

Epictetus on What Is In Our Power, and What Is Not

One of the central distinctions for Stoic philosophy is between those matters that are in our power – what is under our control, what we can decide or determine -- and those matters that are not in our power (though we might mistakenly think they are).

In Our Power

Not in Our Power

THE REST OF THE WORLD

A PERSON'S MIND or SOUL

RULING FACULTY (Choice and Reason)

CHOICES, DECISIONS, COMMITMENTS

OPINIONS and JUDGEMENTS

DESIRE and AVERSIONS

USES of APPEARANCES

and

HABITS (developed through Choices)

A PERSON'S BODY

ORGANS, FUNCTIONS, and APPENDAGES

HEALTH or DISEASE

APPEARANCE

AGE or YOUTH

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE BODY

A PERSON'S "EXTERNALS"

Property and Wealth

Clothing and Possessions

Reputation, Respect, Fame

Positions or Power

EVENTS and the Course of the World

CALAMITIES

SOCIETY, CULTURE, and POLITICAL LIFE

ECONOMICS and the MARKET

OTHER PEOPLE IN GENERAL

PERSONS WITH WHOM WE HAVE RELATIONSHIPS

So long as we stick to wanting and trying to have power over the things that we actually do have power over, we are free and can indeed exercise power over them. It is when we stray into things over which we don't have power that we suffer.

Epictetus on What Is In Our Power, and What Is Not

A few clarifications need to be made – given a commonsensical objection to this viewpoint:

- One might object that with respect to the Body, it seems that we do have some control over it – we choose what we do with our own bodies after all.
- One might also object, with respect to the Body, that Health is – at least in some part – up to us. If we eat unhealthy foods, don't exercise, use harmful substances, it turns out badly. If the opposite, it should turn out well.
- When it comes to property or possessions, one could also voice some objections. Isn't it up to us whether we take care of them or not? Aren't those sorts of things – inanimate objects like clothing – really up to us, in our power?
- When it comes to being famous, or getting a job, or winning political office, that seems up to us as well – after all, if we don't put ourselves forward, nobody will pick us for these sorts of things.
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Clarification 1: We have some degree of control or power – but we don't call the shots in the end.

Epictetus points out (bk. 2, ch. 2) that we can in fact determine some things – we can use them with care. But, unless they are things that really are in our control, something else can always come along and determine things other than we wanted.

I want to go on a voyage – I can by my own thought, choice, and care do several things:

- I pick out a good captain and crew. I even pick the best time of year to sail
- But. . . a storm can still come along and sink that ship! The weather is outside of my (or their) control.
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Clarification 2: We have some degree of control if we've developed skill – but we don't control reception.

He also points out (bk. 2, ch. 13) that someone who has developed a skill or a talent does possess some capacity to decide how matters are going to go – at least with respect to what it is that they will do or produce.

- A person who is not a musician, and who wants to perform, is anxious about it, because whether anything sounds good or not isn't really in their power.
- A musician isn't anxious about performing at home, when they are the audience, since they know that they can create music that will sound good to them.
- A musician is anxious about performing for others, precisely because whether or not the music appears to be well-played depends on the audience. The musician can play well, and still not receive applause