



Epictetus

50 CE TURKEY 135 CE GREECE

People Are Disturbed Not by Things, but by Their Views of Things

Epictetus is a philosopher of acceptance. He is a key thinker in the school of thought called Stoicism. Epictetus takes Socrates' lesson that a virtuous life is a good and happy life and turns it into a strict discipline backed by a deterministic model of the universe. Whereas Socrates defines himself as a midwife, helping others to give birth to wisdom he claims not to possess himself, Epictetus is more akin to a physician. He heals mental disturbances that sicken the soul by teaching us how to live in harmony with the universe. Everything happens for a reason, and if we understood the nature of the universe correctly we would wish for nothing to be different. Serenity and tranquility lie in acceptance of all that is and in understanding that the universe is good. Indeed, we do an injustice to ourselves and to the world when we are disappointed with life.

For Epictetus, the universe is fated and good and can be in no other way. That is why we must be thankful for everything that happens. We cannot change events in the past through

our regret, or influence the future through our worry: the past and the future are out of our control. Epictetus asks us to stay focused only on what is within our control. Our thoughts, desires, emotions, and wills are in our control, while our bodies, property, reputations, and the opinions of others are out of our control. Through mental discipline and the wisdom to know and act only on what is within our control, we may overcome all hindrances.

Epictetus teaches us that our thoughts determine how we feel and experience the world. They shape our outlooks and wellbeing. If we change our thoughts, then we change our reality and how we feel about ourselves and the world. While we cannot always control what happens to us, we can control how we perceive and experience what happens to us. Illness may overcome our bodies, but we control how we respond to the illness. Suffering therefore does not come to us from the outside but is created by our own minds: “Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things. Death, for instance, is not terrible, else it would have appeared so to Socrates.”⁵⁸

We cause our own disturbances by trying to control things that are innately out of our control, like death, or other people’s actions and opinions. Epictetus warns that it is foolhardy to be the cause of our own suffering. We must therefore exercise great care and discipline over our thoughts and direct them properly. The power is ours to avoid harm by refraining from negative and harmful thoughts and by not allowing others to disturb us. “Nothing can influence or control your thoughts, responses, impulses. Things may restrain your body, like illness, but what is most yourself is in your power.”⁵⁹

Serenity and calm are completely in our control. This is why Epictetus asks us to be vigilant over our thoughts and defend

our minds as if an enemy lies in waiting. Just as we would not willingly hand our bodies over to someone who will cause us injury, so we must not recklessly hand our minds over to harmful thoughts or to the negativity brought about by others. He cautions us: “If a person gave your body to any stranger he met on his way, you would certainly be angry. And do you feel no shame in handing over your own mind to be confused and mystified by anyone who happens to verbally attack you?”⁶⁰ Again, Epictetus explains: “Just as in walking about you pay attention so as not to step on a nail or twist your foot, pay attention in the same way so as not to harm your ruling principle.”⁶¹

Epictetus believes that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. All the world is interconnected and ordered according to a grand plan that is both rational and good. Our rational minds fit within the order of this physically determined universe. Freed from the influence of individual emotions and desires, we are asked to align our minds with the soul of the universe, where we will find contentment. In Stoic cosmology, everything happens for a reason and happens just as it should. It is therefore futile to go against our fates and seek to sever ourselves from the whole through unhappiness with our lot. This shows a lack not only of gratitude, but also of understanding our part in the universe.

Our fate is integrally bound to the destiny of the whole: the individual is part of the fabric of the universe. If we wish for any one thing in our lives to change, then everything must change. Destruction ensues. The past is past and the future is bound in uncertainty, bundled within a nexus of causes and effects that reach back incomprehensibly to the beginning of time. Our task is to understand that we belong to the universal order of things and are in good hands. Wishing for things to be as they are rather than as we would otherwise wish them to be is one of Epictetus’s key teachings on happiness: “Do not seek to have

events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well.”⁶²

We show gratitude by being satisfied with our lives. Failure is part of life. Sadness is part of life. But we control the magnitude and duration of how upset we get. It is in our power to see the world either in a way that makes us feel content, or in a way that disturbs our tranquility (*ataraxia* in Greek). We must always remember that what we think about events determines how we feel, and not the events themselves. No harm may come to us from outside unless we let it. We have the power to experience life free from anguish by directing our minds toward things that feed rather than starve our souls. By upholding affirming thoughts to avoid rather than to invite pain, we bring tranquility into our lives.

Epictetus provides us with many tools for living a more satisfied life, including ways to anticipate obstacles. When we go to a post office or another bureaucratic institution, we should not be upset if we encounter long lines, but rather expect the delays that such institutions tend to have. Likewise, we must understand that death is a natural and inevitable occurrence. When a neighbor dies, for example, we may feel empathy and sadness, but we accept that death happens. Yet when someone we love dies, or when death is at our own doorstep, we forget that loss belongs to the nature of the universe and is out of our control. Instead, we become despondent. On this matter, Epictetus does not mince words: “You are foolish if you want your children and your wife and your friends to live forever, since you are wanting things to be up to you that are not up to you, and things to be yours that are not yours . . . Whoever wants to be free, therefore, let him not want or avoid anything that is up to others. Otherwise, he will necessarily be a slave.”⁶³

Indeed, Epictetus was born a slave, but he teaches us that we are lords over our minds. It is not death itself that we find

unbearable, as we are able to endure the death of a neighbor or those whom we do not know well. Rather, it is our thoughts and perceptions of death and our emotions surrounding the death of our loved ones that cause us pain. “Is the child or wife of another dead? There is no one who would not say, ‘This is a human accident.’ But if anyone’s own child happens to die, it is presently, ‘Alas, how wretched am I!’”⁶⁴ Reason can grasp this truth. And since our thoughts and emotions are in our control, Epictetus believes we are able to heal after we mourn, through the power of our thoughts.

We are travelers on this earth—alive now but soon to be gone. We must not waste the short time we have being dissatisfied with our lives. “While he gives it to you to possess, take care of it; but don’t view it as your own, just as travelers view a hotel.”⁶⁵ Others are in our lives for as long as the universe deems fit. We are here for only a certain length of time, and when this time runs out we must let go. Thus, Epictetus enjoins us to “Never say of anything, ‘I have lost it’; but ‘I have returned it.’”⁶⁶ We have the power to experience life in calm satisfaction by accepting our lives as they are and by being grateful for what we have. Serenity is our nature. We must therefore enjoy the lives we have and remind ourselves every morning to appreciate each day, as it may be our last. The great Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius warns us not to be caught unawares: “‘But I have not played my five acts, only three.’ ‘True, but in life three acts can be the whole play.’”⁶⁷

Serenity and tranquility lie in the acceptance of things as they are. We are therefore asked to embrace the fate that the universe has uniquely spun for each of us and to value the precious time we have left. Epictetus writes that “Everything has two handles, the one by which it may be carried, the other by which it cannot.”⁶⁸ We must choose the handle that carries and lifts us up high and not the handle that provides us with no support. Dissatisfaction

is a sign that our minds have failed us before our bodies have: discontentment with life shows bad manners and a lack of virtue. Again, in the words of Aurelius, “Disgraceful if, in this life where your body does not fail, your soul should fail you first.”⁶⁹

Troubles are not found in the world but are self-created. Finding harmony in our lives, we learn to accept the gifts of the universe and are grateful for all that life has brought our way. In the modern Serenity Prayer, we hear the remnants of Epictetus’ Stoicism: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”⁷⁰

APPLYING EPICTETUS' PHILOSOPHY

Epictetus asks you to entrust yourself and your wellbeing to the universe. There is nothing in this world that you cannot bear. Sometimes things may be hard, but don't get stuck in any one moment. Nothing remains the same: life has a way of making unexpected turns. Allow yourself to work with the universe, and doors will open for you. You are not being singled out by events that happen in your life. It is not life's circumstances that cause you suffering but how you view these circumstances. Keep your focus on the present and trust in the goodness of the universe to unfold as it will. Your experience is a necessary part of the fabric of the whole and fits into a larger plan that is unknown to you. Everything plays out exactly as it is destined to and can be in no other way than it is. No human action, no matter how great, can alter the past or determine the future. If you understand this, then you will not wish for anything to happen differently. Contentment is the best way to show gratitude for your life.

Keep your soul healthy and strong. Only you have the power to upset your tranquility, and so you can just as easily toss away all your troubles. Do not be the cause of your own disturbance by giving unreasonable attention to things that are out of your control. If you are anxious or sad, you are likely refusing to accept something that is beyond your control to change. Ask yourself if your worries are about things that are in your control or outside of your control, and work to let go of matters that are beyond your control. Other people's opinions of you are out of your control, but you can control how you let those opinions affect you. When you allow others to upset you, you don't realize that it is you and not them that are causing you distress. Do not relinquish control to others. Do not abdicate the care of yourself to others to manage. Your mind is your ruling power, and you control it. Nothing can harm you

from the outside: all benefit and harm come from within. Do not harm yourself by thinking negative thoughts. The way you speak to yourself and the things that you say to yourself have the power to shape your life negatively or positively.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- *Do you believe that your thoughts influence how you feel and act and that you have the ability to change your life by changing your thoughts?*
- *Is there anything you are failing to accept that is beyond your power to change?*
- *Who or what is in control of your thoughts and emotions—you, or external events and people’s opinions of you?*
- *Do your thoughts support you in living a contented life, or do they torment you with worry?*
- *Do you feed your mind with positive or negative thoughts?*
- *Are you able to focus your thoughts and actions on what is in your control or do you let people and events that are out of your control dictate how you feel?*
- *Are you able to let go of things that are outside of your control?*
- *How would your life be if you lived in the moment without being weighed down by past regrets or future worries?*
- *What would it feel like to believe you are part of a bigger plan, and that everything that happens in your life is destined to be and is perfect the way it is?*
- *Do you have a practice of mental and physical health that you follow with discipline?*
- *What is standing between you and serenity right now?*