

3 Epictetus

Epictetus (Stoicism): Exam-Oriented Notes

1. Two Parts to Living Well

Epictetus's basic recipe for living well:

1. (1) Distinguish what is up to you and what is not.
 - Up to you: your judgments, values, choices, desires, aversions, intentions ("faculty of choice").
 - Not up to you: body, health, wealth, reputation, job, success, other people's actions, political events, life span.
2. (2) Care about, desire, and fear only what is up to you.
 - Treat externals as "nothing to you" in the sense that they are neither genuine good nor genuine bad.
 - Make your only serious goal: keeping your mind and choices "in accord with nature" (i.e., rational and virtuous), whatever happens.

Living well = getting (1) intellectually clear, and then actually living by (2).

2. Four Justifications for Focusing Only on What Is Up to You (for Part (2))

Epictetus gives several reasons why you should direct desire and aversion only at what is under your control.

2.1 Avoiding Misery and Frustration

- If you desire things not up to you (health, success, affection), you are guaranteed to be thwarted sometimes.
- Thwarted desire = unhappiness and blaming others or the gods.
- If you desire only what is up to you (good use of your own mind), you can always succeed and never be forced to act unwillingly.

- So, for a stable, unshakable happiness, your main aims must be internal.

2.2 True Freedom vs. Slavery

- Your “master” is whatever has power over what you strongly want or fear.
- If you want wealth, status, or someone’s love, anyone who can give or withhold these owns you → you are a slave.
- If you want only to use your own choices well, no one can coerce you, because no one can touch your faculty of choice.
- So, to be truly free, you must desire only what is up to you.

2.3 Moral Responsibility and Piety

- If you think externals are true goods and evils, you will:
 - Hate or blame people who block your goals.
 - Blame the gods or fate when you are unlucky.
- Epictetus says: good and bad lie only in your own choices; externals are “indifferent.”
- Seeing this makes you:
 - Just toward others (you don’t rage at them for your misfortunes).
 - Pious toward the gods (you accept events as part of a wise order).

2.4 Invulnerability and “Being Unharmmed”

- Events (illness, poverty, insults, death of loved ones) affect body and circumstances, not your faculty of choice, unless you let them.
 - Harm = your own bad judgment (e.g., thinking you must be miserable).
 - If you train yourself to see events as indifferent and focus on responding virtuously, no event can truly harm you.
 - This yields the Stoic ideal of invincibility.
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3. What Is Up to You and What Is Not

3.1 Epictetus’s Distinction

- Up to you (inner):
- Your judgments (what you think is good/bad).
 - Your endorsements of desires and aversions.
 - Your decisions, intentions, and chosen actions as such (not their outcomes).
 - Your attention and efforts to respond virtuously.

Not up to you (outer): - Your body: health, strength, illness, disability.

- Possessions, money, property.
- Social status and reputation.
- Career success, public office, honors.
- Other people's choices and attitudes.
- External outcomes of your actions.
- Life span, time and manner of death, luck generally.

Key method: when a disturbing impression appears, ask:

"Does this concern what is up to me or not?"

If not: "You are nothing to me."

3.2 Is Epictetus Right?

Criticisms:

1. Some "inner" things are not fully under immediate control.
 - Emotions, moods, some beliefs can resist voluntary change.
 - We can't always instantly choose not to feel grief, anxiety, or anger.
2. Some "outer" things are partly under our control.
 - Through action we can often reliably influence our health, finances, relationships.
 - It seems too extreme to treat all outcomes as equally indifferent.
3. Risk of emotional coldness or denial.
 - Saying "my child's death is nothing to me" seems morally and psychologically problematic.

3.3 What Is Salvageable?

A reasonable "soft Stoic" reinterpretation:

- Direct control vs. influence:
 - Direct control: what you can change by a simple act of will (e.g., choice not to lie now).
 - Influence but not control: outcomes that depend also on luck and others (e.g., getting the job).
 - Epictetus's core insight: ground your self-evaluation and basic serenity only in what is under direct control.
- Two-level attitude to externals:
 - It is rational to prefer health, friends, success, justice, etc. and to act to promote them.
 - But do not treat them as necessary for happiness; be prepared to accept their loss without inner collapse.
- Emotions as trainable, not instantly controllable:
 - Take Epictetus as advocating long-term training to reshape desires and emotions, not overnight emotional numbness.

So the strict doctrine is questionable in detail, but the practical strategy is defensible: > Make your peace of mind depend on your character and decisions, not on fortune.

4. Managing Desire

4.1 Problem: Unsatisfied Desire

Case: You want something and don't have it (promotion, romantic partner, success, comfort).

Options:

1. Try to satisfy the desire.
2. Give up or reduce the desire.
3. Transform the desire into a different kind (e.g., desire to act well rather than to get result).

Epictetus thinks: simply trying to satisfy every desire is not the best solution, because:

- Many desires aim at things not up to you → repeated frustration.
- New desires will keep appearing (hedonic treadmill).
- You become enslaved to circumstances and other people.

4.2 Stoic Strategy for Desire

Key Stoic moves:

1. Suspend desire for externals (at least at first).
 - Epictetus even suggests, initially, eliminating desire for externals and focusing only on “impulses” to act appropriately, held “lightly” and “with reservation.”
2. Redirect desire to inner virtue.
 - Desire to use each situation to practice self-control, justice, patience, courage, gratitude, etc.
 - Aversion only toward vicious choices (lying, cowardice, cruelty), which are up to you and truly bad.
3. “With reservation” formula.
 - When you intend something external, think: “I will do my part to achieve X, if nothing prevents.”
 - You commit to the action, not to guaranteed success.
4. Reframe appearances.
 - When you strongly want something, bring to mind both:
 - The short-term pleasure if you get it.
 - The regret, dependence, and self-reproach if it undermines your character.
 - Counterbalance with the pride of having mastered the desire.

4.3 Examples: Bath and Olympics

Bath example:

- Before going to the public baths, reflect: there will be splashing, jostling, rude people, theft.
- Then say to yourself: > “I want not only to bathe, but also to keep my mind/choices in a state conformable to nature.”
- Outcome:
 - You form a dual goal: (a) take a bath (external, not up to you), but more importantly (b) keep your mind calm and rational (up to you).
 - If circumstances spoil your bath, you can honestly say: my main aim—staying rational and calm—was still achieved.

Olympics example:

- You want to win an Olympic victory (analogous to any big life ambition: career, fame, etc.).
- Epictetus: before committing, consider:
 - Strict training, diet, discomfort.
 - Risk of injury and even losing despite all effort.
- If, after fully understanding the costs and risks, you still choose this, fine.
- But don't be like a child changing roles (athlete, actor, philosopher, politician) without serious commitment.

Key lesson for desire: - Don't attach your happiness to uncertain external outcomes.

- Attach it to whether you played your part well (trained diligently, acted courageously and fairly) regardless of win or loss.

4.4 Is Satisfying Desire Ever Best?

- Sometimes satisfying desire is appropriate:
 - Bodily needs (food, shelter), reasonable career goals, relationships.
 - Epictetus is not against all external goods; he's against treating them as ultimate goods.
- But:
 - If satisfying a desire risks your integrity, peace of mind, or makes you a “slave” to others' power, better to refine or abandon the desire.

5. Freedom of the Mind as True Freedom

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

True slave:

- Not mainly the person legally owned.

- The person whose happiness depends on what others control:
 - The ambitious man desperate for honor.
 - The lover obsessed with someone's affection.
 - The tyrant terrified of losing power.
- Anyone whose desires and fears are fixed on externals is under the power of whoever controls those externals.

True master / truly free person:

- Desires and fears only what is up to them (their own judgments and chosen actions).
- No one can force them to assent to a false value-judgment or to choose unjustly.
- They may be physically imprisoned, but their mind is free and uncoerced.

5.2 Invulnerability: Is It Possible? Desirable?

Claim:

- If harm is only in bad use of your faculty of choice, then others can kill you but not harm you (morally/spiritually).

Is it possible?

- As an ideal:
 - Perhaps achievable only by a sage, but Epictetus thinks we can approximate it by constant practice.
- As a psychological fact for ordinary people:
 - Full invulnerability is doubtful; grief, fear, and pain will still affect us.
 - However, some reduction of vulnerability through trained attitudes is realistic.

Is it desirable?

- Pros:
 - Great stability and resilience.
 - Courage in the face of illness, poverty, and death.
 - Independence from social pressure and manipulation.
- Cons / worries:
 - Could slide into emotional detachment or lack of concern for others.
 - Risks underestimating the real weight of injustice and tragedy.

5.3 Is This Approach Cruel or Uncaring Toward Others?

Worry: If you believe suffering is "just their judgment," you might respond coldly to others' misfortunes.

Epictetus's reply and attitude:

- Recognize that most others are not Stoics and are still vulnerable to externals.
 - Even fellow Stoic learners are far from the ideal and cannot yet help being affected.
 - Therefore:
 - Treat others with kindness and justice.
 - When someone suffers:
 - * Internally: you see that what crushes them is their judgment.
 - * Externally: you sympathize, speak kindly, even “moan with them” if needed—but do not inwardly share the false judgment.
 - So Stoicism is meant to be strict with yourself, gentle with others.
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6. The Insufficiency of Purely Intellectual Work

Epictetus strongly criticizes merely “intellectual” philosophy.

6.1 Intellectual vs. Practical Philosophy

- Insufficient approach:
 - Mastering logic, metaphysics, and Stoic terminology.
 - Being able to expound Chrysippus or argue cleverly.
 - Talking often about what virtue is, but not actually living it.
- Sufficient approach (what he demands):
 - Use doctrines to transform your habits—what you fear, desire, and choose.
 - Constantly train your faculty of judgment:
 - * Don't blame others.
 - * Resist being carried away by appearances.
 - * Practice self-control, patience, endurance in real situations.

Images he uses:

- Sheep and wool:
 - Sheep don't display what they've eaten; they show it by producing wool and milk.
 - Likewise, don't show your philosophical progress by talking; show it by how you live.
- Sick patient:
 - One making progress treats himself as an invalid, extremely cautious not to re-injure his fragile character.

Exam takeaway:

Epictetus insists that real progress in living well is measured by transformed desires and actions, not by theoretical knowledge alone.

7. How to Love Your Family (Stoically)

Epictetus is often misread as anti-love. His view is subtler: love deeply, but wisely.

7.1 Remember Their Nature and Mortality

- When you love a jug, remind yourself: “I love a jug”—then you won’t be devastated when it breaks.
- When you kiss your child or spouse, remind yourself: “I am kissing a mortal human being.”
 - Aim: not to kill affection, but to prepare your mind so that, if they die, you grieve without total inner collapse.
- Loved ones are “on loan” from nature; when they die or are lost, they are “given back.”

7.2 Love Through Roles and Duties

- Your relationships define specific tasks:
 - As a parent: care for, be patient with, and endure your child’s faults.
 - As a child: respect and support your parents, even if they are flawed.
 - As a sibling, citizen, friend: fulfill what is appropriate to that role.
- Focus on what is up to you in the relationship:
 - Your kindness, justice, reliability, respect.
 - Not: whether they reciprocate, or how long they live.

7.3 Accept Their Imperfection

- It is foolish to demand a flawless child, spouse, or friend—this would be wanting “badness not to be badness.”
- Instead:
 - Expect human weakness.
 - When wronged by a family member, take hold of the situation by the “handle” that they are your kin, not by the “handle” that they wronged you.
 - Aim to keep your own character in accord with nature in response.

7.4 Loving Without Making Them Your Master

- If your happiness absolutely depends on your family's safety and virtues, then:
 - You are constantly terrified of losing them or their approval.
 - You become a slave to fate and to their behavior.
- Stoic ideal:
 - Love them genuinely and act for their good,
 - But ground your final happiness in your own virtuous character, not in their presence or perfection.

7.5 Not Just Words: Practicing Love

- Intellectual insight ("my child is mortal") is not enough.
- You must train daily:
 - Imagine losses; remember death and exile; practice small detachments (e.g., "a little wine is spilled: this is the price of tranquillity").
 - So when serious loss comes, your mind is more prepared to grieve without despair.

Overall Stoic picture of family love: > Cherish your family, fulfill your duties to them with patience and care, remember their fragility, and refuse to make your peace of mind hostage to what you cannot control.