

# The Discourses of Epictetus: Chapter 1 Notes and Thoughts

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**Epictetus:** Greek Stoic. Born a slave in AD 50 in Phrygia (present-day Turkey). Lived in Rome until banishment.

**Title of Chapter 1:** Of the things which are in our power, and not in our power.

**Faculty of reason:** There is only one faculty that can make judgments about itself and other faculties: the faculty of human reason. We are obviously able to reason about and judge other disciplines, such as music, art, mathematics, and science. But we are also able to reason about and judge our own reason. Reason can examine itself.

Other disciplines cannot do this. Music cannot be used to examine itself, for example. It can only be examined by reason. This makes me think about Godel's Second Incompleteness Theorem, which says that a system of axioms cannot prove its own consistency (note: may not have stated this perfectly). Even systems that we develop for formal logic cannot totally examine themselves. This makes one wonder what the human mind actually is. It is not an algorithm or a formal system because it can do things that algorithms and formal systems can't do.

**What can we control?:** Only our will by means of reason, according to Epictetus. We cannot totally control what happens to our bodies or our possessions. We cannot totally control who loves us and who hates us.

**Is there a limit to how much we can control our will?:** I think the answer is "yes". Epictetus is right, up to a certain threshold. A man can accept that he is going to lose his home and be content on the inside. A man can accept that he is going to be executed by lethal injection and be content on the inside. But can any man accept that he is going to be tortured for years on end, relentlessly? Can one prepare his mind for this? I sincerely doubt it. Even Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius would break once a certain line was crossed. But maybe there is some mechanism built into our minds that causes them to dissipate once a

certain level of suffering is reached. Are morality and pity built into the laws of nature somehow? It's possible that our morality is a reflection of the morality of nature. I do not know the answer yet.

**Accepting your fate:** Assuming your fate is bearable (i.e., it does not cross the line I mentioned in the previous paragraph), you are better off accepting it and not complaining. You may have two hours to live. If your death is truly inescapable, you will achieve nothing by worrying about or complaining about your death. If you are going to die in your own house, why not spend those last two hours eating whatever you like most or watching a movie? You may say to yourself (during those last two hours), "I must get right with God! I need to repent of my sins!" Well, there may or may not be a god. Even if there is one, it is highly unlikely that you know who it is or what it wants. Most likely, there is nothing you can do in those last two hours to "get right with God." So stop worrying and enjoy the last two hours of your life. (Note: Easier said than done! I guess this is why Epictetus emphasized the importance of the philosophical training of your mind.)

**Important point:** I don't believe for a second that Epictetus advocates accepting something bad when you don't have to. Suppose you are about to be executed for a crime you didn't commit. You are being led to the gallows. The guard drops the key to your handcuffs and doesn't notice. You can pick it up and unlock your handcuffs and run away. Should you do it? Of course you should. You only accept a bad fate when it is justified or inescapable.