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THE ROMAN STOICS ON THE EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL *PAIDEIA*¹

ABSTRACT

The idea that learning liberates or that education emancipates is hardly a novelty, and it can be traced to ancient times and Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. Thus, in this paper, we aim to express that some of the ideas (like the idea that women and men are equally subject to moral virtue because of their rationality) and educational practices (such as those that encourage students to use their voices and reason independently from any authorities) embraced by well-known Roman Stoics did have emancipatory potential. Particularly important was a requirement that philosophy should be lived outside the classrooms.

KEYWORDS

Students, Mentors, Emancipation, Educational practices, Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius

The notion of emancipation comes from the Latin *emancipatio*. One of the meanings of this concept is liberation from the influence of another person or several persons. It thus follows that an emancipated person is someone who achieved freedom and independence through the act of emancipation (Lewis & Short s.v. *emancipatio*; see also Krstić 2021: 209–211; Krstić 2022: 168). From a legal standpoint, we could say that the Roman Stoic Epictetus began teaching philosophy in the city of Nicopolis only after he was emancipated, or after being granted his freedom (Long 2002: 1, 169). Through this particular act of emancipation, Epictetus ceased to be a slave and became a free citizen of the Roman Empire.

However, the Roman Stoics did not believe that emancipation is necessarily restricted to legal or *political* emancipation. They even thought that some

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In this paper, we have used established abbreviations for citing classical works, which can mostly be found in the fourth edition of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.



of the wealthiest and most powerful Roman citizens, despite *de facto* being politically in the position to do practically anything they wanted, were still *only* slaves to their flawed beliefs and bad judgments. The Stoics considered Roman senators an appropriate example of people who were both self-willed and enslaved. Some senators became slaves to their own and other people's excessive desires as soon as they reached the peak of their political ambitions (cf. Epict. *Diss.* 1.4.). Some political slaves, on the other hand, were praised for their character.² That being said, it is clear that the Stoics reversed the conventional or common understanding of freedom.

The freedom sought for oneself included both emancipation from any kind of external supervision (as when a master watches and monitors a slave) and emancipation from prejudices, upsetting thoughts, excessive emotions, and false opinions (see also Krstić 2022). Epictetus, for example, believed that falling madly in love with someone could turn into a form of slavery since falling head over heels for someone can be seen as an excessive expression of emotions (see also Plečaš 2022: 12–13; Diog. Laert. 7.21). The predominant Stoic view was that inappropriate passions do enslave people.³ The following illustrates Epictetus' position:

‘What’s that got to do with being a slave?’ – Doesn’t it seem to you that acting against one’s will, under protest and compulsion, is tantamount to being a slave? ‘Maybe, but who has power to compel me except Caesar, who rules over everyone?’ – So you admit that you have at least one master. And don’t let the fact that Caesar rules over everyone, as you say, console you: it only means that you’re a slave in a very large household. – You remind me of the citizens of Nicopolis, who are forever proclaiming, ‘By the grace of Caesar, we are free.’ – If you like, however, for the moment we’ll leave Caesar out of account. Just tell me this: haven’t you ever been in love with someone, be they man or woman, slave or free? ‘How does that affect whether I am slave or free?’ – Weren’t you ever commanded by your sweetheart to do something you didn’t want to do? Did you never flatter your pet slave, and even kiss her feet? And yet if someone were to force you to kiss Caesar’s feet, you’d regard it as hubris and the height of tyranny. If your lovesick condition isn’t slavery, then what is? (Epict. *Diss.* 4.1.11–18.)

If we are slaves to our passions or wrong beliefs, we are not free, regardless of whether we are political slaves or in a position of power. What gives us

2 Seneca writes in one of his famous letters that slaves, who made up an important part of the Roman economy and population, are human beings but also “lowborn friends” (“‘They are slaves.’ No, they are human beings. ‘They are slaves.’ No, they are housemates. ‘They are slaves.’ No, they are lowborn friends. ‘They are slaves.’ Fellow slaves, rather, if you keep in mind that fortune has its way with you just as much as with them.” Sen. *Ep.* 47. 1). This also implies that we should treat them gently and with love. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius influenced the adoption of certain Roman laws that aimed to simplify the liberation of the enslaved population “even when the tax administration opposed it” (Ado 2011: 258).

3 Of course, the Stoics believed that good emotions also exist (for more on that subject see Plečaš 2020).

freedom, according to the Stoic philosophy, is education (παιδεία). Such education serves the purpose of a fulfilled life. Yet, it is not education for the sake of education that matters, and we will elaborate more on that idea in the chapters to come. At the same time, we will highlight several Stoic ideas that may be considered emancipatory.

In addition, it is important to note that the Stoics expanded on some ideas found in Ancient Greek philosophical thought. Like Plato before them, Stoic philosophers associated vicious behaviour with ignorance, implying that a vice or a vicious character *could* be changed with education or *permanent* learning (cf. Sen. *Ep.* 95.29). Plato points out in his *Republic* that “the nature which we assumed in the philosopher, if it receives the proper teaching” will attain moral virtue or excellence (ἀρετή), “but, if it be sown and planted and grown in the wrong environment, the outcome will be quite the contrary unless some god comes to the rescue” (Pl. *Resp.* 492a). In addition, in his treatise *Timaeus*, Plato suggests that proper education, or adequate educational training, allows us to go through life without limping (cf. Pl. *Ti.* 44c–d). The Stoics agreed with these insights, because, like Plato, they believed that the moral character of a human could be shaped through upbringing and continuous philosophical education and practice, and that the environment plays a significant role in this. Needless to say, this is not an easy task, but rather one that lasts a lifetime.

The Stoics’ Ideas on Education

Education was acquired in Ancient Rome through schools⁴, educated individuals, or private teachers. From the third century BC onward, the “tutorial form of elementary education became accessible to a fee-paying public for the first time” (Corbeill 2001: 269). Following that, an increasing number of schools opened with teachers who were often Greek slaves or freed slaves (cf. Corbeill 2001: 279) teaching for a small amount of money (cf. Rober 2009: 231). The school system was divided into primary or elementary (for pupils aged 7 to 11) and secondary schools (for pupils aged 12 to 16) where grammarians educated children. Higher education was also available (for pupils over 16), and there, rhetoric and philosophy were taught (Rober 2009: 231–232). Thus, in the Roman educational system, philosophy came at the end, and was not binding for everyone, despite the fact that philosophical discourse could be found in formal institutions, public squares, and the Roman senate. In addition, it is important to note that women of Ancient Rome had more opportunities to get an education than Ancient Greek women, and that some of them had private tutors who influenced their emancipation (see also Plečáš 2021).

According to several testimonies, teaching was one of the most preferred professions for any Stoic philosopher, besides being politically engaged as an advisor (like Seneca) or a ruler of an Empire (like Marcus Aurelius) (cf. LS 67

4 More on the philosophical schools of that period and the meaning of the Greek word σχολή can be found in the following paper: Bénatouil 2006.

W). The Roman Stoics lectured, just like their Stoic predecessors, in various internal or external, i.e., open-air spaces depending on the occasion. Seneca, Musonius Rufus, and Epictetus were all different kinds of teachers.

Aside from being a philosopher, rhetorician, and politician, Seneca was known as a tutor of the young emperor Nero. Marcus Aurelius valued higher education and was known for establishing imperial chairs of both philosophy and rhetoric in Athens, then a Roman province (see Bénatouïl 2006: 419).⁵ Musonius Rufus and Epictetus, on the other hand, were primarily known as professional philosophy teachers, renowned for their teaching skills even in Hellenistic times. The schools of Musonius Rufus and Epictetus were mostly attended by members of upper-class Roman society, with a few exceptions. Epictetus' students were mostly between 18 and 25 years of age (Long 2002: 43), despite Epictetus still calling himself an instructor or tutor of the youth (*παιδευτής*) (cf. Long 2002: 123). Nevertheless, there were rumours that emperor Hadrian visited Epictetus' school (cf. Birley 1997: 58–61), as well as other senior citizens of the vast Roman Empire (see, for example, Epict. *Diss.* 3.7.1).

What were the Stoics' thoughts on philosophical education? Although the Stoics divided philosophy into three distinct areas (physics, logic, and ethics), they believed that these areas were intrinsically connected, and that philosophy is a coherent and closed system of thought (see Diog. Laert. 7.39–40; Ierodiakonou 1993; Stephens 2020). In addition, philosophy was not simply a formal discourse but rather the *art of living* (see Sellars 2009). This is why Pierre Hadot highlights that for the Stoics, philosophy is not merely philosophical speech but also a concrete and lived exercise that involves the practice of logic, ethics, and physics (cf. Ado 2011: 150). Physics implies a particular view and understanding of the cosmos, while ethics is concerned with human beings, their mutual interactions, and their place in the cosmos. Meanwhile, logic can be seen as an exercise of thought in everyday life.

Seneca writes to Lucilius that “formal discourse will not do as much for you as direct contact, speaking in person and sharing a meal”, because “the quick and effective way is to learn by example. If Cleanthes had merely listened to Zeno, he would not have been moulded by him; instead, he made himself a part of Zeno's life, looking into his inmost thoughts and seeing whether he lived in accordance with his own rule” (Sen. *Ep.* 6). On the other side, Epictetus taught that all things in life come with a specific price and that moral integrity is attached to freedom (cf. Long 2002: 207–230). No one is free who lives with constant fear or resentment and is not educated to know such things (cf. Epict. *Diss.* 1.2.25). That is why he advises one of his fellow students the following: “Consider at what price you sell your integrity; but please, for God's sake, don't sell it cheap. The grand gesture, the ultimate sacrifice – that, perhaps, belongs to others, to people of Socrates' class” (Epict. *Diss.* 1.2.33). Although humans are prone to making mistakes all the time, the Stoics believed they

⁵ Marcus Aurelius implies that he owes much to his Stoic teacher and philosopher Junius Rusticus who introduced him to Epictetus' sayings (cf. M. Aur. *Med.* 1. 7).

are also endowed with rationality by nature. For that reason, they may be able to develop certain potentials, but only if properly educated. Or, as Epictetus said: “Even if I lack the talent, I will not abandon the effort on that account. Epictetus will not be better than Socrates. But if I am no worse, I am satisfied” (Epict. *Diss.* 1.2.35–36; see also Plećaš 2022; Epict. *Ench.* 51.3). Thus, Epictetus followed the example set by Socrates, who guides others by his own deeds. This also meant that Epictetus, just like Seneca before, believed that learning by example is more beneficial to moral development than formal, philosophical discourse without practice. It is thus not surprising that Epictetus advises us to choose for ourselves what person we want to be. Then, having made that decision, we should act our part accordingly (see, for example, Epict. *Diss.* 4.2.10; Epict. *Ench.* 51). Philosophical knowledge should be applicable (Epict. *Ench.* 49, Epict. *Ench.* 52), because mere theory without practical application is not particularly helpful and effective in our everyday lives.

The Stoics as Mentors

One of the first mentors, according to Greek mythology, was the goddess Athena, who was a wise adviser to the Greek hero Odysseus and appeared as Mentor to Odysseus’s son Telemachus as well.⁶ The goddess Athena was a protector of intellectuals, philosophers, poets, and women and girls, but also of practical intelligence and crafts (OCD s.v. Athena). The term Mentor was later used “in European tradition” as a “name for an older assistant to a younger person – a student, intellectual, or artist in general” (cf. Slapšak 2013: 44–45). The term “mentor” is indirectly found in the Latin *monitor*, which also indicates supervision and monitoring, as well as an instructor, assistant, guide, or teacher of the youth (Lewis & Short s.v. monitor). Mentors may also be those who set an example for others. Mentors for the Roman Stoics included philosophers such as Socrates, early Stoics (especially Zeno and Chrysippus), and early Cynics (such as Diogenes and Crates). The Roman Stoics were mentors as well.

Seneca, for example, advises his friend Lucilius that a *crowd* is something potentially dangerous and that young people should avoid it “more than anything else”, especially when it is not “yet safe” for them “to trust” themselves to one (cf. Sen. *Ep.* 7.1).⁷ Additionally, Epictetus points out that “any extraordinary ability is not safe for a novice” (Epict. *Diss.* 3.13.20). This alludes, among other

6 “Then Athena, daughter of Zeus, drew near them, like unto Mentor in form and voice, and Odysseus saw her, and was glad; and he spoke, saying: ‘Mentor, ward off ruin, and remember me, thy dear comrade, who often befriended thee. Thou art of like age with myself’” (Hom. *Od.* 22.205–210). Mentor, the son of Alcimus, was an old, intimate friend of Odysseus, who oversaw and advised Telemachus.

7 Seneca explains that “contact with the many is harmful to us. Every single person urges some fault upon us, or imparts one to us, or contaminates us without our even realizing it” (Sen. *Ep.* 7.2). In addition, he says that “the mind that is young and not yet able to hold on to what is right must be kept apart from the people. It is all too easy to follow the many” (Sen. *Ep.* 7.6). Only an educated mind can be undisturbed in a crowd.

things, that from a Stoic perspective, youth needed advisors or experienced teachers or mentors to guide them through certain periods of their lives. This is why Seneca says to Lucilius, quoting Epicurus: “I write this not for the many but for you: you and I are audience enough for one another” (Sen. *Ep.* 7.11).

In his thirty-fourth letter to Lucilius, Seneca writes: “I claim you, as my own” (Sen. *Ep.* 34.2),⁸ and immediately adds: “you are my handi-work. It was I who laid hands on you, having seen your potential, and encouraged you, got you going, and did not let you slow down but continued to spur you on – and I am doing that even now, but now I am cheering you in the race, and you in return are cheering for me” (Sen. *Ep.* 34.2). In letter thirty-five Seneca states:

Give me yourself, then: a great gift. And to make you work even harder, keep in mind that you are a mortal being – and that I am old. Hurry, then, to me; but first, hurry to yourself. As you progress, strive above all to be consistent with yourself. If ever you want to find out whether anything has been achieved, observe whether your intentions are the same today as they were yesterday. A change of intention shows that the mind is at sea, drifting here and there as carried by the wind. A thing that is well grounded does not move about. That is how it is for the completely wise person, and also to some extent for the one who is making progress toward wisdom. (Sen. *Ep.* 35.3–4)

A mentor is someone a young person should trust and follow; but mentors should also strive for their own progress first and foremost. Similar to Seneca, Epictetus explains that there are times when it is more important to do something for yourself than for your students (cf. Epict. *Diss.* 1.10.8). In his work *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says about artists that “each of them loves his work more than it would love him if it would have a soul” (Arist. *Nic. Eth.* 1168a). Such is the case with poets and benefactors. Benefactors have a similar affection for their beneficiaries – “their protégé is also their work, and therefore they love it even more than the artist his work” (Arist. *Nic. Eth.* 1168a). Furthermore, Aristotle says that the one who creates exists in a certain way in “his act of creation, his work” and thus “loves his work because he loves his existence” (Arist. *Nic. Eth.* 1168a). Similarly, we could say that Seneca watches over Lucilius and advises, teaches, and encourages him. Further, Seneca expects encouragement from his protégé. The goal of encouragement is to make the person we are encouraging to do something, to change, to work on themselves.

As previously mentioned, according to Stoicism, philosophy is not only a theoretical discipline but also, to a great extent, a practical one. Therefore, philosophy may be found in both theory and actions, and be defined as a discipline that educates the mind. In other words, philosophy teaches us to do, and not (only) to talk. A philosopher is a teacher who encourages us to *do* rather than just *say* things. Concerning that, Seneca writes the following in one of his letters:

⁸ In his *L'Histoire de la sexualité* Michael Foucault writes that Seneca *rightfully* claims Lucilius as his own (cf. Fuko 1988: 63).

Philosophy teaches us to act, not to speak. Its demands are these: each person should live to the standard he himself has set; his manner of living should not be at odds either with itself or with his way of speaking; and all his actions should have a single tenor. This is the chief task of wisdom, and the best evidence of it too: that actions should be in accordance with words, that the person should be the same in all places, a match for himself. “Is there any such person?” Not many, but there are some. It is indeed difficult. And I don’t mean, even, that the wise person always walks the same steps, but only that he walks a single road. (Sen. *Ep.* 20.2)

Similarly, Epictetus repeatedly emphasized the various threats to school education to his students and listeners. Specifically, the syllogisms and the Stoic texts “were not to be studied to shine intellectually in the school, but rather to know how to live outside of it” (cf. Bénatouil 2006: 424). Or, in Epictetus’ words, students must learn how to adequately address anxiety, death, pain, exile, discomfort, and other similar things, and not *only* the syllogisms, logical paradoxes, and so forth (see Epict. *Diss.* 1.2.34–40). That is the *fundamental* knowledge needed in their everyday lives. Put another way, Stoic or philosophical education should prepare students for a life outside of a Stoic school. Hence, the primary aim is not to become a professional philosopher or Stoic, but rather a human being of excellent character who leads a fulfilled life (cf. Long 2002: 111). This Stoic idea seems revolutionary and progressive even today.

A Stoic would argue that we need an education that extends beyond typical school expectations. We must learn not only how to write or read philosophical texts but also how to examine them critically, and even more importantly – we need to put the philosophical insights gained from those texts into practice. We need to change “for the better as a result of one’s reading” (Reydams-Schils 2010: 566), since only the virtuous life, according to the Stoics, is a life of wisdom, and only moral virtue leads to a prosperous or flourished or happy life, known as εὐδαιμονία. Such education is essential to progress towards εὐδαιμονία.

How to Walk a Single Road

As the previous quote shows, Seneca advises his close friend and student on a difficult task – walking a single road. But how do we walk such a road? How can anyone hope to succeed on a single road, reserved only for the wise and virtuous? Such a task may seem impossible, like an unattainable ideal. Despite this, the Stoics advise us to try to live like Socrates or Diogenes, those who, at least from their point of view, deserved to be called wise. To walk such a road, one must be emancipated, or in other words, educated. The Stoics thus believed that humans could liberate or emancipate themselves from the influence of a crowd or others only with the help of (philosophical) education. The following are Stoic ideas and educational practices that have emancipatory potential.

Musonius Rufus advocated that philosophical education be available not only to men but also to women who are equally capable of developing moral virtue (Muson. 3, 4).

When someone asked him if women too should study philosophy, he began to discourse on the theme that they should, in somewhat the following manner. Women as well as men, he said, have received from the gods the gift of reason, which we use in our dealings with one another and by which we judge whether a thing is good or bad, right or wrong. [...] Moreover, not men alone, but women too, have a natural inclination toward virtue and the capacity for acquiring it, and it is the nature of women no less than men to be pleased by good and just acts and to reject the opposite of these. If this is true, by what reasoning would it ever be appropriate for men to search out and consider how they may lead good lives, which is exactly the study of philosophy, but inappropriate for women? (Muson, 3)

Put simply, women are rational to the same degree as men, and gender does not play a role in whether and to what extent we can attribute rationality to someone.

Epictetus explicitly calls his students to use their intellectual capacities and trust their reason without continuous reliance on external authority.⁹ Authority may vary: it may be a mother's breast, a father's authoritative figure, or a mentor teaching us. At the same time, Epictetus was well aware that many of his students were lazy, and would rather spend their days in entertainment, at festivals, with Roman senators, etc. Consequently, we find the following remarks in the *Enchiridion*:

How long will you wait before you demand the best of yourself, and trust reason to determine what is best? You have been introduced to the essential doctrines, and claim to understand them. So what kind of teacher are you waiting for that you delay putting these principles into practice until he comes? You're a grown man already, not a child any more. If you remain careless and lazy, making excuse after excuse, fixing one day after another when you will finally take yourself in hand, your lack of progress will go unnoticed, and in the end you will have lived and died unenlightened.

Finally decide that you are an adult who is going to devote the rest of your life to making progress. Abide by what seems best as if it were an inviolable law. When faced with anything painful or pleasurable, anything bringing glory or disrepute, realize that the crisis is now, that the Olympics have started, and waiting is no longer an option; that the chance for progress, to keep or lose, turns on the events of a single day. (Epict. *Ench.* 51.1–2)

As already pointed out, the Roman Stoics believed philosophy is the *art of living*. This being so, genuine philosophers are only those who *behave* like philosophers in their everyday life, outside of classrooms or places where philosophy is taught (see also Plečaš 2022). These philosophers set good examples for others to follow. Moreover, philosophy, for the Stoics, was also an exercise (ἄσκησις) (cf. Gourinat 2014). Accordingly, philosophers who seek wisdom, as

⁹ In a certain sense, this view of Epictetus resembles the view that Immanuel Kant would express centuries later in his famous essay *What is Enlightenment?*

well as those who already possess it, must apply their beliefs, thoughts, etc. in their everyday lives, whether they are in the Roman senate or a Greek temple and oracle, by exposing themselves to challenges and not backing down in the face of difficulties. Behind this is the idea that external circumstances do not have to be an obstacle to our well-being because the judgments, desires, or everyday choices we make, and even *εὐδαιμονία* itself, are ultimately up to us, and thus within our power (cf. Epict. *Ench.* 1; Epict. *Diss.* 1.1; Epict. *Diss.* 1.11.37).

Finally, this walk is made easier when a person is not alone (because humans are social beings born for collaboration¹⁰) and when they have others similar to them who want to make change and progress by their side. These others are often our loved ones: friends, mentors, or those who cheer for us.¹¹

Lastly, we could conclude with the following remarks. For the Stoics, philosophical discourse is primarily reserved for the classroom or other places where classes were held, i.e., for school teaching (see also Ado 2011: 171), whereas philosophy outside the classrooms is lived and practiced in everyday situations. Philosophy is thus *the art of living* and has a significant impact on humans' *εὐδαιμονία*. The Stoics may seem to be stern teachers. Nevertheless, they encouraged their students, friends, and listeners to use their voices and reason without fear of authorities. They believed that all human beings (including women and political slaves, which was not commonplace in Ancient Greek and Roman philosophical thought) are, in principle, equal in their rationality and should and can be educated. All of the aforementioned indicates that the Roman Stoics advocated ideas and educational practices that carry emancipatory potential.

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¹⁰ Marcus Aurelius writes: "We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth. So to work in opposition to one another is against nature [...]" (M. Aur. *Med.* 2.1).

¹¹ Friendship is considered one of the most important topics in Stoic ethics.

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Rimski stoici o emancipatorskom potencijalu filozofskog obrazovanja

Apstrakt

Ideja da učenje oslobađa ili, preciznije da obrazovanje emancipuje teško da predstavlja neku novinu, budući da se ta ideja može pratiti sve do antičkog perioda, odnosno grčke i rimske filozofske misli. U ovom radu nastojimo da pokažemo da su neke od ideja (poput ideje da su i žene i muškarci zbog svoje racionalne prirode podjednako podložni vrlini) i obrazovnih praksi (poput prakse kojom se podsticalo iznošenje sopstvenih stavova i korišćenja vlastitog razuma, bez oslanjanja na spoljne autoritete) koje su zastupali neki od dobro poznatih rimskih stoika imale emancipatorski potencijal. Posebnu važnost je nosio zahtev u skladu sa kojim filozofija treba da se živi i van učionica.

Ključne reči: učenici, mentori, emancipacija, obrazovne prakse, Seneka, Musonije Ruf, Epiktet, Marko Aurelije

