

## A Balancing Act

Many philosophers of our time have tried to decipher the meaning of human existence; how it is supposed to be lived, what is the desired attitude, and what is the role of happiness in it. Aristotle would say that every man's *telos* – the purpose, goal, or aim of men – would be to become as rational and as good a human being as possible. Epicurus, on the other hand, focuses on the pleasures of life amid balance and a life of simplicity. Conversely, Epictetus in his stoic philosophy reinforced peace of mind through the acceptance of our limitations and our abilities. This last belief indicated avoiding excess, both on a positive and a negative tone. While this view is not strictly mistaken, it prevents a passionate engagement on the existence of the human spirit.

The Stoic philosophy states that there are things in our control, and things out of our control, and that we must conduct ourselves accordingly. Epictetus states throughout *The Enchiridion (The Handbook)*, that moderation of character is necessary in order to control the emotional and psychological aspects of life so that we may reach an inner calm. Epictetus says, "Don't demand that things happen as you wish, but wish that they happen as they do happen, and you will go on well" (Epictetus 8). In this way, the Stoics ask to eliminate any expectations and face all situations as they happen, for this will help you practice the control of emotions and their effect on you. Although this mindset can prove beneficial in helping you distance yourself from problems in life, it can also have certain limitations.

This particular view deeply restrains the human experience for several reasons. If a human being proceeds to live without any type of expectations, or pride of any sort, he is avoiding all failure, but at the same time, all success. The acts of feeling, sensing, and embracing human emotions are part of the beauty of being alive. Feeling too much, loving too much, and becoming deeply sensible are all reminders of our humanity, of the pain we experience, and of our mortality. It allows us to feel as happy as we wish and as sorrowful as we must, while gaining wisdom from those lessons as we go.

Lois Lowry's famous book (although considered for children, it is universal to all ages), *The Giver*, and its recent cinematographic interpretation tell the story of a young boy coming of age in a futuristic society. In this world, in order to avoid pain, war, and discrepancies, all people have agreed to an equal share of goods, equal opportunities and achievements for all, and a lack of personal fulfillment known as Sameness. Even aspects of their climate, race, and culture have been adapted to avoid differences amongst the population. Only one person, named The Receiver of Memories, remembers the past of humankind and all it encompasses, so that he may be able to counsel the community. Because of these changes, people no longer live profoundly nor plentifully, and no one is able to feel intense emotions for themselves or for others. Like the Stoics, they pay little attention to achievements large and small, and live moderately. This goes on until they are shown that there is another way to experience life, one that allows them to feel fully and profoundly. In realizing this, they are able to see the beauty that there is in pain, sorrow, and emotion.

Likewise, the philosopher and filmmaker Jason Silva states in his video "An Existential Bummer," that life is finite and ephemeral, and that as a result, human beings are set in a paradoxical frame where we are given so much, only to get it taken away. In

addition, we are faced with the choice of how to conduct our lives knowing it will end. His answer to this is to find serenity in acceptance and to take advantage of all human interactions, always giving a proactive attitude in the face of adversity.

Ultimately, the Stoic philosophy is valuable in that it allows humans to have a lighter outlook in life. It tells us to remember the nature of our impermanence so that we may be free of materialistic possessions and thoughts. In this way, we will be able to acquire peace of mind without despairing upon the finitude of life. However, we must also embrace our passion for life knowing it may be unjust and evil at times. Our *telos*, then, is to practice profound joy and emotion in all matters of life, and, upon the final call, to gracefully surrender all that has been, and is no more.