HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Epictetus (55 A.D.-136 A.D.)

Epictetus was a Stoic philosopher, whose thoughts echo those of the Stoic school—Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus—all of the early to mid 3rd century B.C.—which gathered around the *Stoa poikile* in central Athens. (This school of thought has adherents to our day; it has, like the thinking of Epicurus, proven deeply influential through Western culture.) Epictetus himself was born in Asia Minor, as a slave, yet rapidly found ways to cope with his subordinate position; when freed he was able to found his own school, in Nicopolis in Epirus (Northwest Greece.) His writings have found their way to us in a large text, *The Discourses*, and in a compilation made from that text, *The Enchiridion* or *Handbook*.

The core of his philosophy turns around two concepts, *volition* (*prohaeresis*) and *impressions,* the maintenance of which proves the key to success in life. It is within our power to control our own lives, and to find peace within ourselves; all of this by the exercise of reason, which puts us in touch with the nature of the universe. (Epictetus 'believes in the existence of the God,' and partiularly in the power of Zeus, who works as the principle of 'reason' in the world around us.) By exercising reason we are able to rise above the claims of our bodies, which are petty and unimportant, and to put ourselves in touch with the nature of things. By doing so we are able to adopt an appropriate attitude toward other human beings. Believing that the universe is benevolent, we can aid others to find their own suitable adjustments to the world we exist in. While stressing the importance of the volition, by which we put ourselves in touch with nature, and by effectively managing our sense and thought lives, our *impressions*, we are able to remain content in the midst of life's buffetings. What could be more activist than the following quote from Epictetus:

Have you not hands, fool? Has not god made them for you? Sit down now and pray your nose may not run! Wipe it, rather, and do not blame god.