Discourses – Epictetus

Epictetus, in true Socratic fashion, never wrote anything down. One of his students, Flavius Arrian, diligently recorded many of his master’s discourses and conversations into a work that originally encompassed eight volumes, only four of which have survived. There is virtually no doubt that Arrian compiled *Discourses* in stenographic fashion and it seems that every attempt was made to preserve Epictetus’ words faithfully.

*Discourses* is not, therefore, a systematic rendering of Epictetus’ Stoic philosophy and reading it is nothing like reading a typical philosophy treatise. It is more like listening to Epictetus himself deliver lectures or engage in conversation with various contemporaries, which is a positive consequence of the way it was written. The colloquial nature of *Discourses* also makes the reading itself quite easy and light. However, the fact that there is no apparent order or progression nor any logical grouping of the material contained within can be off-putting and results in an almost *ad hoc* collection of chapters that jump randomly from topic to topic. There is also a tremendous amount of repetition and little rigorous philosophical argumentation in defence of the principles.

Given this lack of an overall structure, *Discourses* is relatively difficult to summarise. In what follows, therefore, I elected not to try to impose structure on the content of *Discourses*; instead, I have merely sorted the material by category. In general this is, I think, useful although at times the choice of category an idea should come under has proven to be somewhat arbitrary and occasionally I have elected to reproduce similar (or even identical) ideas in more than one category when I felt it necessary. Still, the way I have broken down *Discourses* will hopefully make the very useful and interesting Stoic ideas a little more accessible and coherent than the original.

The Three Spheres of Human Activity (1.4, 1.11, 1.12, 1.17, 1.18, 1.19, 1.21, 1.22, 1.25, 1.27, 1.28, 1.29, 1.30, 2.1, 2.2, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, 2.10, 2.13, 2.14, 2.16, 2.17, 2.19, 2.23, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 3.7, 3.8, 3.9, 3.10, 3.11, 3.12, 3.17, 3.18, 3.19, 3.22, 3.24, 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9, 4.10)

This tripartite division of our ‘moral purpose’ is a central and distinguishing feature of Epictetus’ philosophy that forms the basis of his whole ethics. The three spheres are:

1. *Desire and aversion* – **the purpose of this sphere is to govern our will**. A key tenet of Stoicism is that **desire is always for the good and aversion is always from evil**. The goal of this sphere is to ensure that you never fail to secure that which you desire and never encounter that which you would avoid. For this to happen **one must eliminate desire completely and only feel aversion towards things over which we have freedom of choice**. An example of this is where someone desires to have a good view from a comfortable seat in the amphitheatre, i.e. sitting with the senators. Epictetus advises that we shift our focus from the desired thing to the desire itself, “…do not become a spectator and you will not be crowded.”

Another way of expressing this sentiment is to say that **we must learn to keep our wills in harmony with what happens** instead of trying to make it so things external to us conform to our wills, for this will often be impossible; “We ought not to lead events, but to follow them.” In fact, if we *really* believed everything was ordained for us and for the best (which Epictetus did believe), then we would actively seek out everything which happens, even if it is ‘bad’ e.g. being sick. In another example, Epictetus recommends that when consulting a diviner we should do so with no preference or aversion for any particular reading. Whatever will happen should be fine with you.

**We must eliminate desire because it is something that can never be satiated**. Epictetus likens it to the thirst of a man in fever. This man drinks then throws up and then suffers a more violent thirst than before. Epictetus also points out that he is already satisfied with the little he has but refers to another person who has much more than him but still desires more. This person’s desire is insatiate whereas Epictetus’ is already satisfied. He offers an analogy of a child trying to put their hand into a narrow-necked jar to take out figs and nuts. They can’t get their hand out if they grab too many. Drop a few and they will be able to pull their hand out easily.

**Even desiring things that *seem* good, like peace, leisure or travel is a mistake because these things are not goods, they are externals**. Epictetus gives the example of a book (i.e. desiring to read) which is actually an evil (even if reading provides you with serenity) because it can easily be impeded or hindered by something as simple as a crow or fever. **Even desiring *not* to have certain externals, like a high office or wealth, is a mistake because these are ends that can be thwarted and are therefore externals**. By way of example, Epictetus discusses two externals that are opposites, leisure and a crowd. He says we ought not to favour one over the other. If circumstances bring you the former, call it peace and use the time wisely; if the latter, call it a festival or holiday and enjoy being with your fellow-people.

This sphere is the strongest proof of trouble and misfortune because nothing is worse than desiring something that doesn’t happen or having something happen that we hoped to avoid. **When we fail to get that which we desire, or fall into that which we would avoid, the result is a strong emotion**. When we desire something that doesn’t happen the resulting emotion is *sorrow*. *Anxiety* arises when we desire something outside of our control and is a sure sign that our moral purpose is corrupted. Epictetus gives the example of a citharoede (singer) who shows no anxiety when singing alone but becomes nervous in front of a crowd. The reason is she desires applause, which is an external; i.e. she has not yet learnt what is good and bad. (See “morality” section below)

**Only a different desire or aversion can overcome a prior desire or aversion**.

1. *Choice and refusal* – **this sphere is practical in nature and refers to the impulse towards the actions we choose to perform, or not perform, and in general, with duty, that we act in an orderly fashion with good reasons and not carelessly**. **This sphere also includes the old Aristotelian ideal of choosing or refusing (to act) at the right time, in the right place, etc.** In this sphere, the equivalent of truth and falsity in the sphere of perceptions is duty and what is contrary to duty, the profitable and the unprofitable, and that which is appropriate to me and that which is not. This leads us to the idea that **a person cannot think something is profitable to him or her and then fail to choose it**. But what about someone who is overcome with passion and acts contrary to what she believes is profitable for her? This can never happen because in making the decision she does, the agent has demonstrated that she thinks the gratification of her passion is more profitable than the alternative.

**This sphere also includes learning what our duties are towards others** **for we must all maintain appropriate social relations**. What about when your father or brother does wrong by you? Does this give you the right to get upset or break your duty towards them? No. It is for your father to look to and be accountable for his actions – they are outside your moral purpose. If he does you wrong then he has destroyed the father in him, this is not your concern. You ought to maintain your own moral purpose by continuing to fulfil your duty towards him. This even extends to someone flogging us; while being flogged Epictetus says we ought to love the men flogging us as though they were our father or brother.

And what does it mean to be a son? A son ought to treat everything of his as if it all belongs to his father, be completely obedient to him, never speak ill of him, never do or say anything that might harm him, yield to him in all things, and help him as far as possible. **There are similar duties incumbent on us for all of the different roles we might have in society**; brother, councillor, youth, elder, father, wife, neighbour, ruler, subject, etc.

**Only a different impulse can overcome a prior impulse**.

1. *Giving and withholding assent of judgement* – **this sphere is concerned with not being deceived or overly rash in your judgement of external impressions** and **Epictetus identifies it as the intellect, the nature of which is to agree to what is true, be dissatisfied with what is false and to withhold judgement regarding what is uncertain**. Those who fail to do this, that is, those who follow and react to every sense impression that comes along, Epictetus calls mad-men. An example of this would be if you lose some money. The judgement that might immediately spring to mind is, “This is terrible.” If we just act on this judgement *as if* it is true, then we will fall into certain states, annoyance, frustration, sadness, etc. However, if we examine this judgement first (according to Stoic principles), then we will realise it isn’t actually true (see “externals” section below) and can avoid those negative states.

From the above, we can see that **it is impossible to assent to that which appears false**. As proof of this, Epictetus asks us to assent (during the day) that it is now night or to deny that it is now day. He also asks if we can either (truly) assent to or deny that the number of stars in the sky is even. This leads to the notion that **it is impossible for anyone to be willingly deprived of the truth**. If someone does assent to some falsehood then it must be because it *seemed* to him or her that the false was true.

**We should examine every sense impression and only once we conclude that it is in accordance with nature** (see below for what Epictetus means by our “nature”) **and within our moral purpose should we accept it**. We also ought to aim to be so well-trained in this field that we cannot be taken unawares by an untested sense impression even in dreams, or while drunk, or in a state of “melancholy-madness”.

Epictetus expresses surprise that most people do not judge at haphazard when they have to measure something but when it comes to the most important thing, i.e. our external impressions (impressions we receive from our senses), they are quite happy to run headlong, acting immediately on any and every sense impression without carefully judging them for truth or falsity.

He also notes that **most philosophers these days skip the first two fields of study and focus on the third because it is most closely concerned with logic, i.e. arguments, syllogisms, etc**.

The three spheres make up what Epictetus calls our ‘moral purpose’ which is essentially that part of our being concerned with morality, i.e. good and evil. This tends to have much in common with our reasoning capacity (see the next section) as well and Epictetus himself sometimes uses these terms (‘moral purpose’ and ‘reason’) interchangeably. For clarification I have elected to categorise them separately here although, as I say, I don’t think this distinction is completely accurate.

He calls ‘right’ activity in these three spheres (a desire that cannot fail to achieve what it wants, an aversion that cannot encounter what it would avoid, an appropriate choice, a thoughtful purpose, and a well-considered assent) the “sinews of a philosopher.”

The moral purpose **falls under the category of things which we control and which we are therefore responsible for perfecting and making beautiful**. Thinking about anxiety and when it arises gives us a kind of proof that our moral purpose does in fact fall completely under our control because we never get anxious about our desires, our choices, or our judgements. The reason for this is that they are completely under our control. (We may agonise over the *correct* desire, choice or judgement but we aren’t anxious about them in the same way we might be anxious about any other external situation or event).

Naturally, **being something we have control over, we must turn our attentions solely towards our moral purpose, perfecting it and harmonising it with nature**. Anybody who regards as good things outside the moral purpose will “envy, yearn, flatter, feel disturbed” and anyone who regards as evil things outside the moral purpose will “sorrow, grieve, lament, be unhappy.” The point being good and evil do not lie outside the moral purpose (see the “morality” section below).

Not only is it the only thing we have control of, **our moral purpose is entirely and completely free and unhindered**. No one, not even Zeus (although He gave it to us) can prevent or hinder us in our use of this faculty. You might object by saying that someone can force you to do or say something in any one of these spheres by threatening you with death, but Epictetus would say they haven’t *forced* you, in the sense of taking away your control over your moral purpose; rather you have decided it is better to consent to their will than die. They have exerted control over your body, not your moral purpose. Control over that is always yours and yours alone.

**Because our moral purpose is by nature free, it cannot be disturbed by anything other than itself**. **Only our own judgements can disturb and cause sorrow in us**. The things that weigh upon us and drive us crazy aren’t real problems *out there*; it is our *judgements* about those external problems or situations that cause us distress. By way of example, Epictetus considers what happens when a man receives a sense impression about his son. He was carried off to prison? What happened? He was carried off to prison – that is all. He is dead. What happened? He is dead – that is all. But when we add something like, “he has fared ill” then we are adding a private judgement, i.e. something that hasn’t actually happened. So, in order to achieve serenity, there is no need to get rid of the practice of exile, only our judgements about exile; no need to eliminate death, only our judgements about it; no need to cast out poverty, only our judgements about poverty.

This is good news because no one can prevent you from assenting to the truth or force you to accept the false, no one can compel you to opine anything against your will; only a different desire or aversion can overcome a prior desire or aversion and only a different impulse can overcome a prior impulse. **If it appears that someone has succeeded in controlling your judgements (through arousing fear in you, for example), what has really happened is your judgement overcame itself**. This is such an important concept that Epictetus says, “in every case the way a man fares is determined by his judgement.”

Since all of our decisions about what to do flow from our moral purpose and since our moral purpose is completely free and unhindered, **we cannot blame or complain about any external (including other people) for forcing us to act (or not act) a certain way**. The buck stops with us. But if I don’t get up early and go to work, my boss will fire me. But it is your *decision* that your job is important and your *choice* to keep it that ensures you get up early. We ought to do nothing as if we are burdened, afflicted, or in a wretched state for no one can force us to do anything against our will.

This also means that **the cause of our doing or not doing a thing is simply because we wanted to (or didn’t want to)**. This essentially amounts to taking full responsibility for our actions. We cannot blame death, exile, toil, slaves, neighbours, wives, husbands, children or anything (or anyone) else for making us do something; only our opinions and our will.

The fact that our moral purpose is completely free also means that everyone else’s moral purposes are also completely free and **we should therefore not contend with others to force them to act in accordance with nature, for their moral nature does not belong to us**. We can try to teach others but if they refuse to listen, this ought not to affect us because their moral purpose lies outside of our control. **We ought not to force our ideals on others**. The analogy Epictetus makes is with a child clapping her hands and coming up to us saying, “Today is the good Saturnalia”. We don’t tell her, “Actually this is not all good”, we clap our hands along with them. If someone won’t change their opinion, we ought rather to clap our hands with them or hold our peace. He advocates that we understand people who are not philosophers rather than hold any anger or resentment towards them for their mistaken beliefs.

**Our moral purpose is the only thing of importance; it is the human’s “true good”**. So if a tyrant threatens to chain your leg, or cut off your neck, this should be nothing to you because he cannot chain or cut off your moral purpose. We should place the highest value on our moral purpose, not externals (even our own body). Epictetus goes so far as to call him for whom nothing outside his moral purpose can dismay him, the “invincible man”. He also quotes Socrates as saying, “Anytus and Meletus can kill me, but they cannot hurt me.”

**We need to look beyond appearances to judgements in order to see if a person is really a human being or not** in just the same way that a closer inspection of a lump of beeswax reveals that it is not an apple. Just having eyes and a nose isn’t sufficient; what matters is whether one has the judgements that belong to a human being. Someone who doesn’t listen to reason is an ass, someone who has no sense of self-respect is a sheep, someone looking for another to kick or bite is some kind of wild beast. **Until you learn whether an act proceeds from a good or bad judgement you ought not to praise or blame a person** because it is the judgement behind the act that makes it good or bad, not the act itself.

**We must remain vigilant over our sense-impressions because it only takes a little to ruin and upset everything**. Epictetus compares this to the helmsman on a ship who needs to expend a lot of effort to keep it safe whereas only a tiny mistake will bring about ruin.

Reason / Governing Principle / Soul (1.1, 1.7, 1.12, 1.16, 1.17, 1.20, 1.30, 2.1, 2.8, 2.12, 2.23, 3.1, 3.13, 4.7, 4.11)

Reason is the most valuable possession of human beings and Epictetus frequently mentions how **we share the capacity for reason with the gods**. Its greatness is measured by the decisions of the will, which it ought to be responsible for (as opposed to the passions, for example). For Epictetus, **the function of our reasoning faculty is to make use of external impressions, judging their uses and determining whether or not and when they should be used**. Another way of stating this is that **reason is used to state the true, eliminate the false and suspend judgement in doubtful cases. And** **what does it mean to make use of external impressions *rationally*? It means in accordance with nature and perfectly**.

Our reasoning faculty is not just the only faculty we have capable of ruling on judgements; **it is also the one art or faculty which can contemplate both itself and everything else**. Other faculties, such as grammar or the art of music have a far more tightly proscribed area of expertise. The former can guide us when it comes to the task of actually writing but can’t tell us *whether* to write or not and the latter can help us with composing melodies but is of no use in determining *whether* to play or not or which instrument to play. Since reason is itself composed of a certain kind of external impressions and since its purpose is to make use of external impressions, **reason is naturally self-contemplative**.

Epictetus calls reason **the most excellent faculty of all** and asserts that the first and most important task of the philosopher is to test the impressions, discriminate between them, and act only on those which have been found to be trustworthy. He even calls all the other faculties, sight, hearing, etc. servants and slaves to our reason. It is our moral purpose (reason), not our vision which directs the eyes to look at certain things and away from others. It is moral purpose which makes us receptive to certain discourses, not our hearing. Only reason “sees clearly and surveys… all the rest, determining what each is worth”.

However, even though Epictetus values reason as the highest of our faculties, he explicitly says **we ought not to *de*value or despise our other faculties** because of this. They still have value in their own right, just less than reason and more limited in scope.

**Reason is also completely under our control**. This gives us another reason for the supremacy of reason/moral purpose; i.e. anything (including externals (see “externals” section below)) can hinder any other faculty; vision, hearing, speech, etc., but nothing can hinder the reason/moral purpose. This being the case, **we ought to concern ourselves with nothing more than our reasoning faculty**. Epictetus illustrates this with an analogy about the weather. If we want to go sailing but the weather prevents us, we might become anxious and frustrated, constantly checking the weather every five minutes and waiting impatiently. Since the weather is not under our control, we would be far better to let it be as it is rather than expending our energy fretting over something we cannot change. The moral of this story is **always keep in mind what is ours and what is not ours, what we control and what we don’t**.

Epictetus goes even further than simply saying our reason is ours; he says **we *are* our reason**. If someone threatens you with imprisonment, you ought not to be concerned about this because they can’t imprison *you*, they can only imprison your body (the real you is your reasoning faculty, not your paltry body). What if someone threatens to behead you? Again, they can’t behead the only thing that is truly *yours*, i.e. your reasoning faculty. **You are not your flesh or bones, you are your governing principle**, “that which both governs the impressions of the senses and understands them.”

Our faculty of reason is the only way we can aspire to any kind of purity. The highest purity and the worst impurity for a soul lies in the performance of its functions and the “functions of a soul are the exercise of choice, of refusal, of desire, of aversion, of preparation, of purpose, and of assent.” **What makes a soul impure are erroneous decisions rooted in bad judgements and purification therefore consists in making good judgements**.

Externals (1.2, 1.4, 1.9, 1.15, 1.19, 1.22, 1.24, 1.27, 1.29, 1.30, 2.2, 2.5, 2.6, 2.9, 2.13, 2.16, 2.19, 3.2, 3.9, 3.10, 3.13, 3.22, 3.24, 4.1, 4.2, 4.6, 4.7, 4.10)

Externals are a key concept in Stoic ethics. **Externals are the category of things that fall outside of our reason (i.e. everything else; our body, health, money, reputation, possessions, friends, family, country, other people’s opinions about us, what impression we make, the future, etc.) therefore outside of our moral sphere. They are therefore things that ought to be indifferent to us**. This doesn’t mean, as some commentators have asserted, that we ought to treat everything outside of our reasoning faculty with callous disregard. Rather, it means that these things, precisely because we do not have control over them, ought not to fall within our moral jurisdiction; i.e. they are neither good nor bad from our perspective and therefore should not have the power to move us to anger, sadness or any other disturbing emotion.

It may seem harsh to count things like family, friends, and so on, as ‘externals’ but we need to remember that **this doesn’t mean they are things we don’t care about**. It just means they are things we have no control over, therefore they are things we cannot be morally responsible for and they *aren’t* things our happiness should be dependent on. In another section Epictetus talks about how another’s grief (being an external) is “no concern of mine”, but this isn’t an unfeeling doctrine. What he means by this is that since we cannot control it, it ought not to disturb our own state of serenity. Of course, if we see another in grief, we should try to help “to the best of my ability”, just not to the point where I lose my own equanimity.

Since all *things* are external to our moral purpose and therefore indifferent, it follows that **all things that can happen to or be forced upon us also fall into this category of externals and we must cultivate an attitude of indifference towards them**. This would include things like exile, imprisonment, bondage, death, disrepute, etc. **For a person who has this attitude towards life and death, nothing can possibly cause him fear or disturb her calm**.

Epictetus feels so strongly about this, he even says that if he had to be deceived into believing that externals are of no concern to him, he would gladly accept this situation because it would mean living “serenely and without turmoil”, the ultimate goal of Stoicism.

An analogy Epictetus gives to explain this idea of ‘externals’ is of somebody scattering figs and nuts. All the children will scurry around gathering them up but the adults won’t be interested because they consider this a small matter. Likewise, if somebody is throwing governorships or money about (two different externals), Epictetus won’t be interested but will leave these to the ‘children’ to gather up and fight over. (This analogy continues later in this section)

Regarding other people, Epictetus says, “[O]ne man is not unfortunate because of another.” Another way of saying this is that other people have no moral or emotional control over us because they (and every other external) are outside our moral purpose and therefore neither good nor evil (for us).

Epictetus is constantly deriding people’s desiring after things like fame (one man wanted to be a priest of Augustus so his name would be written on official documents; Epictetus tells him to inscribe it on a rock where it would also remain after his death) and riches (instead of wanting to wear a crown of gold, Epictetus urges this same man to wear a crown of roses which will look much more elegant). He also discusses someone who has been called impious and profane. What has happened? Someone has insulted you – that is all. Ought we to get upset over the opinion of a person uneducated in the holy and unholy or the just and unjust? Another instance of this would be someone getting anxious over how someone else will receive or listen to him. Epictetus says they will listen to you as *they* see fit. But this is not your concern.

If we are going to value externals and seek to obtain or maintain them then we must prepare ourselves to do whatever we have to (beseech powerful men, beg, wail, groan, etc.) in order to attain happiness. Not only that, we ought to prepare ourselves to be fearful and anxious because there can be no other outcome if we regard impending things beyond our control as good or evil.

Not only do they fall outside of our moral sphere but **in many cases, externals are completely uncontrollable** and unable to be changed by us. Some examples of these include our body, family, country, social position, etc. In an analogy, Epictetus calls these uncontrollables “tasks” and quips that we ought to say (to God), “It is yours to set the task, mine to practice it well” demonstrating the importance he placed in accepting externals.

**All externals are equally indifferent**. Epictetus makes this point by saying that estimating the value of individual externals means to come close to forgetting one’s proper moral character.

We call certain externals (body, possessions, etc.) “mine” but we would do well to adopt the perspective that they are ours only in the way we call a bed in the inn “my own.” The idea here is to **act as if all of the things we think of as ‘ours’ are actually merely on loan**. That way, we won’t be so upset when (not if) we lose them.

**If we can change externals according to our wishes then we should do so**. But if we can’t then we mustn’t “tear out the eyes of the man who stands in my way” and if that still doesn’t work “sit down and groan, and revile whom I can”.

Although indifferent to us, **externals are useful both as materials for the moral purpose and because** **it is only in learning to correctly treat externals that we can come to find and distinguish between good and evil** (see the “morality” section below). Therefore the *use* we make of externals is not a matter of indifference. We ought not to be careless with regard to externals; “**They must be used carefully, because their use is not a matter of indifference, and at the same time with steadfastness and peace of mind, because the material is indifferent**.” Epictetus says that it is difficult to combine these two things, carefulness and steadfastness, but it is possible.

An analogy Epictetus gives us to illustrate this is of a dice game where the counters and dice are indifferent and we can’t know what the outcome of each throw will be. Still, the task of the player in a dice game is to make the most skilful and careful use of what has fallen.

Epictetus also talks about “form” in relation to our use of externals. He uses the analogy of a ball game where the players don’t concern themselves with the ball as something good or bad, but only about throwing and catching it. These actions make up one’s form. He then goes on to praise Socrates as a skilled “ball player”. What ball was he playing with? Imprisonment, exile and drinking poison. He showed indifference to these “balls” (externals) but showed carefulness about the “game” (the *use* of those externals, i.e. *form*).

In addition, **externals can be useful in themselves as long as we don’t forget they are indifferents**. As Epictetus says (continuing an analogy started earlier in this section) if some of those figs and nuts (governorships, money, etc.) fall into our laps we can certainly eat them for we “may properly value even a dried fig as much as that.”

**When it comes to externals, not only do we normally attribute good or evil to them but we often go out of our way to make them seem more terrible than they really are**. For example, in an earthquake, we worry that the whole city will fall on us when in reality a little stone will be enough to kill us.

As a kind of proof that externals cannot lead to happiness and serenity, Epictetus points out famous rich people who, despite having wealth, are not happy; and famous gladiators who, despite having perfect bodies, aren’t happy; and people in office who, despite having exalted positions and reputations, aren’t happy. It may *look* as though they are happy from the outside but if we listen to (and watch) them, we will see the truth.

To emphasise the fact that externals aren’t evil in themselves, Epictetus makes the following remark; once the tyrants are thrown out, we need no longer destroy the citadel itself – where the tyrant is a false judgement and the citadel is the external itself. Taking wealth as an example the idea is that once we have eliminated the false judgement that wealth is a good (or an evil) we need no longer concern ourselves with acquiring (or avoiding) it. We are just indifferent towards it, i.e. having or not having money is neither a good nor an evil.

**Whenever you lose an external, think about what you are gaining in its place** and if the latter be greater in value don’t think that you have suffered a loss. The examples Epictetus gives are exchanging a horse for an ass, a noble action for a small piece of money, peace for futile discourse, or self-respect for smutty talk.

Morality (Good and Evil) (1.20, 1.22, 1.25, 1.27, 1.28, 1.29, 1.30, 2.1, 2.4, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, 2.9, 2.10, 2.12, 2.13, 2.16, 2.18, 2.23, 3.7, 3.10, 3.17, 3.18, 3.19, 3.24, 3.26, 4.1, 4.4, 4.5, 4.7, 4.10, 4.13)

These days, most of us think of morality as being something restricted to a set of rules or guidelines we ought to follow regarding our behaviour towards other people and ‘good’ being faithful adherence to these rules. The ancient conception of morality was more expansive than this being more like what it takes to have a well-lived or ‘virtuous’ life. This can make ancient morality seem somewhat self-centred but this is a little short-sighted. Rather, the modern idea of morality is *included within* this broader ancient conception of the ‘good’ life.

Epictetus takes it for granted that **everyone agrees the good is something to be chosen and pursued in every circumstance and the evil something to be avoided or removed**. He also thinks **everyone prefers the beautiful to the ugly**. He calls these our “preconceptions” and they are of supreme importance. Since we all naturally agree on these things, how does disagreement arise? **Disagreement only arises in particular cases; i.e. whether some particular *thing* is good or evil, beautiful or ugly, etc**. Our preconceptions don’t conflict but when we try to apply them to specific cases, conflict arises. The example Epictetus gives here is that Jews, Syrians, Egyptians and Romans all agree holiness ought to be put before all other things, however they disagree on whether particular acts are holy or not, e.g. eating pig flesh.

So what is good? Good and evil are nothing more than a certain kind of moral purpose. **“Good” is a moral purpose that treats all externals as indifferent, “evil” is one that admires (or fears) externals** (or “what is another’s”). He argues that **it is up to us to decide where we will place “the good” and that we therefore ought to place it in the class of things we control** (or “what is your own”). **Hence good and evil lie solely in moral choice**. Above all, **morality turns on remembering what is yours and what is not yours and we ought never to lay claim to the latter**.

He also quotes Zeno in defence of this saying that “the essence of good is the proper use of external impressions”. The reason is that if we transfer “the good” to things outside of our control (health, family, etc.) then we effectively place our happiness in the hands of other people and things. If a person gets hurt or sick, she loses “the good” and therefore loses her happiness. If a person’s brother says something hurtful, he loses “the good” and his happiness with it, for **no one can be happy and at the same time fail to secure “the good”**.

As an argument against placing “the good” in externals, Epictetus says that, since it is my nature to look after my own interests (see the “human nature” section below), if it is in my interest to have a farm (possessions being classed as “the good”), then it is also in my interest to take it from my neighbour. In this way, all wars, seditions, tyrannies and plots are planned and carried out. The only way to break this is to change what we value as “good”.

In addition, if we make externals “good” then when we fail to secure some of these, we will naturally find fault with the gods and lose our faith.

Epictetus, in affirming that our good lies in moral choice, says that things like **our faithfulness, self-respect, intelligence, knowledge, and right reason also lie in the class of things we control**. **These make up the *real* us and no one can take these from us**.

The “good” does not apply to plants because they cannot form external impressions. Other animals lack the faculty of understanding and so the “good” doesn’t apply to them either. So, **the “good” must lie in both having the ability to form external impressions and the capacity to understand them**. That is why only human beings are capable of being good.

Since the good is completely internal to us (our moral purpose, our self-respect, etc.), “it is impossible that the man who has gone astray, is one person, while the man who suffers is another”. In other words, **anyone who does wrong harms only themselves**. This is so because we suffer only when we lose our self-respect, our decency of behaviour, our faithfulness, our respect for hospitality, etc. In short, **we are brought down (harmed) when our correct judgements are destroyed**. An example Epictetus gives is of a thief who pays a high price for his thievery – for a lamp he became faithless, in effect, he became beast-like. He also offers the example of a man who by virtue of his adultery becomes a wolf or an ape instead of a man. And once more; the person who is wrongly flogged by another suffers no harm if she bears it all in a noble spirit, while the person who does the flogging suffers harm by becoming a wolf, snake, or wasp instead of a human being. In all cases, the perpetrator of the evil act loses more than the victim, for there are no greater injuries than these. “No one is evil without loss and damage.” Epictetus cleverly notes that if we were to attempt to harm someone for harming us, it is akin to saying, “Since so-and-so has injured himself by doing me some wrong, shall I not injure myself by doing him some wrong?”

The idea of ‘turning the other cheek’ follows naturally from this; “”So-and-so reviled you.” I am greatly obliged to him for not striking me. “Yes, but he struck you too.” I am greatly obliged to him for not wounding me. “Yes, but he wounded you too.” I am greatly obliged to him for not killing me.” With this attitude firmly in place you can announce that you are “at peace with all men, no matter what they do, and that you are especially amused at those who think that they are hurting you”. Epictetus likens this to the inhabitants of a strong city who laugh at the besiegers. And what makes the soul of humans strong are sound judgements.

Epictetus expresses surprise that the average person would regard the loss of a skill in language or music as a form of loss, but happily perform actions in which we lose things far more important, like our self-respect, dignity, or gentleness. On top of that, the former are usually lost through things beyond our control which we therefore can’t be blamed for, whereas the latter are lost through our own fault. In addition, it isn’t noble or ignoble to have or not have any of the former, but to lose the latter is a “disgrace and a reproach and a calamity.”

He also repeatedly accuses us of being thoroughly experienced in material things but completely dejected, unseemly and worthless when it comes to our actions. A single stray disturbing thought is enough to overwhelm all of our philosophical training.

In discussing caution and confidence, Epictetus holds that it is not contradictory to claim we ought to utilise both attitudes at the same time. **We ought to be cautious regarding matters relating to our moral purpose (since these determine our moral purpose) and confident regarding everything else (since these are indifferent to us)**. It is ironic to Epictetus that we typically reverse this dictate. We usually fear (act cautiously regarding) things outside our moral purpose, like death, exile, hardship, or ignominy, but act confidently, or rashly, when it comes to things we ought to take more concern over, like being deceived, or acting impetuously, or doing something shamelessly or with a base passion as a motive. In acting like this, a person must *necessarily* encounter fear, suffering, hardship, etc. because these things are outside his or her control. Rather, **we ought to remember that “it is not death or hardship that is a fearful thing, but the fear of hardship or death.**”

Living in Accordance with Nature (1.11, 1.15, 1.19, 1.26, 1.29, 2.6, 2.8, 3.3, 3.7, 3.9, 3.17, 3.23, 3.24, 4.5)

This is another central tenet in Stoicism. For Epictetus, acting in accordance with nature simply means neither avoiding what nature demands nor accepting that which is in conflict with nature. **‘Nature’ includes both what is ‘natural’ in the world or universe at large (the way the universe ‘works’) and also what human nature is like** (see “human nature” section below).

Epictetus bases his entire ethics (*how* to live) on this principle of living in accordance with nature. It is so important that he considers suicide preferable to its contrary. If we find ourselves in some situation where it is impossible to live according to nature, suicide is the best option.

Since Epictetus believes the universe is highly ordered (indeed, it is overseen by Zeus), **the universe operates according to reason**. But how can that be true when the wicked person is better off? ‘Better off in what?’ Epictetus asks. They may be better off financially but money is an indifferent. When it comes to being faithful and considerate, you are better off than they, and the thing in which you are better off is far more important than the thing in which they are better off.

Epictetus calls the dictate **that we do what nature demands, the law of life** and asserts that acting in accordance with nature is always right and we ought to always aim to secure those things that are in accordance with nature.

**One law of nature is that the better always prevails over the worse**. And what does it prevail in? That in which it is better. Epictetus gives the examples of one body being stronger than another, several persons being stronger than one, and the thief stronger than the man who is not a thief. In what way? In the matter of keeping awake at night – hence I lost my lamp.

Human Nature (1.2, 1.22, 1.27, 2.4, 2.8, 2.10, 2.11, 2.22, 2.23, 3.1, 3.3, 3.7, 3.13, 4.1, 4.5, 4.7)

Epictetus is very clear that **human beings are mortal animals who are rational by nature** and once we realise (or have it explained to us) that some course of action is rational, we will gladly perform it. Being “rational” simply means that **we are able to use external impressions rationally, i.e. in accordance with our nature and the way the universe works** (see previous section).

**It is in our nature (that of the “animal man”) that everything we do we do for ourselves, in our own interests**. However, Epictetus says *everything* acts for its own sake (including the sun and even Zeus himself). Zeus wishes to be called “Rain-bringer” and “Father of men and of gods” but to earn these appellations He must act for the common interest. In the same way, it is true for humans that in order for us to attain our own “proper goods” we must contribute to the common interest. This means that **acting for our own sakes and acting for the common good are actually, one and the same thing**. After all, is it reasonable to expect someone to neglect him or herself?

**What this means is that if we want to be something then we must conjoin that thing with self-interest otherwise it will never come to be**. Epictetus explains this with reference to a scale. If a person places their own self-interest in one scale and friends, country, and justice in another, then these latter are lost because they will always be outweighed by self-interest. Wherever one can say “I” or “mine”, that is where the creature will perforce incline; if that is in the flesh, that is where the ruling power will be; if in externals, that is where it will be.

**It is in our nature not to endure being deprived of the good or to endure falling into evil**. We will do anything to avoid these things and that is why we ought to control our desires and aversions through reason. Related to this, Epictetus holds that **every rational soul is offended by contradiction**.

**It is in our nature to assent to what is true, dissent from what is false and to withhold judgement in a matter of uncertainty**. Likewise, **it is in our nature to desire the good, aver the evil and feel neutral towards that which is neither evil nor good.** The “good” is even preferred above all forms of kinship so if what we decide to call “good” is something different from the noble and just (i.e. a right moral purpose) then “all relationships simply disappear.” Epictetus uses the analogy of different people having different ‘coinage’. Offer the right ‘coin’ and you will get what is bought with it. An adulterer’s ‘coin’ is “frail wenches” – give him what he wants and you can get what you will from him.

There are also a number of character traits that are natural to humans; i.e. **humans are naturally born to fidelity**. This is a “characteristic quality of man”. **We are also naturally reverent, faithful, noble, high-minded, undismayed, unimpassioned and unperturbed, and** **we have a “natural sense of affection, a natural sense of helpfulness, [and] a natural sense of keeping our hands off one another…”**. **How can we know what is natural to humans? Just look at whom we praise and blame. We praise the just, the temperate, the self-controlled**. These, therefore, make up what can be called human excellence. He quips of someone who boasts that they can kick really hard, that they are proud over what is the act of an ass – not a human.

Another ‘proof’ that we are naturally noble and self-respecting is the fact that we blush, i.e. we comprehend the impression of shame.

**We are all born with innate concepts of a general kind**, i.e. regarding what is good and evil, honourable and base, appropriate and inappropriate, what is proper, what we ought to do and ought not to do, and happiness. We praise those we see acting well and condemn those who act badly, all without specific instruction regarding what is good and evil. We use terms like these (just, noble, unjust, wicked, etc.) all the time with full understanding of what we mean even if we haven’t received explicit moral instruction. Epictetus calls these are our “preconceptions”. But then why aren’t we all in perfect agreement regarding morality, why do we argue about good and bad? **We disagree with others because the application of these general principles to individual circumstances depends on opinion, which is something we need to learn to correctly apply**.

Serenity / Calmness / Tranquillity (1.4, 1.18, 2.1, 2.16, 2.18, 2.23, 3.24, 4.1)

**The ultimate and sole aim of Stoicism is the achievement of complete and imperturbable freedom, serenity and peace**. **Such a state can only be achieved if a person attains the objects he or she desires and avoids those he or she doesn’t wish to encounter**. Epictetus says that “**happiness must already possess everything that it wants**”.

**If you seek peace outside yourself you will never be at peace, for you seek it where it isn’t and fail to seek it where it is**. We get upset, i.e. lose our sense of calm, at the actions of others because we admire the same things as those who have offended us. Someone steals your clothes and you get angry. So stop admiring your clothes. Don’t get attached to them. They are, after all, just externals.

Epictetus likens people to travellers on the way to their own country who stop at an excellent inn and, finding it to their liking, forget their purpose and decide to stay there. The purpose (home country) was to “make yourself competent to use conformably with nature the external impressions that came to you, in desire not to fail in what you would attain, and in avoidance not to fall into what you would avoid, never suffering misfortune, never ill fortune, free, unhindered, unconstrained, conforming to the governance of Zeus, obeying this, well satisfied with this, blaming no one, charging no one” but you have gotten caught up in style, or syllogisms, or equivocal premises (see “philosophy” and “logic” sections below), or some other “inn”. Remember your original purpose (serenity, happiness) and keep this in mind.

Note: ‘happiness’ as it was used by the ancient Greeks and Romans didn’t mean what it does today. Today we associate happiness with a fleeting emotion, often the result of some sensory pleasure, and the opposite of sadness, another fleeting emotion. The Greek word was *Eudaimonia* and this meant an enduring sense of peace and calm over a whole life; something more like ‘abiding contentment’ or, as it is often translated, ‘flourishing’. So *Eudaimonia* should in no way be interpreted as pleasure or a temporary emotional peak.

Philosophy (1.4, 1.15, 1.26, 1.29, 2.1, 2.9, 2.11, 2.12, 2.14, 2.16, 2.17, 2.18, 2.19, 2.21, 3.5, 3.10, 3.13, 3.15, 3.20, 3.21, 3.23, 4.1, 4.4, 4.5, 4.8, 4.10)

Throughout the *Discourses* Epictetus makes a number of points related to philosophy. Because the *Discourses* isn’t a systematically composed treatise, these points tend to appear in a disorganised ad haphazard fashion, although it is fair to say they all follow a similar theme. Rather than trying to impose a schema on Epictetus’ thoughts here, I have merely noted down his ideas which, while somewhat disparate, all contribute to a picture that is overall, reasonably cohesive.

Epictetus calls **philosophy the “art of living” which takes as its subject matter each individual’s own life**. He also says that **philosophy means “making preparation to meet the things that come upon us”**. This appropriately reflects the practical nature of Stoicism. The correct approach is to learn the theory first (regarding externals, moral purpose, etc.) and then engage in the affairs of life, where we put what we have learnt into practice.

**A philosopher ought not to proclaim that they are such and such a person. They ought to *be* such and such a person**.

**Epictetus is quite dismissive of acquiring knowledge for knowledge’s sake**. This is because he believed that **the only purpose for philosophy was as a practical guide to living well**. Building an encyclopaedic knowledge of treatises (even philosophy treatises; even those of previous Stoics, whom he thoroughly admired) does not help one unless one puts into practice the wisdom contained therein; we need to “remember these statements outside the classroom”. As Epictetus says, “If you do not learn these things so as to be able to manifest them in action, what did you learn them for?” As an example of how useless this kind of knowledge is, Epictetus asks what you will do when a crisis occurs. Will you “make an exhibition of your compositions, and give a reading from them…”? Of course not. Such things are useless for the art of living well. Another example is if in finding ourselves surrounded by sense-impressions, we should not wish to distinguish between the true and the false, but rather read a treatise entitled, *On Comprehension*. We ought to read a treatise *On Choice*, not in order to know the subject, but in order to make correct choices; a treatise *On Desire and Aversion*, in order that we may never fall into what we want to avoid or fail in our desire; a treatise *On Duty*, that we may act according to the principles of duty. **Progress in philosophy comes not from reading or writing so many lines but from proper action in the three spheres of the moral purpose**.

Epictetus chastises us for being “fiery and fluent in the schoolroom” (also “lions in the school-room, foxes outside”) and able to logically dissect and analyse questions but “drag us into practical application, and you will find us miserable shipwrecked mariners.” He compares this to builders, who don’t give discourses about the art of building but actually go out and build a house. So a philosopher should act in accordance with her art, i.e. being an excellent human.

Naturally then, **we ought not to study philosophy merely in order to build a vast knowledge of hypothetical arguments** because this aims only at earning the admiration of other people, which is an external. Epictetus condemns these kinds of things as “trifling phrases”, “philosophic quibbles”, “little philosophic phrases”, and the person who indulges in them as an “idle babbler” intent on making exhibitions. Rather, he demands to see how you stand with regard to desire and aversion. He even condemns the person who wishes only to know what Chrysippus (an important Stoic figure) means in his treatise on *The Liar* by saying, “If that is your design, go hang, you wretch!”

Epictetus also goes on to compare philosophical training to food. Storing bread and wine in a pantry (learning) is useful if you want to take them out and show them to others, but what is eaten helps our bodies function better and actually produces real benefit. He also compares people who know the principles and love talking about them but who haven’t let these principles change their behaviours, to people with weak stomachs who haven’t yet digested those principles and end up vomiting them up all over other people. In yet another analogy, he talks about a person who wants to be a doctor and who has acquired all of the drugs he needs, opening a practice even though he doesn’t know when or how to administer them.

The person who mistakes reading and learning for the actual goals of philosophy is like the athlete who wails upon entering the stadium because he would rather be exercising and training outside. The athlete is a fool because the training was precisely for competition, not an end in itself.

So what is philosophy concerned with? **Philosophy is concerned with learning “how to die, how to be enchained, how to be racked, how to be exiled.”** Philosophy aims to help us recognise that each of these things are externals and therefore indifferent to us; the ultimate goal being to cultivate a character that will allow us to face each of these things without groaning and moaning and abandoning our moral purpose in order to avoid them.

**The beginning of philosophy is a recognition of the conflict between the opinions of different people** (because not everyone applies the common, universal preconceptions in the correct way to individual circumstances)**, a systematic search for the sources of that conflict** (the learned opinions of people), **and the invention of a standard of judgement to determine the truth** (the good ought to be something we can attain, have confidence in, and be within our control). As an example, Epictetus takes pleasure. He subjects it to the standard – the good is something secure that we can have confidence in – can we have confidence in pleasure? No. There is no guarantee pleasure will come our way or that we will be able to maintain it. Then pleasure is not a good.

**The aim of philosophy is to pass one’s life free from pain, fear and perturbation**. To do this, the philosopher must learn about the correct moral purpose (see “moral purpose” section above). Then she must seek out *how* to achieve this goal. The first step in this is to realise that “there is a God, and that he provides for the universe”. She must then learn what “the gods” are like so she can resemble them. It is also important to understand the “meaning of terms”, i.e. study logic and argumentation.

Epictetus advises that **the first task of the student of philosophy is to “get rid of thinking that one knows” for one cannot be taught otherwise**. And **the first thing the student of philosophy will learn is how to apply general principles to appropriate facts**. Everybody has natural, preconceived ideas of these general principles (which Epictetus calls “preconceptions”), e.g. ‘good’ or ‘just’, but we can’t adjust them to the appropriate facts without first having systematised them and identifying which particular facts belong under each preconception. Epictetus gives the example of ‘healthy’. Everybody knows what this means but they are unable to apply it, hence to someone sick, one person says, “Abstain from food” while another says, “Give nourishment”. The same applies with words like “good”, “evil”, “advantageous” and “disadvantageous”. Everyone uses these words but they don’t have a full understanding of them as part of a complete system, hence they can’t apply them properly to specific facts. One person applies their preconceived idea of the good to wealth, another to health, another to pleasure, and so on. This is also the reason we disagree, i.e. we don’t disagree over general principles, but over their particular application.

**We ought to attend our classes with a willingness to obey and the desire to change our judgements, not just learn about the history of philosophy**. Epictetus calls this attending class with the “expectation of being cured” (i.e. from the incorrect judgements we currently hold) and “with the expectation of submitting his own judgements for purification”. In addition, **studying philosophy should be painful because it ought to make us realise that we are not well and that we have to put in much work to ‘recover’**. He compares the lecture room of the philosopher to a hospital out of which the student should walk in pain, not pleasure.

**Philosophy promises to free us from all troubles so that we need never feel pain, anger, compulsion, hindrance, but rather pass our lives in tranquillity and freedom from any disturbance**. Someone who achieves such a state no longer has anything to fear because there is no evil that can befall him or her.

**It is not easy to be a philosopher**. It involves hard work, the overcoming of certain strong desires, ridicule, etc., so it is not a life suited to everybody.

**The subject matter for a philosopher is reason. The end for a philosopher is to keep her reason right. The nature of her principles is to “understand the elements of reason, what the nature of each one is, and how they are fitted to another, and all the consequences of these facts.”**

Education / Training (1.2, 1.11, 1.12, 1.22, 1.24, 1.26, 1.29, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.9, 2.16, 2.17, 2.18, 2.19, 2.22, 3.2, 3.3, 3.9, 3.10, 3.12, 3.13, 3.15, 3.19, 3.20, 3.21, 3.22, 3.25, 4.1, 4.4, 4.5, 4.8, 4.9)

**Education, for Epictetus, means learning how to apply our natural preconceptions to individual cases, in conformity with nature and to understand which things are under our control (the moral purpose) and which aren’t (everything else).**

**We need education and training to cultivate a strong, noble character**. Epictetus compares this to a bull which doesn’t become a bull all at once but rather undergoes a “winter training”. This is because **the education and training we must undertake is not something we can complete easily or quickly**. In fact, the Stoic ideal, that is, a person who doesn’t just recite Stoic principles but *lives* by them; who though sick is happy, though in danger is happy, though dying is happy; is very difficult to find. So much so, that Epictetus remarks he would be content to merely find someone on the way to being a Stoic.

Since it is not easy to be a philosopher, Epictetus recommends **keeping your philosophic principles to yourself at the beginning while you make progress so that you don’t ‘bloom’ prematurely and fail**. He likens this to fruit which is produced successfully only after a seed has lain buried and hidden for a season and grown slowly in stages. If it sprouts too early, it won’t mature. Or if hot weather comes early and the seed sprouts early it will grow “insolently lush” and then wither if a single frost should come along.

When we answer facts like “Is it day?” (Yes), “Is it night?” (No), “Are the number of stars even?” (I cannot say), we are able to answer immediately. **Our philosophical training should enable us to give the proper answer to questions of judgement just as quickly**; “Here is some money” (That is neither good nor bad). These kind of judgements should be automatic. We should not need to deliberate over them, rather we ought to settle the question on the spot by (a trained) intuition.

Epictetus believes, in opposition to Socrates and Plato that **morality can, and should, be taught**, specifically stating that **we must learn (be taught) what it is correct to desire and train ourselves to desire the correct things**. As an argument in favour of this, Epictetus asks how could we reproach a child for doing something wrong if there is no way for the child to learn what is right and wrong? He then affirms that **the cause of someone doing wrong is ignoranc**e. Pursuing the child analogy a little further, the only thing that separates a child from an adult is ignorance, lack of instruction. If a child had the same level of knowledge and experience, he or she would be no different to an adult.

**Education is only useful when we give someone general principles and show them how they can use these in particular cases**. If a philosopher gives specific advice, then the person asking for that advice will be unable to help themselves when the next problem arises. To illustrate this he uses the example of an illiterate student who has been told to write “Dio”. If the philosopher tells her specifically to write D-I-O, this particular knowledge won’t help if the teacher later asks him or her to write “Theo”. The only helpful thing in this case is to teach the student the art of writing (in general).

What is training? **Training is putting our philosophic principles into practice, i.e. not employing desire and exercising our aversion only on things within our moral purpose.** Epictetus suggests that just as athletes have broad shoulders as a result of their training, so should philosophers have a strong governing principle as a result of theirs.

**It is also important to practice in matters we find particularly difficult, which means that different people will have to practice different things**. For example, if I am inclined to avoid hard work, I should deliberately take on hard work to train myself in this area.

**Epictetus also recommends practicing living without certain things for some period of time so that later we can enjoy these things while still maintaining proper reason**. For example, he suggests fasting so that later you may eat without becoming a slave to your desire for food. In general, we ought to refrain from desire altogether for some time so that “at some other time we may exercise desire, and then with good reason.”

**Training is important because over the years we have learnt bad habits** and taken on board opinions which are incorrect. This started when we were young, e.g. if we bumped into a stone our nurse would blame the stone and even hit it as if the stone was at fault. **The only way to rectify this is to inculcate new habits, which means taking what we have learnt and putting it to practice**. The good news is that we can get accustomed to anything if we work at it. Epictetus talks about someone complaining because they will no longer be able to drink the water of Dirce. His reply is that they will get used to the water of the Marcian aqueduct soon enough.

**Every habit and faculty is strengthened by the corresponding action**. To become a good reader, read; to be a good writer, write. If you want to do something, make a habit of it. The reverse is also true; if you don’t want to do something, refrain from doing it. If you get angry once, you haven’t just gotten angry on this occasion, you have also strengthened the habit.

**We ought not to be satisfied with merely learning but we must combine this with practice and then training** or else our learning is in vain. By way of example, Epictetus criticises the philosopher who, while giving a speech on morality is interrupted by a loud noise or an audience member laughing at him, and becomes upset. A true philosopher would not get upset over an external like this. The idea is that his actions ought to match his words otherwise he is not a real philosopher.

**Difficulties show us who we really are**. We should think of obstacles and problems as opportunities to rise up and excel; chances for us to find out and show to others what all of our training has been for. **We can also think of them as tests which reveal who we *really* are**. **In truth, all of our actions disclose which sect of philosophers we belong to**. Epictetus says most of us will find out that we are Epicureans, some of us will be Peripatetics (The philosophical school of thought founded by Aristotle), but it is extremely difficult to find even one Stoic. Because of this, it is possible to derive advantage from any circumstance, even disturbing ones. In the same way that a strong training partner helps a wrestler exercise his wrestling skills, a person who reviles us helps us by exercising our patience, dispassionateness and gentleness. Is this person bad? For himself he is, but for us, he is good. Epictetus calls this the “magic wand of Hermes” – whatever we touch with it turns to gold (a ‘good’). Even death, disease, poverty – all of these things can be changed into goods.

When we are faced with one of these ‘tests’, we ought to bear it “in the right way”. No matter if we are hungry, thirsty, sick, etc., **the important thing is to bear our trials in the right way.** And what does “in the right way” mean? Not blaming anyone and not being overwhelmed by what is happening.

However, **we ought not to take on too difficult a challenge too soon in our philosophical training because it will not be a fair match**. His example of an unfair contest is a “pretty wench and a young beginner in philosophy.” The young beginner won’t be able to resist such a strong desire right away, but should train himself on easier fare first.

**Even if you fail to act according to your principles, don’t be discouraged. Pick yourself up and try again** because if you succeed once it will be as if you never failed in the first place. It is not like it is for an Olympic athlete, Epictetus says, who, if he fails one year, must wait another four years to compete again. You can “wrestle again [immediately], till you get strong”.

Freedom (1.12, 1.25, 1.29, 2.1, 2.2, 4.1)

We usually think of freedom as meaning a complete and unrestricted capacity to do whatever we wish. Epictetus disagrees with this. He says **a free individual is a person “for whom all things happen according to his moral purpose, and whom none can restrain**.” Indeed, Epictetus says that people for whom things happen against their wills are in prison, i.e. the complete opposite of being free. This may seem strange at first but upon closer reflection I think you’ll find Epictetus’ understanding of freedom to be superior to the common opinion of ‘being able to do whatever you want’.

Freedom for Epictetus is a “noble and precious thing” and **does not mean desiring “at haphazard” that the only things that happen are those you want to have happen**. This, he thinks, is shameful and little more than the outlook of a madman. He considers how we act when it comes to writing. Do we desire to write the name “Dio” however we wish? No. We desire to write it as it is supposed to be written. The same is true in the case of freedom. We ought not to desire to be free in any way we wish either.

The path to freedom from hindrance and restraint in writing is knowledge, that is, knowledge of how to write. So, **the path to freedom from hindrance and restraint in living consists in the knowledge of how to live**, which is the Stoic principle that good and evil lie only in things we can control.

What’s more, in the case of writing, we don’t just desire the word “Dio” to be written as it is supposed to be, we are *taught* to desire this. The same thing applies with freedom. **We must be taught what to desire to be free**, and this instruction in **freedom consists in learning to desire each thing exactly as it happens** (see the “desire” part of the “three spheres” section above).

This coincides with the above definition of freedom. **Real freedom requires not being pulled this way and that, tossed up and then down, by external events or circumstances (your masters); in other words, real freedom requires us to transcend externals**. Since externals are, by definition, outside of our control we can never achieve this end if we continue to allow our desires to run rampant, hence **we have to learn to desire only what happens, not what we want to happen**. Epictetus adds to this, saying that the person who is free is she who “is subject neither to compulsion, nor hindrance, nor force, whose choices are unhampered, whose desires attain their end, whose aversions do not fall into what they would avoid.” The *only* way to achieve this is to only desire things within our control, i.e. our moral purpose. As Epictetus says in one memorable quote, “freedom is not acquired by satisfying yourself with what you desire, but by destroying your desire.”

The flip side of the above is the conception of **freedom as not having one’s desire tied to externals**. If we admire our bodies or property or a lover or money, then we are as slaves to them and can never be considered free. In a stirring passage, Epictetus says it is disgraceful for people to contemplate externals as if they are important to our lives. In doing this we make them our “masters”. He talks about Caesar approaching him with threats of death and hardship or promises of life and pleasure. If he was to be afraid or enticed into something because of one of these things then he has recognised his master “like the runaway slave”. His master wouldn’t be Caesar, but the threats or promises he brings with him. To be free we must be emancipated from our masters. When we think of a master, we usually think of a person but it is not people who are masters over us, rather the masters are the externals those people control. No one loves Caesar (unless he is a person of great merit) but they love wealth or social status. In the same way, no one fears Caesar, rather they fear imprisonment, death, or exile. Since Caesar controls these externals which we are slave to, we, in turn, become slave to Caesar.

All of the above means that **the truly free person will not complain or worry about anything**. As soon as something (a person, a thing or even a situation) can subject us to compulsion, hindrance or unhappiness then we are not free for that thing is our master and we its slave.

This ‘enlarged’ understanding of freedom, as not being subject to any ‘externals’, means that Epictetus can quote Diogenes (a famous Cynic) approvingly when he says, “The one sure way to secure freedom is to die cheerfully”. Death is the ultimate in freedom because we place ourselves completely beyond any compulsion or hindrance.

Society (1.12, 2.5, 2.10, 3.24, 4.7)

The Stoics have a very acute sense of the whole, and the idea that **individual humans are merely a small part of the whole** (“as an hour is part of a day”) formed a key part of their philosophy. Epictetus was clear that “**the whole is more sovereign than the part, and the state more sovereign than the citizen**.” Indeed, **it is right for the parts to serve the whole**. If you imagine yourself as a thing detached from this whole, then it may seem natural for you to live to a ripe old age in good health and with lots of money. However, if you are a part of a whole, it is only fitting for bad things to happen to you at times. By analogy, Epictetus points out that a foot or hand, if detached would no longer be a foot or hand. Moreover, if they had the faculties of reason and understanding, they would only exercise choice and desire by reference to the whole. The same is true of a human detached from society; for **a human being is a part of the state**.

**We all have a duty to the State and must “always obey the law in every particular”**. Socrates is the perfect example in this case.

Death (1.9, 1.27, 1.29, 2.1, 2.5, 2.6, 2.16, 3.5, 3.10, 3.20, 3.22, 3.24 4.7, 4.10)

**The Stoic attitude towards death is one of calm acceptance. Death, being outside of our moral purpose (as an inevitable thing), is an indifferent (neither good nor evil) and so the appropriate stance towards it is neither being too eager nor overly afraid to die**. He chastises us by asking what we will do when the time comes for us to “leave the sun and the moon, what will you do? Will you sit and cry as little children cry?”

Epictetus encourages us to endure difficult situations and wait for God to give you a “signal” at which time your life will come to an end in accordance with nature.

Naturally, **we ought not to worry about death either.** Epictetus gives the example of someone lamenting about where their next meal will come from. His answer? If you get food, you will eat; if not, you’ll depart; “the door stands open”, meaning death is never far away.

**Rather than worrying about death, we ought to worry about what we will be doing when death does come for us. If you have something better to be doing, then get to it!** You should aim to be doing something beneficent, that promotes the common welfare, or is noble. Failing that, at least be caught striving to correct your moral purpose.

Epictetus offers a number of consolations for death, i.e. reasons we should not consider it an evil:

1. (2.1, 3.10, 3.22) **Death is inevitable. Sooner or later, the “paltry body” must be separated from the spirit**. **We ought not to grieve if that separation occurs now rather than later**.
2. (2.1, 4.1) **All things must die so that other things can be born and the universe can continue to develop and progress**. If the first-comers don’t move along, how can anyone else come up? “Why do you crowd the world?” Epictetus compares this to spectators at the Olympics who don’t want to leave even though the festival is over. We ought to leave life the same way a grateful and reverent spectator departs from a festival.
3. (2.5, 2.6, 4.7) **Death is natural**. “**What is born must also perish**.” **We ought not to concern ourselves with the method of our death; whether by drowning or fever, all roads are equal.** Death is no hardship; it is just the playing out of nature. Epictetus goes so far as to say that it would be a curse never to die, comparing such a situation to being like grain that never ripens and gets harvested. The only reason we curse our being “harvested” is that we are aware of the fact.
4. (3.10) **Keep your death in perspective.** The universe won’t be upset when you die. All that will happen is the paltry body will be separated from the soul.
5. (3.20) **We can use death as a chance to show the kind of person who acts in accordance with nature**.
6. (3.24) **Death is not destruction, it is a change**, not into something that is not, but into something that is not *now*.
7. (4.7) **Death is nothing more than the materials of which you are constituted being restored to the elements from which they came.** This is a completely natural and reasonable thing.
8. (4.10) **Death is the final refuge for all people.**

Suicide (1.24, 1.25, 2.1, 2.6, 3.8, 3.13, 3.22, 3.24, 4.10)

Since Epictetus treated all externals (including the body) as indifferent, for him **suicide is a viable option when a situation becomes unendurable**. One recurring expression he uses for this is to say that “the door has been thrown open”; the ‘open door’ being a metaphor meaning death is never far away and can be embraced at any time. One example of a time when the situation is unendurable is when we find ourselves in a place where it is impossible to live in accordance with nature. In such a place, suicide is preferable to life.

Epictetus also compares suicide to being like leaving a house that is full of smoke. If he were to be exiled to Gyara and considered life there to be unbearable (like a lot of smoke in the house), the door is always open to him (suicide) where he can leave for a place no one can stop him dwelling (death).

**On another occasion he says if you find the hardships of the flesh profitable, bear them; but if you don’t find them profitable, the door stands open**. Also, if you find the conditions on which God has brought you into the world unacceptable (i.e. not having control or possession of externals) then you may depart at any time.

Metaphysics (1.14, 2.10, 3.13, 3.17, 3.24, 4.1)

Epictetus believes that **“all things are united in one” and the universe is a single state, the substance out of which it was fashioned also being single**. This idea goes back to the Presocratics, many of whom tried to explain how all of the myriad things we see in nature share some kind of deeper unity.

He also adheres to a strong belief in the **“orderly arrangements of the whole”**. **This leads to a belief in “Providence”, something akin to fate or destiny**. **Since the universe itself is ordered and rational, whatever happens in it must take place in accordance with reason, therefore Providence is also rational**. Everything physical is “subject to the revolution of the universe”.

When we die we return the elements from which we were formed; the fire in us passes into fire, water into water, earth into earth, and spirit into spirit. **Epictetus doesn’t believe in any sort of afterlife or heaven or hell**; “There is no Hades, nor Acheron, nor Cocytus, nor Pyriphlegethon”.

Practical Advice (1.27, 2.1, 2.16, 2.18, 3.3, 3.8, 3.10, 3.13, 3.18, 3.24, 4.6, 4.12)

Since our behaviours are primarily habitual, **we must cultivate habits we want and eliminate unwanted habits. One tactic to accomplish the latter is to use the contrary habit to overcome an unwanted one**. Epictetus recommends taking extra care when trying to eliminate bad habits (e.g. in trying to eliminate grief we ought to be on guard when things that might provoke grief take place) and keeping a count of the days you have not indulged that habit. It takes thirty days to fix or eliminate a habit.

We must also **keep our skills in logic honed so that we can correctly understand arguments and hypotheses as well as** **keeping our preconceptions** (e.g. what is good and what is evil or what we ought to face with confidence and what with caution (see ‘morality’ section above)) **clear and always ready at hand to be used when we need them**. We ought to have them “ready at hand by night and by day; write them, read them, make your conversation about them, communing with yourself…” In this way, these preconceptions and principles will become second nature to us and when something undesirable occurs the appropriate principle will immediately present itself. We will also immediately recognise that whatever problem arises, it is outside the moral purpose, and therefore its sting will be lessened. For example, when death appears to be an evil, we must have ready at hand the argument that we are only to avoid evils (which can only be things in our control) and since death is an inevitable thing (i.e. not in our control), it cannot be an evil. Another example is when receiving disturbing news we should remember that no news ever falls within the sphere of the moral purpose. After all, no one will bring you word that your moral purpose is wrong.

**When something is taken from you be prepared to give it up readily and be grateful for the time in which you had the use of it**.

**Every day practice saying that all externals are nothing to you**. Begin with small things, a pot or cup; then advance to things like clothes and pets; finally move on to things like your body or family.

**To overcome a sudden desire, bring your reason to bear on it**. This will still the passion and restore your governing principle (reason) to authority.

**Keep in the front of your mind your goal of becoming pure**.

We ought to **have models (dead or alive) we can compare ourselves to and turn to for support**. Epictetus calls this withdrawing “to the society of the good and excellent men” when an external impression causes distress.

**Do not be swept off your feet by a vivid impression**. Take your time, see it for what it is and put it to the test. Then don’t let it lead you on through pleasant images of what is to come or you will be lost. **Instead, set over it some fair and noble impression**. **When imagination bites (as it will, for this is outside your control) fight it with your reason** and don’t allow it to run rampant or draw enticing pictures in your mind of what it wants to do.

**Exercise yourself all the time with regard to incoming sense impressions.** What did you see? A beautiful woman? Apply your rule. Is it outside the moral purpose. Yes? Away with it. Did a Consul meet you? Apply the rule. Consulship is outside the moral purpose. Away with it.

**Always pay attention**. If you relax your attentions just once, you will have started a bad habit. To what should you pay attention? **These principles**:

1. No one is master of another’s moral purpose
2. Good and evil are only to be found in the sphere of the moral purpose
3. Do not pursue any externals, that is, anything that is not your own
4. Direct your actions in the performance of your duties and meet the requirements of your social relations
5. Observe the proper time for play, the proper time for song, take account of whose presence you are in and act accordingly, etc.
6. Maintain one’s proper character in social intercourse

Epictetus recommends **taking stock of our actions during the day right before sleep and taking note of the errors we made as well as rejoicing in the good**. Also, **first thing in the morning we ought to think about what we need to do to achieve tranquillity and remind ourselves that we are not a “paltry body”, property, reputation, etc.; instead, we are rational creatures**.

**Epictetus also recommends practicing living without certain things for some time so that later we can have them while maintaining proper reason**. For example, he suggests fasting so that later you may eat without becoming a slave to your desire for food. In general, we ought to refrain from desire altogether for some time so that “at some other time we may exercise desire, and then with good reason.”

**Whenever you become attached to something (or someone) never forget that it (or they) can be taken away from you at any time**. Constantly remind yourself that those who are close to you are mortal and have been given to you for the present only, not inseparably, nor forever. Don’t let your “exuberant spirits” carry you away and cause you to forget what is natural; i.e. that everyone dies. An analogy Epictetus offers here is that we would be foolish to want a fig in winter, because this is impossible. “If in this way you long for your son… at a time when he is not given to you, rest assured that you are hankering for a fig in wintertime.”

**At the moment you are enjoying something call to mind the opposite impression**. When you kiss your child, silently utter to yourself, “Tomorrow you will die”. This helps one to not fall under the spell of passions which cause us to mistakenly believe a certain state will last forever.

Virtue (1.4, 2.9, 2.19)

Epictetus says that **virtue is that which holds out the promise to create happiness, calm and serenity**; therefore progress towards virtue is progress towards these states as well. **He also defines the virtues simply as “good things”**, which includes all those things within our control; moral purpose, rationality, self-respect, etc.

Wisdom (1.20)

**Wisdom contemplates the good, bad, and things neither good nor bad**. Since wisdom is itself a good, wisdom naturally contemplates both itself and its opposite. All in all, wisdom seems not very unlike reason.

The Passions (3.2, 3.24)

Strong emotions arise when a desire fails to attain its object or an aversion falls into what it would avoid. **Passions are bad to the extent that they make it impossible for us to listen to reason**.

However, Epictetus is clear that **“I ought not to be unfeeling like a statue” because we have to maintain our social relations** (as per the second field of study).

We ought to always **try to find a balance between enjoying positive emotions without being swept away by negative ones**. For example, Epictetus says that we ought to rejoice with those who are with us but not grieve at those who have to depart. In the same way, he asks how we ought to be affectionate and answers, “As a man of noble spirit”. **Being affectionate doesn’t mean making yourself miserable.** So to with love. **Nothing prevents us from loving a person as one subject to death or as one who will leave us**.

Understanding (1.27, 1.28, 2.18)

In Stoicism, **understanding first occurs through perception, which is nothing more than receiving external impressions through the senses. Next, we employ our reason** (see the “reason” section above) **to judge and determine whether or not / how to use them**.

Regarding perceptions, the external impressions come to us in one of four ways; either as things that are and seem to be, things that are not and don’t seem to be, things that are and don’t seem to be, or things that are not and seem to be.

The second step, where we judge those impressions, is critically important because **it is from these external impressions that our actions spring**. All great and terrible deeds have their origin in the judgements we make of our external impressions.

Our external impressions are powerful storms which unseat the governing principle (reason) from its proper place of authority. The storm itself (the disrupting emotions) is nothing more than an external impression. To prove this, Epictetus asserts that if we take away the fear of death, it doesn’t matter how much thunder and lightning rain down upon us. We will remain calm in our governing principle.

Other People (1.9, 1.13, 2.10, 3.16, 3.24, 4.2, 4.4)

**What unites *all* humans (not just those wealthy ones or those with a title) is their common nature (being rational beings) and this is a similarity that transcends all other variables; race, social position, etc**. Based on the fact that we are all descended from God, we, specifically all rational beings, ought to call ourselves “citizen[s] of the universe”. Epictetus also asserts that even though we may find ourselves stationed higher than someone else we ought to remember that we are all kinsmen, brothers by nature, the offspring of Zeus. In fact, by our common nature, all humans are “of one household with one another”.

**We must be wary of whom we consort with because people inevitably tend to influence those around them**. Epictetus uses the analogy of putting a live coal next to a dead one, either the live one will spark life back into the dead one or the dead one will rob life from the live one. He also cautions that a person who brushes up against someone covered in soot will inevitably also get soot on him or herself. This is particularly the case for those beginners in philosophy who are still trying to overcome bad habits.

We have to choose whether we wish to remain like our former selves, i.e. enjoying the affection of our old acquaintances and friends (which requires doing things like drinking, cavorting and wasting time) or become superior to our former selves, i.e. losing certain friendships (by being respectful, modest and restrained) because we can’t be both.

We ought to observe others, not to ridicule them, but to compare them with ourselves to see if we are making the same mistakes.

The Rational (1.2)

We determine what is rational and irrational for us by 1) using reason to estimate the value of external things and 2) assessing what action would be in keeping with one’s character. Because these two judgements may not be the same for everyone, what is rational for one person may be irrational for another. He gives an example of one man (a slave) accounting it rational to hold a chamber pot for someone else whereas another man (someone higher in society, perhaps) may deem it beneath him. Assessments like these must be made by each individual in each individual circumstance.

Note: This seems to be different from the “reason” or “governing principle” that is each human being’s birth right.

Character (1.2, 2.10, 2.14)

**Our character is essentially how much we are worth in our own eyes** **and we can and ought to cultivate a strong, or noble, character that is not easily turned from the path of virtue.**

Although Epictetus does say that we all have different characters, I think he doesn’t mean by this that all responses or actions are equally virtuous. An example would be someone ordering him to shave off his beard. Since he is a philosopher, he would refuse, even if the other should threaten him with a beheading. This is the ‘proper’ response and accords with Epictetus’ character, but only because he has cultivated this level of character in himself. For someone who is not so far along the path, it may not be appropriate to respond this way – but they should still be aiming at this target, i.e. where even a beheading cannot sway them (because our bodies are externals and therefore ought to be indifferent to us).

What good is having a character so strong that not even the threat of beheading can deter one from one’s chosen path or action? It lets its possessor be conspicuous and stand out as an example to other people.

How do we know what is appropriate to our proper character, that is, what level of character we have currently cultivated? Just as a bull is aware of his own prowess and rushes forward to defend the whole herd from a lion, so too would **the consciousness of such ‘character prowess’ in a human naturally accompany the possession of it**.

Epictetus does have this one piece of advice for those who haven’t cultivated such a character yet; **if you must sell your freedom of will, don’t sell it too cheaply**. He also cautions that **even though it may be impossible for us to cultivate a character as noble as Socrates, this is no excuse for giving up or not even trying**. We would take a dim view of someone who didn’t bother learning a musical instrument solely because they knew they would never become the world’s best. In like fashion, even though you are not a Heracles or Theseus who can clear away the wickedness of other men, you can at least clear out from your own mind grief, fear, desire, envy, greed, etc.

Epictetus also categorises our different roles in society with reference to character, listing the different duties that befall each of us in each of those roles. For example, what should the character of a son be like? A son ought to treat everything of his as if it all belongs to his father, be completely obedient to him, never speak ill of him, never do or say anything that might harm him, yield to him in all things, and help him as far as possible. There are similar duties incumbent on us for all of the different roles we might have in society; brother, councillor, youth, elder, father, wife, neighbour, ruler, subject, etc.

Logic (1.7, 1.17, 1.27, 2.6, 2.12, 2.14, 2.17, 2.21, 2.23, 3.2, 3.9, 3.21, 3.24, 3.26)

Although Epictetus placed less emphasis on logic than some of his forebears, he did still believe **logic was important in being able to understand and construct solid arguments as well as find errors in other people’s arguments and chains of reasoning**. He recognises this as the reason Stoic philosophers placed logic first, naming not just some of his Stoic predecessors in connection with this, like Chrysippus, Zeno and Cleanthes, but also Antisthenes (founder of the Cynic school of philosophy) and Socrates.

Nevertheless, he immediately follows this up by saying that we need these philosophers not on their own accounts, “but only to enable us to follow nature”, which makes it clear that the logic itself is not the end goal. In fact, Epictetus says that **logic is the measuring instrument, not the thing measured**. In general, Epictetus is **scornful of people who have only studied various forms of logical disputation; syllogisms, equivocal or hypothetical premises, etc.**, recommending that they unlearn these in order to begin once more at the beginning, i.e. learning about and practicing a correct moral purpose.

Epictetus returns to his endorsement of logic by pointing out that **the philosopher’s syllogisms *are* useful, just not to everyone**. They are useless to those who don’t use them properly, that is, to those who want to use them to showcase in front of others, but they are useful (indeed, necessary) to those who can use them to correctly dissect false or mistaken arguments and construct meaningful arguments that can be helpful in the art of living.

Logic is also a positive thing for a person who is already living in a state of conformity with nature. Since this person’s “mind is not being dragged this way and that”, he or she can take it up as a kind of hobby.

**While hypothetical syllogisms are matters of indifference, the judgements we form of them are not, being either knowledge, opinion, or delusion**.

Socratic Evil Injures the Doer of the Evil Deed / No One Errs Intentionally (1.18, 1.26, 1.28, 2.10, 2.12, 2.13, 2.22, 2.26, 4.1, 4.13)

In light of the Stoic philosophy of good and evil, Epictetus asserts that “**it is impossible that the man who has gone astray, is one person, while the man who suffers is another**” (since no one can harm our moral purpose), which means that “whoever remembers this… will not be enraged at anyone, will not be angry with anyone, will not revile anyone, will not blame, nor hate, nor take offence at anyone.” Indeed, Epictetus asserts that if we were to attempt to harm someone for harming us, it is akin to saying, “Since so-and-so has injured himself by doing me some wrong, shall I not injure myself by doing him some wrong?”

Epictetus thinks that it is impossible for people (who are completely rational) to judge one course of action to be the best *for them* and yet do something different. If this is true, then coupled with the idea that the “true good” of humans lies in having a correct moral purpose (i.e. people who do wrong harm only themselves), it follows that **no one does the wrong thing intentionally**, which means **anybody who does something bad has “simply gone astray in questions of good and evil**.” Another nice quotation from Plato for this is, “every soul is unwillingly deprived of the truth.”

This has two curious consequences; 1) **we ought not to be angry with evildoers, rather we ought to pity them and try to help them**, we should be “tolerant, gentle, kindly, forgiving, as to one who is ignorant or is making a mistake”, and 2) **if we can succeed in showing them the error of their ways they will immediately and willingly correct their behaviour**. Epictetus therefore argues against the death penalty for criminals because they are merely in a state of error and delusion in their judgements regarding good and evil.

As an extension of this, Epictetus says that **a real teacher never insults or ridicules someone with mistaken ideas**. Rather, she helps the student find his or her way to the correct path. She also doesn’t use technical terms a layperson wouldn’t understand.

Platonic Dualism (1.3, 1.9, 1.25, 2.1, 3.10, 3.22, 4.11)

**Humans are composed of two elements; the body, which we share with animals, and reason / intelligence, which we have in common with the gods**. The former is “unblessed by fortune and is mortal” whereas the latter is “divine and blessed.” He adds that our flesh is wretched and paltry (he frequently uses the phrase “paltry body” all throughout the *Discourses*) but consoles us with the fact that we have something far better in our minds. Indeed, the body and its possessions and the things we need to sustain this life are all “fetters” in Epictetus’ mind.

It is impossible for human nature to be perfectly pure because it is partly composed of the physical. He also calls our bodies slave to all manner of disease and anything that is stronger and can therefore bring harm to it, e.g. a tyrant, fire, iron, etc.

Despite the fact that Epictetus isn’t fond of the physical body he does say **we ought to keep our bodies clean and healthy**. It is inevitable that mucus should come from the nose, hence we have hands to remove it. Our feet must occasionally get muddy, so we have water to wash them. **Why should we bother looking after our bodies? There are two reasons: first, to be a human being and not a beast; and second, so as not to offend others**. Epictetus asks if nature had given you a horse to look after, would you neglect it? No. You would wash it, rub it down, feed it well, etc. Then how much more ought you to look after your own body?

Aristotelian Function-Driven Purpose / The Virtuous Man (1.6, 2.9, 3.1, 3.14, 3.23, 4.1, 4.5)

For Epictetus, **the end or purpose of everything can be divined from looking at its nature and constitution**. Animals *use* a number of the same functions humans have but humans couple this use with *understanding*, therefore it is sufficient for the former to eat, drink, rest and procreate (mere *use*) but **for humans we must also add the principle of propriety to derive their purpose**.

Epictetus expands on this theme by reminding us that **we ought to fulfil the profession of being a human**. **He defines a human as a rational, mortal animal**; as opposed to sheep and wild beasts. We act like sheep when we act for the sake of food, sex, or without due consideration for our circumstance or other people. We act like wild beasts when we “act pugnaciously, and injuriously, and angrily, and rudely. In both cases we have destroyed our reason, i.e. the *human* in us, and failed to fulfil our profession. In the same way, we can say **a human is faring badly when he or she acts contrary to his or her nature**.

What makes a thing beautiful is that it has achieved “supreme excellence in terms of its own nature”. Epictetus gives the example of a wrestler and a runner. What makes a wrestler excellent would make a runner absurd. So, in general, **what makes a human excellent is the presence of a human’s excellence, i.e. being just, temperate, self-controlled, etc.**

Epictetus gives the analogy of horses arguing amongst themselves as to who has the prettier neck-trappings or more fodder. These things don’t represent a horse’s excellence and so are irrelevant – if however they were to race, then the winner of this could lay claim to being the better horse because a horse’s excellence lies in being fast.

Epictetus also follows Aristotle in asserting that **each of our deeds reinforce that virtue or vice in each of us**, i.e. modest acts preserve and strengthen the modest person, whereas immodest acts strengthen the immodest person.

The Physical (1.1)

**Because we are physical things forced into physical interactions with other physical things, it is inevitable that at times we will be hampered by them**.

Stoic Conduct (1.1, 1.18)

The contemporary meaning of the word ‘stoic’ is to bear hardships or trials with fortitude, i.e. without complaining or moaning about how miserable your lot is. This is only partially related to Stoicism as a philosophy though. Stoic conduct *does* include not groaning about external events, but not in an effort to ‘keep a stiff upper lip’ or out of some misguided attempt to be manly or tough, rather, if we are acting ‘correctly’ (in the Stoic sense of the word) or as we ought to, then we wouldn’t complain because we would think it foolish to complain about external events simply because they lie beyond our control. Instead, we would just accept them, deal with them as best we could, and move on, not wasting our time getting upset or angry.

Examples Epictetus gives include the following; if I must die, must I die groaning as well. If I must be locked up, must I weep and wail about it at the same time. If I am forced into exile, can I not go with a smile? Once more, this isn’t about putting on a brave face, it is about understanding what is and isn’t under our control. Stoic calmness in the face of adversity follows from this; it is not a vain effort to deny what is happening or to pretend that it isn’t so bad.

Note however, that Epictetus is not being totally unreasonable here. He says it is not that you can’t groan, only you must not “groan in the centre of your being.”

Against the Academics (sceptics) (1.5, 1.27, 2.20)

Epictetus takes it for granted that an awareness that we are awake in reality is clearly different from an awareness that we are awake in a dream. Anyone who disputes this he thinks can no longer be argued with because he is either so delusional as to be like a madman or pretending that he can’t see any difference, which is even worse.

Even sceptics, who claim that we can’t know anything for sure on the basis of our senses, still act as if they know some things. For example, when they wish to go to a bath they don’t go to a mill instead. When they eat they bring food to their mouths, not their eyes or some other such place; “they use all the gifts of nature, while in theory doing away with them.” Even though Epictetus admits he doesn’t know whether perception arises through the whole body or a part of it, he knows that you and he are not the same person. There is value in accepting the commonly received opinion when it is rational.

Epictetus claims scepticism is self-refuting. Sceptics ask people to give their assent to the statement that nobody can give their assent to anything; they say they would have people know that nothing is knowable.

Epictetus worries that scepticism will lead to the dissolution of society because in removing any and all certainty, people can justify any action; after all, who knows what’s right and wrong anyway?

Against Epicurus (1.20, 1.23, 2.20, 2.23, 3.7)

Epictetus says it is unlikely the good of a snail lies in its shell and therefore it is also unlikely the good of humans lies in their flesh.

Epictetus finds a contradiction in Epicurus’ philosophy. Epicurus believed that we are by nature social beings but, having equated the good with pleasure, also apparently said that we ought not to bring up children (presumably because having children comes with so much pain). But if we take no care for children, then we can’t fulfil our nature as social beings.

Epicurus seeks to do away with the natural fellowship of men by attempting to convince people that there is no natural fellowship of men. But in that case, why should he care? Why does he want to convince anyone if there is no natural fellowship of men? Shouldn’t he be happy doing his own thing without bothering anybody else?

Epictetus attacks Epicurus’ teachings that the gods don’t exist and no natural duties attach to people towards each other (e.g. son to father, etc.) as fostering social disharmony. Epicurus also advises people not to marry or have children or perform the duties of a citizen. What kind of state would these principles create? These are all “subversive of the State, destructive to the family”.

He also challenges Epicurus asking whether it was the flesh or his moral purpose (/reason) that enabled him to compose the treatises he did or become a philosopher in the first place. Will he not confess to having something superior to his flesh?

If the good is pleasure then wealth ought to be the best thing because it is able to procure the most pleasurable things. Therefore, if we can steal without being caught, we ought to. If we can seduce our neighbour’s wife without him knowing, we ought to do that as well because that will be pleasurable.

On the Cynics (3.22, 4.1)

Epictetus respected Cynicism immensely, particularly Diogenes, although he was somewhat scornful of contemporary Cynics, whom he thought were more interested in putting on a show rather than embodying principles they truly believed in.

To become a Cynic was no small undertaking. It was more than just sleeping on a hard bed, wearing a rough cloak and criticising affluent people. One must change one’s lifestyle completely, cease blaming anyone else for anything, eliminate desire and ensure your aversion is turned only towards things within the moral purpose, feel no anger, rage, envy, pity, no woman must seem pretty to you, have no concern for reputation, and turn your attention towards nothing more than your governing principle and making the right use of impressions.

He concedes that marrying and having children is not particularly important to the Cynic, nor is politics. In response to the charge that society cannot function if everyone acted like this, Epictetus says the Cynic does far more for society than anyone else who brings into the world “two or three ugly-snouted children” and more than any senator. In addition, for the Cynic, all people are his children and there is no nobler office than the one he holds as a Cynic.

A Cynic should also have a good, healthy body (to show his principles are conducive to good health), possess natural charm and a quick wit (to meet objections competently), but above all a Cynic’s governing principle should be “purer than the sun”.

Diogenes was completely free because there was absolutely nothing that he valued outside of his own moral purpose.

Religion

Epictetus is highly religious (although he knows of Christianity, he is definitely not Christian in any sense) and frequently mentions Zeus by name. However, he also speaks of God in a pantheistic fashion more in line with his Stoic predecessors for whom God tended to be equated with Nature or the Universe. In addition to this, he also talks of “the gods”. This results in a confusing and somewhat inconsistent blend of theism, pantheism and polytheism.

It is worth pointing out here that Epictetus did not believe in any kind of afterlife. At death our bodies simply dissolve back into the elements from which they were composed.

*Theism* (1.3, 1.6, 1.9, 1.12, 1.14, 1.16, 1.19, 1.20, 1.22, 1.25, 1.27, 1.29, 1.30, 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, 2.14, 2.16, 2.17, 2.18, 2.19, 2.23, 3.3, 3.5, 3.8, 3.13, 3.22, 3.24, 4.1, 4.3, 4.4, 4.7, 4.10, 4.12)

We ought to “subscribe heart and soul” to the doctrine that we are all children of God (Zeus), who is also the father of other gods and that doing so will (or ought to) render us incapable of ignoble or mean thoughts. It will also free us from griefs and fears; how could someone who has God as his maker, father and guardian have anything to fear? Even if we don’t know where our next meal is coming from, we can trust in God to provide it.

We also ought to praise providence (God) for there are many things to be grateful for. Specifically, Epictetus mentions God making colours *and* the faculty of seeing them (vision), and vice versa, for making the faculty *and* colours for us to perceive. In addition, He also made light, for without this the previous two things are worthless. However, the greatest gift God has given us is the faculty of reasoning by which we can comprehend all of His gifts and follow the path of reason.

He actually goes so far (in 1.16) to say that if we had any sense all we would do would be “hymning and praising the Deity, and rehearsing His benefits”.

Epictetus sees Zeus as our Creator (Father) and insists that He has created us completely free from hindrance and with the faculty of choosing things.

A very strong theme in Epictetus is that we ought to follow the gods in everything we do (Epictetus quotes Zeno as saying it is man’s end to follow the gods), not so much in the sense of following a set of commandments dictated from on high but in the sense of accepting everything that happens because everything happens precisely as God has ordained. Since He has ordained summer and winter, abundance and dearth, virtue and vice… in short, everything; it must all be for the best. This is summed up when Epictetus quotes Socrates as saying, “If so it is pleasing to God, so let it be”, for what could be better for us than what pleases God? Indeed Epictetus says, “I regard God’s will as better than my will”. As a result of this he urges that we look to God and say, “Use me henceforward for whatever Thou wilt; I am of one mind with Thee; I am Thine; I crave exemption from nothing that seems good in Thy sight; where Thou wilt, lead me; in what raiment Thou wilt, clothe me.” This even extends to torture or death; if it happens, then it was Zeus’ will and it was therefore Epictetus’ will too.

Heaven and earth are connected in some deep way whereby they are really one. It is through this connection that God’s commands are fulfilled on earth; plants growing, putting forth shoots, flowering, etc., all when God bids them to. Again we see how Epictetus attributes everything that happens to God. However, he doesn’t make the childish claim that *every* plant flowers because God *directly* commands it to; it’s more like God creates the world and the conditions in which everything happens according to His divine plan.

He says something curious in (1.14) about God having given to each man a “guardian” in the form of “his particular genius” who never sleeps, can’t be deceived and is committed to the care of his charge. For this reason, none of us is ever alone. It is somewhat unclear what he is referring to here.

For Epictetus, impiety is a great evil.

Epictetus also charges us with bearing witness for God, asking what kind of witness we are. Do we moan and complain about our lives, in effect disgracing the summons God has called us to, or do we demonstrate through our actions that we control the only important thing in life (i.e. moral purpose) and nothing else determines our happiness?

God brought us into the world to be, not just a spectator, but an interpreter of Him and His works. Hence we must use our intellect to contemplate the world and create a life in harmony with nature.

Epictetus also talks about God having entrusted and committed the care of ourselves to ourselves; “He has delivered your own self into your keeping”, asking that we maintain this man or woman with the character with which nature endowed him.

God looks down on us from above and we ought to remember it is Him we have to please and no one else. One thing that will help us in this is to remember that hardships are essentially Zeus training and exercising us. Should we complain to God for giving us the chance to demonstrate our “virtue in a more brilliant style”?

We should make it our desire to be pure in the presence of God.

We ought to remember God and call on Him to help us overcome the unruly external impressions that assail us like storms and threaten to sweep us away.

At one point, Epictetus defines the Stoic goal as aiming to “be of one mind with God”, to establish a “fellowship with Zeus”. He also remarks that a Stoic is trying to change from a human into a god.

Epictetus is clear that everything belongs to God, i.e. not us. If God had wished for us to lay claim to any external, He would have made them goods (i.e. in our control), but since he didn’t, He never meant for them to be ours. This means that when we lose things or people we ought to remember that they were never ours in the first place.

*Polytheism* (2.14, 2.17)

Epictetus talks about learning “what the gods are like” because in order to please and obey them we must resemble them, and we can’t do that unless we know what they are like.

He also recommends that we not give our desires to external things like wealth, health, honours, friends, etc., but rather give them to “Zeus and the other gods”, meaning we ought to desire only what the gods desire and cause to happen.

*Pantheism* (1.14, 1.16, 2.8, 3.13, 3.24)

Given Epictetus’ metaphysical belief in the unity of everything he also believes that our souls must therefore be so bound up with God that they are in fact parts of His being. Therefore, God perceives the movement of each individual soul as a movement in His body. He also asserts that God created the sun which “is but a small portion of Himself”.

Given God’s omnipresence in this way, He is obviously able to perceive everything.

Epictetus also equates God with nature (and refers to her by the feminine pronoun, no less).

We are fragments of God, and we have within us a part of Him. Epictetus says that whenever we mix in society, exercise or converse, we are also nourishing and exercising God.

“[E]verything is filled with gods and divine powers”.

Epictetus talks about the universe as if it had a purpose or teleology. He reminds the reader that you weren’t born at *your* behest, but “when the universe had need of you.”

*Design Argument* (1.6, 1.16, 2.14)

Epictetus here gives what must be one of the earliest instances of the design argument. He first argues that we can be certain all the objects we see around us are the product of some artificer and have not appeared by random. Then he marvels at how all visible objects, the faculty of vision and light work together to allow us to see. He wonders at man and woman and their passion for intercourse with each other using organs perfectly suited for this. And the intellect which allows us to not just contemplate sensible objects but manipulate them in our minds. Such apparent design can surely not have arisen by random forces, but must require an artificer.

Some more examples he gives of this are the simple facts that milk is produced from grass (via a cow), cheese from milk, and wool from skin. It is absurd, Epictetus claims for us to suggest that nobody devised these things.

Epictetus points out that it would be impossible for a household or a city to remain without someone to govern and care for it. How much less likely is it that the “great and beautiful structure” of the universe should “be kept in such orderly arrangement by sheer accident and chance?”

*Problem of Evil* (1.6, 1.12, 1.24, 2.10, 2.16)

(1) Epictetus answers this dilemma in an interesting fashion, by pointing out that we have been given faculties to bear whatever happens. We have been given magnanimity, courage, endurance, etc., each of which we can call on when problems arise and rely on to get us through unscathed.

In a similar vein he responds to the complaint of someone who has a runny nose by saying that is what he has hands for, i.e. to wipe his nose. In a world with hands is it not reasonable then that there be running noses?

(2) Evils also give us the opportunity to rise up and overcome them. Without evils/problems there would be no great men and women either. The example Epictetus gives here is Heracles, who would not have been able to use his strong arms and physical prowess nor exercise his steadfastness and nobility unless there had been evils (a hydra, a boar, wicked men, etc.) for him to face.

(3) God has ordained all manner of opposites; summer and winter, abundance and dearth, virtue and vice, etc. for the harmony of the whole. Whatever happens, happens to ensure the orderly arrangement of the whole.

Other

(1.11) The actions of the majority (or what people normally do) say nothing about whether those actions are right or wrong.

(1.18) All thought and action start from feeling. *Feeling* that a thing is so (or not so) leads us to assent or dissent; *feeling* that a thing is good for us creates a desire for that thing and an impulse to perform, or not perform, certain deeds.

(2.14) Epictetus compares life to a fair. Some people are like the cows interested in nothing but their fodder (property, land, slaves, office, etc.) whereas others are fond of the spectacle (asking questions about the nature of the universe).

(2.16) Epictetus values the person who is concerned with *how* he or she does something, i.e. not with getting something but with his or her own actions.

(2.21) In general, people won’t admit to anything they consider disgraceful. They might admit to being timid because this can also be seen as prudent, but they will never admit to being stupid. They will also admit to things they think contain an involuntary element, such as jealousy.

(2.21) We ought to watch ourselves as objectively as possible to see how we conduct ourselves and whether we are acting as we profess to believe.

(2.22) Only the wise can be true friends. This is true because only those with knowledge of the good (and able to distinguish them from things evil) will be consistent in their actions towards others and therefore capable of ‘true’ friendship. Foolishness is being frequently disturbed and overcome by external impressions, at one moment considering a thing good but at another bad, and being subject to pain, fear, envy, turmoil and change. Such a person, because he is inconstant, may at one moment be friendly towards a person and at another unfriendly. Can such a person be called a friend? No. Epictetus gives the example of a pair of dogs that are playing together. They seem to be friends but if you throw a piece of meat between them they will suddenly be at each other’s throats. Likewise, throw a piece of land (or a girl, or money, or…) between you and your son and you will see how much your love is worth. Hence, the ruling principle of a bad (or foolish) man is not to be trusted for “it is insecure, incapable of judgement, a prey now to one external impression and now to another.” Only a person who knows the difference between good and evil, and therefore puts their interest with their moral purpose can properly be called a friend.

(3.1) We ought not to waste our time beautifying ourselves, for we are not our flesh, our hair, etc.

(3.13) We should not be afraid of spending time alone. We should use this time to do philosophy.

(3.14) Do not be afraid to be an individual and not follow the crowd. However it is important that we be an individual for our own selves and not merely to earn acclaim from others. The example Epictetus gives is if we take up an ascetic practice we shouldn’t tell everyone about it – just do it.

(3.15) Consider carefully what it is you want to do, assess your own abilities and talents (not everybody can do or be everything) contemplate all of the drawbacks that come with that particular choice, and then dedicate yourself to it.

(3.24) Aiming for the impossible is foolish and shows that you are a “stranger in the universe”.

(3.24) We were born not when *we* wanted, but when the universe ‘wanted’.

(3.26) The disgraceful thing is that which is censurable and the censurable is that which deserves censure. Given that we never censure anybody for anything they are not responsible for, nothing is disgraceful that is not fully our responsibility. I.e. we ought not to be held in disgrace for the actions of our father.

(4.3) We ought to maintain seemly and proper conduct; “I do not shout where it is unseemly; I shall not stand up where I ought not”.

(4.4) Reading merely for entertainment or to learn something is a futile and lazy endeavour.

Education and philosophy to understand correctly (logic and preconceptions of good and evil) 🡪 good habits 🡪 happiness.

Imagination arises beyond our control but we give it legitimacy by assenting to its impressions. We must fight it with reason.