

Thesis

In this essay, I will be going over Epictetus' views on control and freedom. I will show how what is in our control helps lead us to freedom and how this is helpful and relevant to our modern lives.

Epictetus: Who is really the slave?

If you wish to understand Epictetus' views, it is important to first look at his understanding of control. He starts with a statement that every human can understand, that "we are responsible for some things, while there are others for which we cannot be held responsible" (Dobbin Page 221, Enchiridion Chapter 1). When he speaks about this responsibility, he is touching on the dichotomy of control. The dichotomy of control is the understanding of the things that are in our control versus the things that are not in our control. When looking at the things that are not in our control, Epictetus also calls these 'externals'.

This might seem basic but it is the base of the entire philosophy of the Stoics. The reason for this is, within our will lies our faculty of reason. This faculty of reason is the realm of consciousness that we all live in. It is our thoughts, choices, feelings, judgments, and everything else that is within our minds. The faculty of reason is the most important aspect of humans in Epictetus' view. He expresses this idea when talking about our creation, "Two elements are combined in our creation, the body, which we have in common with the beast; and reason and good judgment, which we share with the gods" (Dobbin 11). This faculty of reason is used to distinguish between the impressions of the outside world, assigning the characterization of good, bad, and indifferent to the circumstances and externals that are impressed upon us as we move through life. When Epictetus talks about being indifferent to the externals he is looking for us to

shift our focus from these externals to the realm of consciousness that we have control over. This is important because this realm of consciousness is where the qualities of fortitude, justice, wisdom, courage, and temperance reside.

On the topic of externals, an important distinction needs to be made between the preferred externals and the dispreferred externals. The preferred externals are ones that our judgments know are better for us than the alternative. An example of this can be seen in food. This is an external that is also necessary for life. You can place zero value on food but you must eat it in order to live. In this situation, we should call upon the virtue of wisdom to help us make correct judgments about which food should be preferred and which food should not be preferred, then act in accordance with this wisdom. This highlights the importance of training and developing the facility of reason to make the correct judgments of which externals should be preferred and which ones not preferred.

Now we understand that the realm of our will is considered to be the most important thing in the world to Epictetus, but why does this matter? This matters because once we understand this, we can use our reason to desire fate instead of desiring something when we know we might not get. Instead of saying ‘I really hope my team wins this game’ only to be devastated by the losing outcome, we can say, “So who should I hope wins? The winner” (150). This might seem like a dumb thing to do but to Epictetus it is not, saying “Don’t hope that events will turn out the way you want, welcome events in whichever way they happen: this is the path to peace.” (224, 5). What Epictetus is saying is that we should bring our desires into alignment with “God’s will” or fate and only when we do this can we become happy in any situation. In

these situations, it is okay to have a preferred team while watching but the will must wish for whatever fate decides if it is going to maintain happiness in any outcome.

Once we have done this, we will no longer become angry or sad by the results of anything that happen in our world. This might seem impossible but we must expand on a previous point to understand it. Our will is what assigns the judgment of good and bad to the things of the world. This should not be confused with ethical relativism as the virtues of courage, wisdom, justice, and temperance are universal. Rather it is saying that the way we interpret the external world has the true effect on us instead of the external world that we think is affecting us. That whenever you decide to do something “It’s your set of values that compelled you; will acting on will.” (45). From this, it can be understood that every feeling we get is from the will assigning a judgment to that external, not from the external. This might seem strange but let’s look at death, this is something that causes a lot of people anger or fear. Stoics would say this is not the case, rather it’s our will’s judgment of these things that causes people anger or fear. Epictetus touches on this topic, “In other words, it isn’t death, pain, exile or anything else you care to mention that accounts for the way we act, only our opinion about death, pain and the rest.” (33).

There is another thing that might convince you that this facility of reason is even more of a superpower, this being that nothing can touch our will except our will. Epictetus makes this point by saying “But what can obstruct the will? Nothing external; only the will can turn back on, and obstruct itself” (142); that, “It’s written here that you have a will incapable of being coerced or compelled” (44). An example, when someone throws your body in jail, they still cannot affect your attitude and happiness, only where your body resides. If you were to become

depressed because you are in jail, it would be your will obstructing your happiness and not the courts causing your sadness.

Once we understand this, we can see another superpower, invincibility. This is because “You are invincible if nothing outside the will can disconcert you” (47). Not being invincible from a mob of people; as their strength outmatches yours by tenfold—invincible in regards to your will, which cannot be touched by anyone. That no one can ever force you to desire something you don’t want. Furthermore, we know that only the will can disturb the will, therefore it is within us to be indifferent and invincible to the externals around it. This idea has been met with criticism, saying that this would come at the price of empathy and compassion for others. The stoics would respond with the claim that the moral virtues of justice, wisdom, and courage are still present in any situation to understand and help others. That these virtues are more than enough to help us feel empathy for others.

These reasons are why understanding the dichotomy of control is so important. An example to illustrate. If someone insults you, you are not in control of that. If they harmed you, you are in control of that. Let Epictetus show us why, “Remember, it is not enough to be hit or insulted to be harmed, you must believe that you are being harmed. If someone succeeds in provoking you, realize that your mind is complicit in the provocation.” (228, 20). Epictetus expands on this issue saying “In general, remember that it is we who torment, we who make difficulties for ourselves - that is, our opinions do. What, for instance, does it mean to be insulted? Stand by a rock and insult it, and what have you accomplished?” (61). If someone, being angry and upset, tries to hurt your feelings by yelling at you and insulting you, it is meaningless if you do not care. If you were to yell and insult a rock for hours, you would leave

only having made yourself tired. The rock does not care about anything you have to say, good or bad. These examples show the main point, that our opinions hold true power in our world. We can choose to be a rock toward the insults people throw at us or we can choose to value their words. Epictetus thinks it is easy to see the correct way of thinking between these two options.

These are the things that are in our control, everything else—all the externals, we must not put value in if we are going to be free. This is shown when Epictetus says “To me those other things are worthless; it’s enough if one day I can live without sorrow and frustration, if I can lift my head like a free person in the face of circumstance” (119). When Epictetus talks about ‘lifting his head like a free person in the face of circumstance’ he does so as someone who was once a Roman slave. This shows his words are coming from real-life experience. His example shows these ideas can be used even in the worst of situations.

Furthering this point on freedom, Epictetus believes that these teachings on ‘what is in our control’ are the way to obtaining this freedom. This is how control and freedom work together, with freedom only coming if we are educated on what is in our control and desire only God’s will. This is also why he says, “The fruit of these doctrines is the best and most beautiful, as it ought to be for individuals who are truly educated: freedom from trouble, freedom from fear - freedom in general” (79). This freedom, that we would all love to have, is only possible if we absolve ourselves from the masters that obstruct our freedom. Epictetus makes this point further saying that “If you hanker after externals you are going to be twirled round and round at the will of your master. ‘Who’s my “master”?’ Whoever controls what you desire or dislike” (83). This is the philosophy that Epictetus teaches. This concept is so central to Epictetus that he teaches his students to use different wording when they are ‘philosophizing’, telling them this, “do not say

that you are philosophizing (admittedly a pretentious claim), but that you are a slave presenting your emancipator; because this is genuine freedom that you cultivate” (188). So, are you less of a slave than Epictetus was?

Now we understand Epictetus’ philosophy on control and how it leads to freedom. The next point to address is how this is relevant and helpful to our modern lives. One way in which this is relevant to modern lives is that each of us puts the value of good on many things outside of our control. Every day modern humans wish for: our crush to like us, a new promotion, the new iPhone. Epictetus has shown us that when we do this, we are allowing ourselves to become slaves to those externals. This fact alone provides extreme helpfulness to anyone who comes to know it. If our crush sleeps with our friend, we get fired from that job, or the iPhone breaks the day after getting it--all worst-case scenarios for those situations--we will see that it is not the event that is causing us to be sad. That it is our fault for putting so much of our value or our ‘good’ into that external. That we have nobody else to blame but ourselves for not using the faculty of reason to distinguish what was outside of our control and bring our desire in alignment with fate. This might seem counter to the norms of today but it does not mean it is not helpful. We feel so wronged when we get the short end of the stick, we feel so hurt when someone acts badly to us. If we could see that it is our opinions that torment us instead of those people, we would be much happier. This is what Epictetus is trying to impress on us when he says, “So when we are frustrated, angry, or unhappy, never hold anyone except ourselves—that is, our judgments—accountable” (223, 5). This way of looking at the world is extremely helpful to all humans living right now.

Furthermore, Epictetus shows another practical example that is still relevant and helpful to humans today, “We get angry because we put too high a premium on things that they can steal. Don’t attach such value to your clothes, and you won’t get angry with the thief who takes them.” (46). We get so nervous that someone will steal from us. We hate it when someone steals something from us. However, if we do not value that external, then we will not feel this anger or nervousness. Epictetus also has a way of thinking to help prevent nervousness, something that is extremely relevant and helpful to modern-day lives. For nervousness he tells us; “So if externals are neither good nor bad, while everything within the sphere of choice is in our power and cannot be taken away by anyone, or imposed on us without our compliance - then what’s left to be nervous about?” (104).

There is another issue that most people face in modern life as well, loss and sorrow. It takes many different shapes and forms but loss and sorrow will find their way into all modern human lives at some point. What insight does Epictetus give for this issue? “‘I have a pain in the head.’ Well, at least you don’t have a pain in the horns right? Loss and sorrow are only possible with respect to things we own.” (47). This seems like a weird quote at first, but after a second, the meaning of the words start to carry more weight. We do not have horns on our heads so it is impossible to have pain caused by them. If we do not claim to ‘have’ the clothes, when they are stolen we will not feel pain. Understanding that we are like travelers at a hotel, only passing through.

After understanding this, we can also see that anything else we wish to ‘have’ or ‘own’ can easily become a target for enemies. If you do not claim those things or give them value, then you will be unharmed by any attack that those enemies bring upon you—they can touch your

possessions or body but they cannot touch your will. This is advice that people in modern times would definitely find helpful as they often value their wife, their car, their job only to be in ruins when: their best friend sleeps with their wife, a distracted driver destroys their car, or the spiteful coworker gets them fired. Were any of these things within the will? Then bring your desire in alignment with fate and you will not be so upset when fate gives you the cards of life.

You might begin to see the helpfulness of these ideas in less meaningful aspects of life but be unswayed with respect to close family members who we love so dearly. Epictetus has a helpful reminder for this topic as well; “When giving your wife or child a kiss, repeat to yourself ‘I am kissing a mortal.’ Then you won’t be so distraught if they are taken from you” (222, 3). This is something that I wished I did more with my grandmother in the time leading up to her death and will be immensely valuable with my wife and children, who are mortal and can die any day. Death is the final destination in everyone’s journey on earth and yet we have set sail. The time of this death can happen at any time. Reminding ourselves of this fact constantly will help our emotions when fate ends the journey of our loved ones. This type of thinking can be helpful to humans as we all allow ourselves to love our family and friends and give them value, even knowing this makes us susceptible. This love and value of family is human nature and we often do it at the cost of our ‘invincibility’. The price we would have to pay to be truly ‘invincible’ is something that critics point to when looking at stoicism. The response of the stoics would be that even the sage of stoicism can allow themselves to love and value their family, but to remind themselves of their families mortality and accept the reality of their death with a love of fate in order to help protect their happiness when tragedy strikes.

Furthermore, on the topic of tragedies, it is something that many people fear in the modern world and become mentally ruined when they happen. These tragedies include: having your business fail, losing your family in a car accident, getting cancer. Epictetus tells us to scoff at these, “For what else are tragedies but the ordeals of people who have come to value externals” (14). While most everyone thinks that it is crazy to scoff at these types of ideas, the point should not be lost. I don’t know if anyone will ever be able to be the perfect stoic that Epictetus hopes we become. This does not mean that moving forward in the education of the stoics will not be helpful to you as you sail on this journey called life. Am I telling you that you should not love your wife anymore? No. Rather I make the point that if you choose to love this woman, you must understand that there is a chance she will cheat on you and when faced with this reality, you will desire nothing more than what fate has given you. This could seem like flawed reasoning but it’s not, Epictetus makes a good point on the issue, “Don’t make your wife’s external beauty her chief attraction, and you won’t be angry with the adulterer. Realize that the thief and the adulterer cannot touch what’s yours, only what is common property everywhere and not under your control” (46).

These words of Epictetus—though written just under two thousand years ago—have never been more needed due to the materialistic aspects of the world we live in. Look at the issues that affect us all. Issues like death, becoming sick, getting robbed or hurt, being canceled. These all seem like terrible things but to the Stoic, they do not affect him. This is extremely relevant to anyone at any point in time, those issues are staples of human sorrow and pain, therefore it is extremely helpful to human existence to not be bothered by those issues. Epictetus

expresses this idea by saying “Show me someone untroubled with disturbing thoughts about illness, danger, death, exile or loss of reputation. By all the gods, I want to see a stoic!” (127).

Conclusion

In conclusion, in this essay, I went over Epictetus’ views on control and freedom. I showed how what is in our control helps lead to freedom and how this is helpful and relevant to modern lives. Through this essay, I hoped to show the ways in which we are more powerful than we thought we were. That we hold the power of our freedom within our will, that the power does not lie outside of us. We are slaves only when we decided to give this power to the externals, and that nobody can take your fortitude from you.

Works Cited

Dobbin, Robert F. *Epictetus: Discourse and Selected Writings* . Clarendon Press, 2011.

Notes

This book includes Epictetus' discourses, fragments, and the Enchiridion. Due to the fact that the Enchiridion is the primary source for our class, it is given extra citation on the quotes. This is shown by the chapter number that follows the page number to show what chapter in the Enchiridion that the quote is from.