

The Role Ethics of Epictetus: Stoicism in Ordinary Life

By Brian E. Johnson

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The Role Ethics of Epictetus: Stoicism in Ordinary Life offers an original interpretation of Epictetus's ethics and how he bases his ethics on an appeal to our roles in life. Epictetus believes that every individual is the bearer of many roles from sibling to citizen and that individuals are morally good if they fulfill the obligations associated with these roles. To understand Epictetus's account of roles, scholars have often mistakenly looked backwards to Cicero's earlier and more schematic account of roles. However, for Cicero, roles are merely a tool in the service of the virtue of decorum where decorum is one of the four canonical virtues—prudence, justice, greatness of spirit, and decorum. In contrast, Epictetus sets those virtues aside and offers roles as a complete ethical theory that does the work of those canonical virtues.

This book elucidates the unique features of Epictetus's role based ethics. First, individuals have many roles and these roles are substantial enough that they may conflict. Second, although Epictetus is often taken to have only a sparse theory of appropriate action (or "duty" in older translations), Brian E. Johnson examines the criteria by which appropriate action is measured in order to demonstrate that Epictetus does have an account of appropriate action and that it is grounded in his account of roles. Finally, Epictetus downplays the Stoic ideal of the sage and replaces that figure with role-bound individuals who are supposed to inspire each of us to meet the challenges of our own roles. Instead of looking to sages, who have a perfect knowledge and action that we must imitate, Epictetus's new ethical heroes are those we do not imitate in terms of knowledge or action, but simply in the way they approach the challenges of their roles.

The analysis found in *The Role Ethics of Epictetus* will be of great value both to students and scholars of ancient philosophy, ethics and moral philosophy, history, classics, and theology, and to the educated reader who admires Epictetus.

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Editorial Review

Review
A strong and consistent reading of an ambiguous text is always welcome, and Johnson's effort to think through what a role-based ethics might entail is of philosophical interest regardless of its fit with Epictetus' ancient project. Readers at all levels will benefit, too, from Johnson's consistently patient and clear manner of laying out the issues and from his meticulous references to related passages elsewhere in the corpus. (*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*)

Brian Johnson’s study is the most extensive analysis to date of the importance of roles in Epictetus’ ethics. The work is ‘good to think with’: it provides ample textual evidence for its claims and robust analyses, it is generally lucidly written, and has a good bibliography (*Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*)

This is a fresh approach that puts role ethics squarely at center stage in understanding Epictetus’s philosophy. With a lucid, penetrating, and original analysis, Johnson makes a strong case for both the importance of roles in Epictetus’s Stoicism and the originality of Epictetus’s version of role ethics. This study is a very welcome contribution to scholarship on Epictetus. (William O. Stephens, Creighton University)

About the Author
Brian E. Johnson is assistant professor of philosophy at Fordham University.

Users Review

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