

3 Epictetus

Epictetus and Stoic Happiness – Exam-Focused Notes

1. The Two Parts to Living Well

Part (1): See Clearly What Is (and Is Not) Up to You

- Epictetus starts by dividing everything into:
 - **Up to you (within your control):**
 - * Your judgments, beliefs, values
 - * Your decisions, choices, intentions
 - * Your desires and aversions *as you shape them*
 - **Not up to you (outside your control):**
 - * Your body (health, strength, aging)
 - * Possessions (wealth, property)
 - * Reputation, social status, offices
 - * How others act, what they think of you
 - * Many outcomes of your actions (success, failure, luck)

To live well, you must first grasp this distinction and take it seriously.

Part (2): Align Your Aims with This Reality

Epictetus' core practical claim:

Attach your desires and aversions only to what is up to you; accept everything else as it happens.

Concretely: - Strongly care about: - Having correct judgments
- Making good choices
- Responding virtuously to circumstances

- Do *not* strongly care about: - Getting or keeping particular external outcomes
- Avoiding all illness, poverty, death, or insult

Instead, about externals: prefer some over others if you like, but hold them **very lightly** and accept events.

2. Justifications for Part (2): Why Align Desires Only with What's Up to You?

Lecture mentions **four justifications** for shaping desires this way:

(a) Argument from Peace of Mind (Avoiding Frustration)

- If you desire things **not** up to you (e.g., wealth, health, admiration):
 - Often you will fail to get them □ you will be “thwarted, miserable, and upset.”
- If you desire only what **is** up to you (good judgment, virtuous response):
 - You will *never* be forced to fail □ you always “get what you want” internally.
- So, for your own happiness and tranquility, you should only strongly desire what is up to you.

(b) Argument from Freedom (No One Can Coerce You)

- “The things that are up to us are by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded.”
- If you think externals are “yours”:
 - Anyone who controls them can manipulate you (threaten your job, reputation, life).
 - You become a **slave** to those people and circumstances.
- If you only care deeply about your own choices and judgments:
 - No one can *make* you think or will what you reject.
 - So you are free in the deepest sense.

(c) Argument from Responsibility and Piety (Right Way to Relate to God/Nature)

- Good and bad must be **up to us** or we could not be rightly praised or blamed.
- If you treat externals as good/bad:
 - You inevitably blame other people or the gods if things go poorly.
 - This generates anger, ingratitude, and impiety.
- If you see good and bad as only in your own choices:
 - You stop blaming others.
 - You accept events as part of a larger rational order.
 - This is proper “piety”: trusting that the cosmos is arranged as it should be and focusing on your own role within it.

(d) Argument from Truth and Realism (Living in Touch with Reality)

- **Fact:** Externals *are* outside your full control; your judgments and choices *are* the main things you can deliberately control.
- To stubbornly demand that external events match your wishes is to live in fantasy.
- Rational beings should:
 - Adjust their *wants* to fit the world,

- Not demand that the world adjust to their wants.
 - “Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to; instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well.”
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3. What Is Up to You and What Is Not – And Is Epictetus Right?

Epictetus’ Distinction (Simplified)

Up to you: - Your *use of appearances*: how you interpret events. - Your *assent* or refusal to assent to impressions. - Your choices, commitments, inner attitudes.

Not up to you: - External events and outcomes. - Other people’s minds and actions. - Many aspects of your own body and circumstances.

Illness, injury, poverty, death: harm the body or external situation, **not** your faculty of choice—unless you *choose* to interpret them as harm.

Objections: Is He Right?

1. **Our judgments are partly shaped by things not up to us.**
 - Upbringing, trauma, culture, genetics influence what we believe and value.
 - So we don’t have *total* control over our inner life.
2. **We do have some control over “externals.”**
 - Diet/exercise affect health; effort influences career.
 - So it seems wrong to say body and property are entirely “not up to us.”
3. **Emotions seem partly outside our control.**
 - Grief, fear, anger often arise automatically.
 - Stoic ideal of perfect control may be unrealistic.

What Is Salvageable?

Even if the strict dichotomy is too sharp, Epictetus’ **practical insight** remains powerful:

- Distinguish:
 - **What you can directly control right now** (how you respond, what you try, what you believe),
 - From what you can only influence or not control at all.
- Focus your deepest concern and energy on:
 - What you can reliably change (your attitudes, decisions, efforts).
- Treat the rest as:
 - Worth planning about,
 - But not worth *pinning your happiness* on.

So we can keep a **softened version**: - We don’t have perfect control of our minds, - Nor zero control of our bodies and circumstances, - But we nevertheless have *much more* reliable control over our **inner responses** than over outcomes; - Wise people base their happiness mainly on the former, not the latter.

4. Managing Desire

The Problem: Unsatisfied Desire

Scenario: You want something and you don't have it (love, money, success, health, respect).

Question: Is the best solution always to **try to satisfy** the desire?

Epictetus: **No.** - Sometimes pursuing satisfaction is impossible, risky, degrading, or makes you dependent. - Always chasing external satisfaction traps you in anxiety and frustration.

Is Satisfying Desire Ever Best?

- **Sometimes yes:**
 - When the object is within your power, and
 - Obtaining it does not conflict with virtue (e.g., studying to learn, working to support family).
- **But often not:**
 - When the outcome depends heavily on others or luck,
 - Or when striving for it would require sacrificing integrity.

Key Stoic move: - Instead of automatically trying to change the world to match your desire, - Often you should **change the desire** (or weaken it) to fit the world.

The Stoic Solution to Desire

1. **Detach strong desire from externals.**
 - For now, Epictetus even suggests *eliminating desire for externals entirely*.
 - Keep only measured impulses to act appropriately.
2. **Reserve strong desire for what is up to you:**
 - Desire to respond virtuously,
 - Desire to keep your mind “in a state conformable to nature.”
3. **Reframe situations.**
 - Instead of: “I must get X or I’ll be miserable,”
 - Say: “What matters is how I handle not having X.”
4. **Use aversion carefully.**
 - Do not fear or be averse to things not up to you (illness, poverty, death).
 - Reserve aversion for inner failures: injustice, cowardice, pettiness—things that *are* up to you.

Bath Example

Before going to take a bath, Epictetus says to anticipate: - People splashing, jostling, insulting, maybe stealing.

Set your goal as: - Not only “I want to bathe,” but: - “I want to bathe **and** keep my mind in a state conformable to nature.”

Then if you're jostled or insulted: - You can say: “I didn't just want a wash; I also wanted to keep calm and reasonable. Getting upset would defeat my *real* goal.”

Lesson: - Redefine your aim so that **your inner state** (which is up to you) is central, - And the external part of the aim (the bath going smoothly) is secondary.

Olympics Example

Wanting an Olympic victory: - You must accept: - Strict diet, hard training, sacrifice, pain, risk of failure. - If you want only the glory but not the work and risk: - Your desire is childish and unrealistic.

Epictetus' point: - Before desiring any external achievement: - Fully consider the **costs and risks** (many of which are not up to you), - And decide whether you actually want that entire package. - Again, make your main goal: - To act nobly in training and competition (up to you), - Not just to win (not fully up to you).

5. Freedom of the Mind as True Freedom

Who Is the True Slave? Who Is the True Master?

True slave: - Anyone whose happiness depends on things controlled by others: - If you *must* have money, you are the slave of employers, markets, or patrons. - If you *must* be admired, you are the slave of public opinion. - If you *must* avoid death, you are the slave of anyone who can threaten you. - Epictetus: "A person's master is someone who has power over what he wants or does not want."

True master / free person: - Someone who: - Wants and avoids only what is up to them (their judgments, choices), - Is not emotionally hostage to anyone else's actions. - Such a person cannot be coerced: - Others can imprison or kill the body, - But cannot force the mind to approve or fear what it refuses to.

Thus: - **True freedom** = independence of one's mind and will from external control, not political status or physical liberty. - Even a literal slave can be inwardly free; a powerful ruler can be inwardly enslaved.

Stoic "Invulnerability"

Epictetus promises a kind of **complete invulnerability**: - If: - You care only about what is up to you, - You see externals as "nothing to you" in terms of your good and bad, - Then: - No one can harm you in the only sense that truly matters (harm to your character and rational agency).

Illness, poverty, disgrace, even death: - Are **events**, not harms, - Unless you choose to see them as harms and react viciously.

Is This Possible?

- As an *ideal*:
 - Very demanding; requires deep training and sustained practice.
 - Most people, even Stoics in training, fall short.
- Psychologically:
 - Human beings seem wired for emotional attachment and vulnerability.

- Total invulnerability may be unrealistic for most.

Epictetus' stance: - He knows that the "sage" is extremely rare. - But he insists we should **aim** at this ideal, even if we never fully reach it.

Is This Desirable?

Advantages: - Enormous resilience and courage. - Freedom from manipulation, anxiety, and bitterness. - Ability to stay calm and just under great pressure.

Concerns: - Might seem to flatten emotional life: - Less intense joy from externals, - Less grief at losses, including death of loved ones. - Some argue that certain vulnerabilities (e.g., grief at a child's death) are part of a fully human, loving life.

A moderate reading: - We can value the Stoic emphasis on inner strength and non-attachment, - While still thinking some emotional vulnerability is a valuable part of human relationships.

Is the Stoic Approach Cruel or Uncaring Toward Others?

Worry: - If you think no external harm really matters, - You might be indifferent to others' suffering: - "They're only harmed by their judgments—so why care?"

Epictetus' reply: - Most people are **not** Stoic sages: - They *are* still vulnerable to externals. - They *can't help* being hurt by illness, poverty, injustice. - So: - You must treat them gently and helpfully. - Sympathize outwardly with their grief ("moan with them verbally") while inwardly remembering that the real harm is in mistaken judgments. - Also: - You yourself, as a non-sage in progress, are vulnerable; you should want a community that treats others well.

So Stoicism, properly applied: - Does *not* recommend being cold or cruel. - It asks you to: - Be emotionally disciplined inwardly, - But outwardly kind, patient, and supportive.

6. The Insufficiency of Purely Intellectual Work

Epictetus repeatedly criticizes:

- People who:
 - Study logic, psychology, and Stoic theory,
 - Can define "demonstration," "truth," "indifferent," etc.,
 - Can explain Chrysippus,
- But **do not change** how they live.

His view: - Philosophy's **first and most necessary** part: - Training your *use of impressions*: - Not assenting to false or harmful judgments, - Not blaming others, - Not being ruled by passion and externals. - Theoretical work (definitions, logical proofs) is: - Only **instrumental**, - Valuable *only* if it supports ethical transformation.

Signs of real progress (contrast with mere theory): - You blame no one, praise no one excessively. - When blocked, you blame yourself rather than externals. - You greatly reduce desire and fear regarding externals. - You care less about being seen as knowledgeable.

Exam takeaway: - For Epictetus, **knowing the doctrine is not enough**; genuine philosophy is a *way of life*, a constant practical discipline.

7. How to Love Your Family (Stoic Style)

Epictetus does **not** tell you not to love your family.
He tells you how to love them **wisely**, without enslaving yourself.

Key Ideas

1. **Remember they are mortal humans, not permanent possessions.**
 - When you kiss your child or spouse, remind yourself:
 - You are kissing a **human being**, which means mortal and fragile.
 - If they die, you will still be saddened as a human,
 - But you won't be totally shattered if you have long practiced seeing them as on temporary loan from nature.
2. **“Never say ‘I have lost it’; say ‘I have given it back.’”**
 - Everything external—even your child, spouse, property—is **given by nature** temporarily.
 - When it is taken away, see it as:
 - Being returned, not stolen.
 - This reframing lessens despair and resentment.
3. **Banquet metaphor:**
 - Life is like a banquet:
 - When a dish comes to you, take some politely.
 - When it passes, do not grab or cling.
 - Apply this to:
 - Children, spouse, offices, wealth.
 - A Stoic:
 - Enjoys loved ones fully while present,
 - Does not clutch at them as if they must never leave.
4. **Voyage metaphor:**
 - You are on a ship anchored briefly:
 - You may step ashore, pick up a shellfish or vegetable,
 - But always keep an eye on the ship in case the captain calls you back.
 - Your family is like those temporary finds:
 - You care for them deeply,
 - But if “the captain” (death, fate) calls, you must be ready to go.
5. **How this shapes actual behavior:**
 - You:
 - Care for your family's needs and wellbeing.
 - Fulfill your role as parent, child, spouse faithfully.
 - But you don't:
 - Demand that they never die or never suffer,
 - Collapse entirely if they are taken from you,
 - Sacrifice virtue (lie, cheat, betray others) solely to protect or advantage them.

Stoic love: - **Deep concern for their character and true good** (virtue), - **Grateful enjoyment of their presence**,

- Combined with **acceptance** that they are not fully yours and not under your control.

These are the core ideas and arguments you need from Epictetus on:

- The two-part recipe for living well, and why to reshape your desires,
- The “up to you / not up to you” distinction (with critique and salvageable core),
- Stoic management of unsatisfied desire (bath and Olympics examples),
- Freedom of mind, true slavery/mastery, and invulnerability (with worries and replies),
- The demand to go beyond mere intellectual theory,
- And the Stoic way to love your family without becoming enslaved to fortune.