# ON THE NOTION OF ETHICAL EXERCISES IN EPICTETUS

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**ABSTRACT**: I review a tentative list of the examples of ethical (or spiritual) exercises that have been proposed as Epictetan by contemporary commentators. Based on a minimal definition of the notion of ethical exercises, I suggest that some practices have been misidentified and propose some revisions to that repertoire.

**KEYWORDS**: Roman Stoicism. Spiritual Exercises. Askesis.

**RESUMO**: Analiso, nesse artigo, uma lista de exemplos de exercícios éticos (ou espirituais) que foram propostos como epictetianos por comentadores contemporâneos. Baseado numa definição mínima da noção de exercícios éticos, sugiro que algumas práticas foram identificadas erroneamente e proponho algumas revisões a esse repertório.

**RESUMO:** Estoicismo romano. Exercícios espirituais. Askesis.

## On the notion of Ethical Exercises in Epictetus

## 1. Introduction:

The extremely complex topic of moral progress in Stoicism can be approached from -at least- two different (but complementary) perspectives: *a)* ethical teaching; *b) ethical exercises*[1]. The first perspective (which has been brilliantly analyzed by Martha Nussbaum[2]) concerns the agent who produces (or attempts to produce) a certain change in the the student (or, considered from within the analogy philosophy-medicine, the patient), a change that will -ideally- get the latter closer to being a fully virtuous individual. The second perspective, which is the one I am interested here, concerns the question of what activities (be they physical or intellectual) the student can perform *himself* in order to reach that same goal, and does not (necessarily) involve another person: ethical exercises can be initially thought of as activities that one should -or, at least, *could-* perform in isolation.

Although these practices concern what is frequently labeled -following Foucault- as the "care of the self", ethical exercises only represent a *part* of the whole range of activities, attitudes and dispositions that constitute the general idea of the care of the self (*epimeleia*), an idea which includes -if we consider, for instance, Foucault's broad stroked approach-, the care of the body, health regimes, the moderate satisfaction of one's bodily needs, meditation, reading, note taking, or conversations with a virtuous person[3]; in other words: every practice destined to produce a specific *conversion* (*epistrophē*) of the agent.

With different degrees of specificity, B.L. Hijmans, Pierre Hadot, Michel Foucault, Richard Sorabji and John Sellars[4], among others, have approached the general issue of the

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1 Although not much hinges on the issue, I will opt in the following pages for the expression "ethical exercises", rather than Hadot's popular concept of "spiritual exercises". Hadot's claim that the notion of an "ethical" (or moral or intellectual) exercise does not cover all the aspects that he wants to describe (HADOT, 1993, p. 20) is understandable if we consider the broad scope of his survey, which ranges from Socrates to Early Christianity. If we focus on Roman Stoicism, and on Epictetus in particular, the concept of "ethical exercises" does seem to cover, on the contrary, the main idea and focus of the practices we are about to analyze, and has the additional advantage of avoiding undesired connotations. Barnes' particular objection to the notion of "spiritual exercises" might be seen to derive precisely from such connotations and from the ambiguities present in Hadot's general definition of the term. Cf. BARNES (1997, p. 47) and Sellars' defense of the notion of "spiritual exercise" (SELLARS, 2003, p. 111–112).

2 Cf. NUSSBAUM, 1996.

3 Cf. FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 58-59.

4 Cf. FOUCAULT, 1994, 2001; HADOT, 1974, 1995; HIJMANS, 1959; SELLARS, 2003, 2007; SORABJI,

care of the soul in Epictetus from different perspectives, without pausing to distinguish, nevertheless, what -if anything- sets ethical exercises apart from the rest of the elements that constitute the care of the self. Although that approach is undoubtedly more comprehensive and allows more far-reaching conclusions, I believe that the question about the specific nature and scope of ethical exercises needs to be addressed if we want to reach a fairly systematic understanding of Epictetus' approach to ethics. Although much progress has been made in this direction in the last decades, a general vagueness still surrounds the definition of what we are to understand by ethical exercises, the consequences of which can be seen in the relative confusion in the secondary literature concerning which of Epictetus' exhortations should indeed count as exercises and which of them are merely descriptive accounts of the specific features that a virtuous action should have[5]. It could be argued, nevertheless, that Foucault's, Hadot's and Sellars' approaches encompass a wider range of elements or perspectives on the problem of moral progress, and that any lack of precision on their part in the definition of what an ethical exercise is can be linked to that fact. That is, however, precisely what I intend to stress: if we rely on the possibility of extracting from Epictetus' lectures certain practices or techniques specifically designed to aid the student in his way to virtue, we must be able to explicitly distinguish those practices from broader notions such as *askēsis* or "care the self". Otherwise the notion of an spiritual, moral, intellectual or ethical exercise becomes of little or no value at all.

**2.**

Although both the *Ench.* and the *Disc.* are filled with terms derived from or equivalent to the notion of *askēsis* (exercise, training), the instances where we find specific practices explicitly presented as exercises to be performed by the student are extremely rare. The ethical exercises we will be talking about are, thus, practices that *we*, as readers, reconstruct as possible instances of those exercises. Although since Hadot and Foucault's work on the notions of "spiritual exercises" and the "care of the self" -respectively-, the literature on Stoic exercises has been growing exponentially, a minimal repertoire of the practices that have been identified by contemporary commentators as examples of ethical exercises should

2000.
5 I will return to this point later.

include the following:

e1)  To repeat to ourselves certain philosophical (Stoic) theoretical principles or maxims[6].

e2)  To engage in practices of meditation or reflection concerning what happened during the day that is ending or what might happen during the day that begins (early morning and bedtime reflection)[7].

e3)  To perform certain activities that allow us to discipline our bodily needs and desires[8].

e4)  To deliberately make a pause before reaching a decision[9].

e5)  To adopt a critical attitude towards every impression before making a decision (i.e., to be alert or watchful)[10].

e6)  To evaluate in a thorough and realistic manner the consequences of a certain decision before making it[11].

e7)  To evaluate in a thorough and realistic manner what a certain decision requires of us and whether we will be up to those requirements, before making the decision[12].

e8)  To ask ourselves what a completely virtuous agent (vg. Socrates or Zeno) would do when faced with a situation like the one we are faced with[13].

e9)  To reconsider our situation from a different perspective (relabelling)[14].

e10) To picture in our minds the pleasure we will get from refraining to do certain

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6 *Disc.* 1.1.21-25; 2.16.1-4, 3.3.14-16; 4.1.111-113. Cf. [personal reference].

7 *Disc.* 3.10.2-3; 4.6.33-35. Cf. FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 71–73. On the pythagorean origin of this practice, cf. SORABJI, 2000, p. 213–214.

8 *Ench.* 47. Cf. FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 68–70; SORABJI, 2000, p. 213–214.

9 *Ench.* 34. Cf. SORABJI, 2000, p. 240–241; BARTSCH, 2007, p. 89–95. By "reaching" or "making a decision" I am translating -for purely didactic reasons- the technical idea of *assenting to a given (practical) impression*.

10 *Disc.* 1.20.7-11; 3.12.15; 4.9.16; 4.12. Cf. HIJMANS, 1959, p. 68–70; FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 73–75; SELLARS, 2003, p. 141–142.

11 *Ench.* 2; 33.13; 34.

12 *Ench.* 29.

13 *Ench.* 33.12. Cf. SELLARS, 2003, p. 141); (HIJMANS, 1959, p. 72–77.

14 *Ench.* 11; 43; *Diss.* 1.12.20-21; 4.4.24-6. Cf. SORABJI, 2000, p. 222.

actions and the sense of regret we will experience if we perform them[15].

e11) To bear in mind the distinction between what does and what does not depend on us before making a decision**[16]**.

e12) To bear in mind the mortal or ephemeral nature of the object of our desire before making a decision[17].

e13) To evaluate the situation we are faced with from within its cosmic context**[18].**

e14) To reflect upon which of the virtues or capacities that we possess (vg.: self-control -*enkrateia-,* endurance -*karteria-*, or patience -*anexikakia-*) corresponds to the specific situation we are faced with[19].

e15) To desire things as they actually happen and not as we would like them to happen[20].

e16) To desire "with reservations" (i.e., qualifying our desires with the clause "if Zeus wills")[21].

e17) To completely suppress our desire until such time has come when we are able to experience correct desires[22].

e18) To approach our project of moral progress in a progressive manner (i.e., to "begin with the little things")[23].

As is evident, the elements that compose this list are extremely heterogeneous and betray diverse philosophical influences. A first general classification, however, can be presented concerning two main groups of exercises. The first group **[e1-e3]** includes certain activities that the agent is supposed to perform independently of any particular decision.

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[15]*Ench*. 34. Cf. SEDDON, 2006, p. 132–133; SALLES, 2007, p. 261–262.
[16]*Disc*. 1.24.11-16. Cf. SORABJI, 2000, p. 214–215; SORABJI, 2007, p. 91.
[17]*Ench*. 3. Cf. SORABJI, 2000, p. 216.
[18]*Disc.* 1.13.
[19]*Ench*. 10. Cf. SEDDON, 2006, p. 63–64.
[20]*Ench*. 8. Cf. SELLARS, 2003, p. 136–139; SEDDON, 2006, p. 121–122. INWOOD, 1985, p. 119–126.
[21]*Ench*. 2. Cf. SEDDON, 2006, p. 43–48; SORABJI, 2000, p. 219–220. On the notion of reservation (*hypexairesis*), cf. BRENNAN, 2000; BRUNSCHWIG, 2005; INWOOD, 1985, p. 119–126.
[22]*Ench*. 2; *Disc*. 1.4.1; 3.22.13. Cf. HIJMANS, 1959, p. 90; SEDDON, 2006, p. 41–42; INWOOD, 1985, p. 124–125; COOPER, 2007, p. 17.
[23]*Ench*. 12; *Disc*. 3.12.12; 4.1.111-115. Cf. HIJMANS, 1959, p. 90; SORABJI, 2000, p. 216.

These activities are independent from any particular situation not only from a *temporal* perspective (they can be performed, for instance, every night, regardless of what has happened during the day), but also from a *conceptual* point of view (the practice of dedicating a few minutes to meditate what kind of situations we might encounter during the day -so as to be prepared for them- is not linked to any specific situation, given that we cannot foresee the future). The exercises comprised in this group are consequently of a more *abstract* nature than the ones that conform the second group (e4-e14), in that they are meant to prepare us for a wide range of situations (in the case of exercises that project forward) and to extract general lessons concerning specific situations that have already taken place[24] (in the case of retrospective exercises)[25]. These exercises possess two additional features that clearly define their specificity: firstly, because of their abstract nature, these exercises can be the object of a certain *planning* and *organization*: I can set myself the goal of evaluating every night how far my actions have been from the ideal of virtue, I can dedicate some minutes in the morning to picture in my mind what kind of situations I am likely to encounter and what a virtuous reaction to them would be, or I can dedicate certain pre-established periods of the day to repeat to myself (either by rote or with the aid of a Stoic handbook) certain Stoic doctrines that may enable me to make increasingly virtuous decisions. In the second place, these exercises are not ends in themselves but rather means to some other goal (*eudaimonia*)[26]: we do not perform morning meditations because of a specific value that that practice might have, but merely because it will allow us to face everyday situations in a better position than if we didn't perform them.

The second group of exercises **[e4-e14]** is constituted by activities that the agent is supposed to perform *when faced with a particular decision,* or when dealing with a general

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24 If I am, for instance, supposed to recapitulate before going to sleep how I have dealt with certain situations during the day, this is not meant to make me experience a sensation of guilt or regret, but rather to enable me to learn a particular lesson concerning a kind of situation that I may be faced with in the future once again.

25 As a matter of fact, many of the exercises can be considered from both perspectives: we can, for instance, take the time in the morning to reflect in a general fashion upon the mortal or ephemeral nature of the individuals and things we will most likely encounter during the day that begins, or we can reflect upon that feature when faced with a specific situation.

26 An example of this conception of the notion of exercise would be an artisan who practices performing hundreds of wooden carvings until he manages to obtain the desired (ideal) result. In this case, the (hundred) instances are merely preparatory; they are instances of training and have no value in themselves (as happens with the carvings the artisan produces in his preparatory stage). For a careful analysis of the problem of philosophy considered as *technē* or *epistēmē*, vid. SELLARS, 2003, p. 55–85.

complex situation that demands from him a resolution[27]. Besides this general distinctive feature, an important difference with the first group is that within this second group we find a specific set of exercises (e5-e8, e11-e14) that, unlike e1-e3, should probably not be considered as practices that the progressor is supposed to perform *in virtue of being a progressor* but that would later be abandoned: the sage himself performs them, one would assume, although in a spontaneous manner[28]. The only difference between the progressor and the sage is that the progressor needs to make *an active effort to remind himself* to perform those activities.

These differences notwithstanding, what is common to both groups of exercises is that they can all be minimally defined, in general terms, as certain *activities that the agent can consciously and voluntarily perform that will enable him to perform future actions in an (increasingly) virtuous manner*. This definition is evidently vague, since, among other things, it leaves out the fact that these exercises are usually of an epistemic nature and it fails to include when and how they are supposed to be put into practice. For the time being, however, I will take it as a useful definition of an ethical exercise, since it serves to stress two facts: *i)* that ethical exercises are supposed to be *concrete activities* that the agent engages in, and *ii)* that he does so *in a conscious and voluntary manner*[29].

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27 We might be tempted to state, for the sake of symmetry, that the exercises included in this group are ends in themselves, and not merely means to a further end. This could be the case in certain specific exercises, such as e6 or e13, where establishing a difference between the exercise and the virtuous action itself seems arbitrary. The same cannot be said, however, as regards, vg., e4, e8 or e9, where the exercise is clearly conceived as an instrument to reach a virtuous result.

28 I exclude e9 and e10 from this subset for obvious reasons: the sage does not need, in order to refrain from performing certain actions, to picture in his mind the pleasure he will get from so doing, and nor does he need to wonder what another sage (be it Socrates, Zeno or Diogenes) would have done in his place. He possesses in himself the right criteria and does not need any motivation to pursue the virtuous course of action other than the fact that it is the virtuous thing to do.

29 An additional advantage of the proposed definition is that it downplays the idea that ethical exercises are activities directed at a wholesale *spiritual conversion* of the agent, such as the one proposed by Hadot: "Grâce à eux [i.e., ethical exercises] l'individu s'élève à la vie de l'Esprit objectif, c'est-à-dire se replace dans la perspective du Tout («S'éterniser en se dépassant»)" (HADOT, 1993, p. 21). To be sure, the aim of ethical exercises is indeed to produce an transformation in the *psyche* of the student, but the emphasis on the notion of *epistrophē* or on the idea that ethical exercises produce "une métamorphose de la personnalité" (HADOT 1993, p. 21) has tended to obscure the fact that the transformation in question is of a strictly *epistemic* nature. Sellars is right, nevertheless, to defend Foucault and Hadot's position against Nussbaum's attack, since nowhere do Hadot or Foucault suggest that any of the exercises depend on means that are not those of strict rational argumentation, nor do they appeal to an irrational part of the soul (cf. (NUSSBAUM 1996, p. 353–354); (SELLARS 2003, p. 117–118)). My suggestion is, therefore, merely to avoid terms and expressions that might be read as going against the actual interpretation one is trying to propose. My rejection of Hadot and Foucault's emphasis on the idea of a general *epistrophē* is also linked to Epictetus' general rejection of the dichotomic picture of Ancient Stoicism concerning the figure of the ideal sage and of its counterpart, the complete moral fool: Epictetus'

If this an acceptable definition, some progress can be made concerning the goal of defining what can and what cannot count as an ethical exercise. If we agree that ethical exercises are *concrete activities* that the agent performs in a voluntary manner, we can filter out certain ideas that have been presented by commentators as exercises but which are actually either *i)* descriptions of (some of) the features that an action must have in order to be considered as virtuous, or *ii)* pieces of advice concerning the manner in which we should approach the project of moral reform (i.e., beginning with the little things -e18- and suppressing our desire until some progress has been made -e17-). Concerning (i), given that e15 and e16 are actually *descriptions* of certain features of a virtuous action, they cannot actually function as exercises, since an exercise is precisely a certain practice that will *enable* our actions to have those features, but not the possession of the feature in itself. Concerning (ii), those pieces of advice are clearly general guidelines that might apply to certain exercises, but are not exercises in themselves. As is evident, this forces us to resign e15-18 and narrow down the list of available exercises to e1-e14. By doing so, we have, I believe, cleared the way for a more precise understanding of the possibilities of a realistic, useful and more accurate reconstruction of Epictetus moral project from a practical perspective.

**3.**

When we consider closely a subset of the second group of exercises, a problem immediately arises: if ethical exercises are, according to the minimal definition I proposed earlier, concrete activities that the agent consciously and voluntarily performs, what are the *precise activities* we are supposed to perform in the cases of e11-e14? What specific activity translates, for instance, Epictetus exhortation to bear in mind the mortal nature of the people we love or the distinction between what depends and what does not depend on us?

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pedagogical project does not aim directly (as has been stressed, among others, by LONG, 2004, p. 32–33 and ROSKAM, 2005, p. 11–124 ) at a complete "metamorphosis of the personality" of the individual, but rather at enabling him to, at least, perform particular future actions in an (increasingly) virtuous manner. To be sure, from an orthodox Stoic viewpoint, one could object that *i)* there is no such thing as an *increasingly virtuous action* (an action is virtuous or it is not; there are no possible degrees in that matter), and that *ii)* in order to perform future actions in a virtuous manner, a change of the sort envisaged by Hadot or Foucault must *first* take place in the individual. However, whether or not this jeopardizes the logical consistency of the theory, Epictetus can be seen to adopt a more flexible attitude towards both principles, which allows us to not only to speak of an increasingly virtuous action but also to assume that Epictetus may not have believed that a wholesome *epistrophē* was needed in order to start performing that kind of actions.

In order to see the problem clearly, it is helpful to bear in mind that nearly all the exercises of the second group (e6-e14, most clearly) share a common feature: they provide the agent with different *criteria* that will enable him to decide which the virtuous course of action is[30]. How this works, nevertheless, is not equal in all the cases: e6-e10 provide us with an indirect strategy, i.e., they do not directly provide us with criteria but present us with a rule or a strategy we must pursue in order to figure out those criteria ourselves. E11-e14, on the other hand, explicitly provide us with specific criteria that we are supposed to make use of when faced with a decision. As I have stressed elsewhere, however, whether these different criteria are available at the moment of making a decision or not does not depend on an active, undetermined (somehow magical) decision. We cannot *remind ourselves* to bear in mind certain criteria: they are either *ready at hand* (*procheiros*) or they are not[31]. From Epictetus' perspective, we could even say that the very idea of *reminding oneself* of something (anything) is somewhat ludicrous, in that the act of remembering is not an active practice of the agent, but rather an *event* that takes place in the soul (or does not). In his analysis of the notion of *askēsis* in Epictetus, Hijmans claimed on this matter that "many of the exercises in Epictetus are announced by the word *memnēso*, which can be regarded as an almost certain signpost that something is to follow that should be used as an exercise by his pupils" (HIJMANS, 1959, p. 80). What I suggest is exactly the opposite, to wit, that those statements that are preceded by *memnēso* -or other equivalent formulaic expressions- are rather the reverse of ethical exercises: they are instances of *ethical teaching.* Although it would not make sense for Epictetus to *urge us to remind ourselves* that *p*, his repeated enunciation of *p* (preceded by the rhetorical device *memnēso*) aims at increasing the chances that *p* will be

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30Although I included above e4 in the first group of exercises by virtue of it also being an activity "that the individual consciously and voluntarily performs that will enable him to perform future actions in a (partially) virtuous manner", when we come to this second element of the *criteria* for a virtuous decision we can consider e4 as a *necessary* -but not sufficient- condition: the student -unlike the sage, presumably- must make a pause before making a decision, because it is that period of time that will enable him to factor in all the criteria provided by e6-e14. If we place it in the context of the Stoic discussion concerning the passions and whether the passing of time alone is enough to cause the heat of a passion to subside or whether a change of a cognitive kind is required, *Ench.* 34 might be seen to incline towards the second alternative: the delay that Epictetus is proposing is not just an empty time, but rather a pause dedicated to an intellectual evaluation of the consequences of the action, etc.; the *necessary condition* for the passions to subside -or disappear altogether- is not time in itself but a change in our assessment of the situation.

31 The act of remembering, in any case, can be thought of as the result of certain *other activities* we have performed in the past; but then it is *those activities* that we can conceive as translatable into exercises (which is precisely what e1 and e2 do, i.e., they work on the dynamics of memory or, to put it in contemporary terms, of the dynamics of *availability*).

ready at hand when the time comes to make a decision where *p* is relevant. Epictetus' act of reiterating once and again that we should bear in mind certain (Stoic) premises when we are about to assent to a certain impression, is not, therefore, an *exhortation*: it is (or at least it aims to be) a *pedagogical practice:* Epictetus' words will (hopefully) modify the epistemic disposition of our soul and make it possible for us to have the correct doctrines ready at hand when faced with a decision.

A quick balance of what we have done so far shows that not only e15-e18 should be crossed out as concrete ethical exercises, but also that an important number of what we initially identified as the second group of ethical exercises have actually turned out to be not *ethical exercises* in themselves, but rather, considered from a broader perspective, instances of *ethical teaching* (e11-e14). If we accept the narrowed down list of exercises that this balance leaves us (which only comprises e1-e10), there does not seem to be anything specifically Stoic about Epictetus' therapeutic strategies, at least concerning what the agent is supposed to do himself: some of those exercises can be traced backwards to pythagorean practices, others are shared by several hellenistic philosophies, and not one of them seems to require that we accept any distinctively Stoic premise. All of this notwithstanding, the exercises of repetition and meditation (e1 and e2) fit particularly well with the Stoic theory of action and with the intellectualist psychology they defend[32]. This explains why repetition and meditation turn out to play a much more important part in the process of moral progress than one might initially have thought, since they -along with ethical teaching in general- are responsible for enabling the several criteria defined by e11-e14 (which includes the most important criterion, i.e., the distinction between what does and what does not depend on us) to be ready at hand when the time comes to make a virtuous decision. The set of available exercises has, all in all, become smaller, but more precise and systematic.

## 4. Conclusions

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32 The same cannot be said as regards e3 (i.e.: to perform certain activities that allow us to discipline our bodily needs and desires), since there doesn't seem to be any self-evident reading that would make sense of it from an intellectualist account of human agency. A possible solution to the problem that E14 presents might be to consider it as rather careless inclusion by Epictetus of a practice that was not only common in any greco-roman philosophical circle with ascetic tendencies, but also explicitly endorsed by Epictetus' master Musonius Rufus (cf. MUSONIUS RUFUS, *Discourses 6*). A more plausible solution is probably available; just not not me.

In the previous pages, I have attempted to put forward (building mostly on Hadot, Foucalt, Sorabji and Sellars' work) a tentative approach to the problem of *ethical exercises* in Epictetus that may, I believe, help to clarify not only the notion of ethical exercises itself but also what can count as such, a task which may be considered of interest not only from the perspective of the history of philosophy but also on account of the surprising rebirth that the interest in Epictetus' ethics is experiencing, specially concerning possible translations of his reflexions to concrete therapeutic practices[33]. As is evident, the often defended idea that we could read the *Ench.* as a handbook of practical recipes to reach *eudaimonia* is simply untenable, not only because Epictetus does not present in an explicit manner the practices outlined above *as* exercises, but also because many ideas that might seem at first sight to represent concrete exercises are actually not so.

My specific proposal on this matter has been extremely modest: based on a minimal definition of ethical exercises (i.e., *activities that the agent consciously and voluntarily performs that will enable him to perform future actions in a (partially) virtuous manner*), I have suggested that of all the examples that have been proposed as ethical exercises by commentators, only a portion of them (e1-e10) can be strictly considered to be so. The remaining elements of the list cannot be accurately termed exercises because they are either *i)* descriptions of (some of) the features that an action must have in order to be considered as virtuous [e15-16], *ii)* pieces of advice concerning the manner in which we should approach the project of moral reform [e17-18], or *iii)* descriptions of the criteria we must bear in mind when deciding on the virtuous course of action [e11-14]. None of these elements seems to be translatable into concrete practices that the agent could perform and cannot, as a consequence, be easily accommodated within a concrete ethical project. Needless to say, all of the ideas outlined in e11-e18 represent an crucial part of Epictetus' general therapeutic and pedagogical project, but they are not exercises in themselves, and what my interpretation suggests is merely that they should be approached from a different perspective.

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33 Cf. for instance, the increasing proliferation of editions, translations and free reelaborations of Epictetus' *Enchiridion* that has taken place in the last two decades (cf. ROMANECK, 2007; SEDDON, 2006), or the efforts to approach psychological therapy from a cognitive perspective by seeking inspiration in Epictetus' general approach to ethics (cf. ROBERTSON, 2010; STILL; DRYDEN, 2003, 2012).

This distinction may seem arbitrary and it might even be objected that what I have done is mere relabelling: what others have interpreted as ethical exercises would be considered, under my interpretation, as part of the global project of the care of the self but not as exercises in themselves. The reason why this is not mere relabelling is that only that which we can strictly count as an ethical exercise is something we can actually perform *in a conscious, deliberate and voluntary manner.* Conversely, that which cannot be translated into a concrete therapeutic practice cannot be said to represent an exercise, unless we deprive the notion of ethical exercise of any distinctive hermeneutic value. If we go back to the distinction I proposed in the introduction between ethical teaching and ethical exercises, which derive their specificity from being *what the student can perform himself* in order to reach the goal of acting in a virtuous manner, I believe that the usefulness of a precise definition of what an ethical exercise is becomes self-evident.

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