

3 Epictetus

1. Epictetus on How to Live Well: Two Parts

Epictetus thinks living well has TWO main components:

1. (1) Use your rational faculty correctly (virtue).
 - Train your judgments, choices, desires, and aversions so they line up with what is truly good (virtue) and truly bad (vice).
 - This is about your inner life: how you see things, what you care about, and how you respond.
2. (2) Restrict concern to what is “up to you” and accept the rest.
 - Direct genuine desire/aversion only at what is within your control (your own mind and choices).
 - Regarding everything else (body, wealth, reputation, other people, outcomes), don’t treat them as true goods/bads; accept whatever happens as part of nature’s plan.

These two parts are tightly linked:

- (1) is the goal: becoming virtuous, wise, and rational.
 - (2) is the method: by caring only about what’s up to you, you protect and perfect your rational faculty and avoid disturbance.
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2. What Is Up to You, and What Is Not

2.1 Epictetus’s Distinction

Up to us (truly ours, free, unhindered):

All aspects of our rational faculty:

- Judgments/opinions about what things are and what they mean
- Choices / decisions (the “faculty of choice”)
- Desires and aversions, insofar as we can decide what to value
- Our inner attitude toward events (e.g., resentment vs acceptance)

Not up to us (enslaved, hindered, not truly ours):

- Our body (health, illness, looks, strength, disability)
- Possessions (money, property, clothes, tech, etc.)
- Reputation (what others think or say about you)
- Social position (offices, honors, jobs, promotions, admissions)
- Other people's actions and characters
- Events and outcomes in the world (weather, accidents, political events, whether you win the race, etc.)
- Even family members and loved ones, because they can be taken away

Key claim:

- Only the inner things are by nature "free, unhindered, and unimpeded."
- Everything else is inherently insecure and can be taken away at any time.

2.2 Is Epictetus Right?

Problems / criticisms:

1. Our mind is not fully up to us in practice.
 - Our beliefs, desires, and emotions are heavily shaped by genes, upbringing, trauma, social pressures.
 - Changing deep-seated attitudes often takes long therapy, habits, and luck; it's not a simple "choice."
2. We have some control over some externals.
 - Through effort, we can usually influence health, friendships, grades, career, reputation.
 - It seems too extreme to say none of this is "up to us" at all.
3. Moral responsibility seems to need some external control.
 - If circumstances are totally outside our concern, it's unclear why we should take responsibility for helping others, or for shaping institutions.

What can be salvaged?

A weakened, but plausible version:

- Treat as primarily up to you:
 - Your deliberate judgments, long-term values, and how you choose to respond to events.
- Treat as partly but not fully up to you:
 - Health, grades, career, relationships (you can influence them, but not guarantee outcomes).
- Treat as not ultimately under your control:
 - The final outcomes of efforts, other people's reactions, accidents, death.

So the practical Stoic lesson still works:

- Shift your main focus from outcomes to your own efforts, attitudes, and character.
 - Accept uncertainty about everything else.
 - This can reduce anxiety and resentment, even if Epictetus's strict metaphysical claim is too strong.
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3. Four Justifications for Focusing Only on What Is Up to You

Epictetus offers multiple overlapping reasons for part (2):

3.1 Psychological Freedom and Happiness

- If you treat externals as if they were truly yours, you will be:
 - “Thwarted, miserable, and upset”
 - Blaming gods, fate, and other people
- If you treat only your inner life as yours:
 - “No one will ever coerce you or hinder you”
 - You will have no enemies, and “no one will harm you,” because true harm would require corrupting your mind, which is under your control.

Argument form:

1. Being thwarted happens when you desire what you can't control.
2. If you only desire what you can control (your own rational action), you can never be thwarted.
3. Therefore, you become psychologically invulnerable.

3.2 Moral Responsibility and Self-Respect

- Your virtue—how you judge and act—is the only thing that is truly your achievement.
- Wealth, beauty, status can come from luck, inheritance, or corruption.
- So:
 - Pride in externals is misguided (“You are not your horse; you have a good horse”).
 - You should base self-respect on how you handle appearances and choices, not on external success.

3.3 Piety and Agreement with Nature / God

- The world is governed by a rational order (god/nature) which assigns each event.
- Our role:
 - Treat events as the “play” assigned by the playwright.
 - Our task is not to choose the part (beggar, official, sick, healthy), but to play whatever part we get well.
- To fight externals is to fight nature; to accept them is to cooperate with the divine order.

3.4 Logical Coherence about Good and Bad

- If things truly good or bad could be taken from you by others, then your moral state would partly depend on others' choices.
 - Then:
 - Your goodness could be destroyed by someone else's decision.
 - This makes virtue too fragile.
 - So:
 - True goods and bads must be confined to what no one else can control: your own rational choices.
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4. Managing Desire and Unsatisfied Wants

4.1 The Problem: You Want Something You Don't Have

When a desire is unsatisfied, possible responses:

1. Try to get what you want.
2. Change the world so that the object becomes available.
3. Change your desire instead of the world.
4. Change what you count as truly good or bad.

Epictetus says: (3) and (4) are often better.

4.2 Why Satisfying Desire Is Not Always Best

- If you aim at externals (wealth, status, praise), you:
 - Depend on other people and luck.
 - Risk anxiety, envy, bitterness, and fear of loss.
- Also, many pleasures bring regret or new dependencies:
 - Overindulgence, addictions, vanity about looks or social media, etc.

So:

- Trying to satisfy every desire can make you less free and less happy.

4.3 The Stoic Solution to Desire

Core strategy:

1. For now, suspend desire for externals.
 - Epictetus even suggests temporarily eliminating desire, and using only:
 - Impulse (toward what seems appropriate)
 - Rejection (away from what seems against nature)
 - This is like going on a mental "desire diet."
2. Detach aversion from externals.
 - Don't be averse to illness, death, poverty. Those are not truly bad.

- Be averse only to:
 - Acting unjustly
 - Failing to live rationally and in accord with nature
- 3. Eventually, redirect desire toward what is up to you.
 - Desire to:
 - Be just, brave, and self-controlled
 - Hold correct judgments
 - Accept events as they occur
- 4. Align your will with reality.
 - “Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but want them to happen as they do happen.”

4.4 The Bath Example

Scenario: You go to a public bath.

- What you would like:
 - A quiet, pleasant, clean experience.
- What usually happens:
 - People splash, jostle, insult, steal, etc.

Stoic practice:

1. Before acting, remind yourself what the situation is like.
 - “At baths there are people who splash, jostle, insult, steal.”
2. Set a double aim:
 - “I want to bathe”
 - “and to keep my mind/choices in accord with nature.”
3. When things go wrong, remind yourself:
 - “I did not want just a bath, but a bath while remaining rational and calm. I cannot keep my choices in accord with nature if I get angry.”

Lesson: - You change the kind of desire: not “I must have a perfect bath” but “I must keep my mind in order whatever happens at the bath.”

4.5 The Olympics Example

Wanting an Olympic victory:

- Epictetus: if you want to compete, you must accept:
 - Strict diet, painful training, injuries, heat and cold, risk of public defeat.
- If you only want the glory but not the full package, you’re childish.

Applied to Stoic practice:

- If you want the “gold medal” of inner freedom:
 - You must accept giving up:

- * Some worldly ambitions (wealth, office, status)
 - * Some pleasures and comforts
 - You cannot have complete Stoic freedom and also chase externals in the usual way.
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5. Freedom of the Mind as True Freedom

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

Epictetus's definitions:

- A person's master:
 - Anyone who has power over what that person wants or fears—can grant it or take it away.
- Slave (in the philosophical sense):
 - Someone whose happiness depends on things controlled by others or by luck:
 - * Needs others' approval
 - * Craves money, status, sex, comfort
 - * Fears poverty, illness, death, disgrace
 - Such a person must “obey” those who control these externals.
- True master / truly free person:
 - Desires and fears only what is up to them:
 - * Their own judgments and choices
 - Since no one can force them to think or value wrongly, no one can enslave them.
 - Even if they are literally in chains or beaten, their mind remains free.

Epictetus:

> Whoever wants to be free, let him not want or avoid anything that is up to others. Otherwise he will necessarily be a slave.

5.2 Freedom as Invulnerability

- If you only care about what you control:
 - No one can make you lie, flatter, or do wrong; they can only hurt your body or externals.
 - You can lose everything external and still retain what matters most: a good will.
- Epictetus claims:
 - You become “invincible” by refusing to enter contests whose outcome isn't up to you.
 - You stop competing for status, praise, and material success—things others can take.

5.3 Is This Freedom Really Possible?

Challenges:

- Human psychology:
 - Emotions and attachments arise spontaneously; hard to limit caring only to inner states.

- Social reality:
 - Institutions and others can seriously constrain your options and shape your character.

Stoic reply:

- The perfect sage is extremely rare, but:
 - We can make progress by:
 - * Constant practice (anticipating difficulties; reflecting on what's up to us)
 - * Gradually loosening the grip of externals on our minds
- So treat it as an ideal and a direction, not an all-or-nothing fact about you now.

5.4 Is This Ideal Desirable?

Worry: It sounds cold or inhuman.

- If I am invulnerable:
 - Do I stop caring about my family, friends, or social justice?
 - Do I just shrug at terrible events and say “it's just an appearance”?

Epictetus's response:

1. Appropriate action based on relationships.
 - You still have duties as:
 - Parent, child, sibling, citizen, friend.
 - Being rational includes:
 - Taking care of your father
 - Treating your brother as a brother even if he behaves badly
 - Helping your city in ways consistent with virtue
2. Differentiating inner disturbance from outer concern.
 - You may still help others, comfort them, act to improve the world.
 - You just don't let your inner peace depend on success in these aims.
3. Compassion for others' vulnerability.
 - Most people are not Stoics, and even Stoics are far from ideal:
 - They are vulnerable to external harm and emotional pain.
 - Therefore:
 - You must treat them well, avoid cruelty, and not use Stoicism to justify harming them.

5.5 Is It Cruel and Uncaring When Applied to Others?

Worry: - If I think only judgments harm us, I might say to a suffering person: - “Your problem is just your opinion” — which is dismissive and unkind.

Epictetus's guidance:

- When seeing someone grieving:

- Recognize philosophically: the real problem is their judgment.
 - But in practice:
 - * “Do not hesitate to sympathize with him verbally, and even to moan with him,”
 - * Just don’t let yourself internally believe that the external event is a genuine evil.
 - With others:
 - You treat them as genuinely affected, because they are vulnerable at their current stage.
 - Stoicism is not a tool for blaming victims; it’s primarily for working on your own mind.
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6. The Insufficiency of Purely Intellectual Work

Epictetus stresses that merely understanding arguments is not enough:

1. Distinction:
 - Theoretical work:
 - Learning definitions, distinctions (e.g., what is a demonstration, truth, conflict).
 - Practical work:
 - Actually changing desires, handling insults, facing illness or death calmly.
 2. Critique of armchair philosophy:
 - Many people:
 - Can explain Stoic logic and ethics in detail.
 - But their lives are still driven by fear, anger, vanity, and attachment to externals.
 - This is like:
 - Praising a trainer’s manual but never working out.
 3. What is required beyond intellect:
 - Habitual exercises:
 - Pre-rehearsing difficulties (bath example, death of loved ones, failure, insult).
 - Monitoring your judgments when upset (“What belief is making this feel terrible?”).
 - Starting with “little losses” (spilled oil, stolen wine) as training opportunities.
 - Constant self-watchfulness:
 - Treat yourself like an invalid who must protect healing parts (your developing rational faculty).
 4. Evidence of real progress:
 - You blame no one else, praise yourself less, aren’t thrown off by praise or blame, and care less about externals.
 - You are more cautious with desires and aversions, and you are on guard against yourself “as an enemy lying in wait.”
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7. How to Love Your Family (Stoically)

Epictetus's challenge:

- How to love deeply without becoming enslaved by fear of loss.

7.1 Seeing Loved Ones as Mortal and "On Loan"

Key practices:

1. Remember what they are: mortal human beings.
 - When you kiss your child or spouse, remind yourself:
 - "I am kissing a mortal human being."
 - This is not to love them less, but to:
 - Avoid reacting with total collapse if they die.
2. Think of them as temporarily entrusted to you.
 - A child, spouse, or property is "given" by nature or god.
 - When they die or are lost, say:
 - "I have given it back," not "I've lost it."
 - Your role:
 - Care for them well while they are with you, as travelers care for things in an inn.
3. Banquet metaphor:
 - Life is like a banquet:
 - When a dish (child, partner, office, wealth) is placed before you, take it politely.
 - When it passes on or doesn't arrive, don't grab or strain after it.
 - You enjoy them while present, but you do not cling.

7.2 Duties from Relationships

- Being someone's:
 - Father, mother, child, sibling, spouse, friend
- Entails specific appropriate actions:
 - Care, patience, forgiveness, support.
- Even if:
 - Your father is bad, you still owe him fatherly respect and care.
 - Your brother wrongs you, you still act as a brother should, focusing on your role.

7.3 Loving Without Enslavement

Epictetus's model:

- Do:
 - Love your family, care for them, fulfill your role, suffer with them in a measured way when they suffer.
- Don't:
 - Make your own happiness depend on their survival, success, or perfect behavior.
 - Demand that they live forever or be flawless — that's wanting what is not up to you.

This gives a distinctive ideal:

- Deep engagement in action, measured detachment in judgment.
 - Act as a devoted parent / child / partner.
 - Internally remember:
 - * They are mortal, and your ultimate good lies in your own character, not in their fate.
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Quick Summary for Exam Recall

- Two parts to living well:
 - (1) Perfect your rational faculty (virtue).
 - (2) Care only about what is up to you; accept the rest as fate.
- Up to you: judgments, choices, desires/aversions as guided by reason.
Not up to you: body, possessions, reputation, office, others' actions, outcomes.
- Why focus only on what's up to you?
Psychological invulnerability; genuine self-respect; piety toward rational nature; logical coherence about what counts as a true good/bad.
- Managing desire:
Don't always try to satisfy desires; often better to change desires.
Bath example: set higher aim of keeping mind in accord with nature.
Olympics example: you must accept full costs of the goal; can't mix full Stoic freedom with ordinary ambition.
- Freedom vs slavery:
True slave: person ruled by desires for externals other people control.
True master: person whose desires are confined to their own rational choices.
Ideal: mental invulnerability; controversial but defensible as an aspirational ideal.
- Insufficiency of intellectual work:
Knowing doctrines is useless without practice.
Need daily exercises, habit-change, and self-watchfulness.
- Loving family:
Fulfill relational duties with real care.
Remember they are mortal and "on loan."
Love them, but don't make your ultimate happiness depend on their remaining safe or perfect.