in a preface, "under various damaging conditions," and the greater part "in haste to catch late posts." He tells us of the influence on his youthful mind of a benign but fiercely Protestant old nurse, "who believed in her heart that God was an Orangeman, and also believed that a strong family likeness existed between Satan and the Pope of Rome."

But by the time he arrived in London as a tall (six-foot) gaunt young man he had shed religious prejudices and become the reasonable, tolerant, equable-minded citizen of the world who is revealed in his essays as one more amused than irritated by the follies, vanities and self-importances of mankind, who, seeing both sides of a question, could sympathise with hopes, ambitions, beliefs he did not share, had too keen a sense of the ridiculous ever to be oracular, but could lose his temper gloriously, and grow angry and bitter against manifest injustice to nations or to individuals, against wrongs done by the strong to those who have not the strength or the means to retaliate successfully. With all his tolerance he was implacable in his detestation of bunkum and brutality. "The passion for justice," he says in one of his essays, "will outlive any statesman that God has yet created"; and it is the only passion, apparently, that ever broke up his engaging, genial quietude and roused him to hot indignation.

By and large, he was contented to live and let live; his own views were good enough for him, and he was willing to assume that other men's views might be good enough for them, and, except when he was frankly frivolous, or playing with an odd or grotesque fancy, it was this gracious spirit of reasonableness and commonsense philosophy that were the charm and distinctive notes of his essays. Many volumes of them have been published; get hold of some of them and read or reread them; they tell you far more about the kind of man he was than can be told by anyone else.



ROBERT LYND.
(From a pencil study by Augustus John.)