

THE BIG IDEAS

Hercules w/out Challenges
Just rolls over, goes back to sleep.

Want Something Great?
Look at a fig.

The Good, the Bad
And the indifferent.

Impressions
Our #1 threat.

Avoid Grime
Hang out with philosophers.

A Call to Excellence
Be a modern exemplar!



Discourses

BY EPICTETUS · PENGUIN CLASSICS © 2008 · 304 PAGES

“The true man is revealed in difficult times. So when trouble comes, think of yourself as a wrestler whom God, like a trainer, has paired with a tough young buck. For what purpose? To turn you into Olympic-class material. But this is going to take some sweat to accomplish. From my perspective, no one’s difficulties ever gave him a better test than yours, if you are prepared to make use of them the way a wrestler makes use of an opponent in peak condition.”

~ Epictetus from *Discourses*

[Epictetus](#) is known as one of the world’s leading Stoic philosophers. Along with [Seneca](#) and [Marcus Aurelius](#), the three make up a very interesting bunch.

Seneca was essentially a billionaire advisor to Nero who was exiled and compelled to commit suicide while Aurelius was part Roman Emperor + part Stoic philosopher who wrote his [Meditations](#) while leading battles in the Danube.

Epictetus was a former slave turned philosopher who lived from 55-135 (a little later than Seneca and before Aurelius). After all the philosophers were kicked out of Rome, he settled in to a town called Nicopolis on the Adriatic coast of Greece where he ran a school of philosophy attended by Rome’s elite young men.

We covered another one of Epictetus’s books called the [Enchiridion](#) which literally means “ready at hand” or a “handbook.” That one is a short little distillation of some of his more pithy wisdom.

This book is a transcription of the informal lectures Epictetus gave to his students. While the *Enchiridion* is incredibly potent, with this one we get to see just how witty Epictetus is as he unpacks his ideas during lectures. (Get the book [here](#).) (Both the *Enchiridion* and *Discourses* were transcribed and published by one of his students, Arrian. Thank you, Arrian.)

Epictetus’s work has influenced everyone from Marcus Aurelius to [Albert Ellis](#)—who leaned heavily on Stoic philosophy to create his Rational-Emotive Behavioral Therapy which led to the very popular (and effective!) cognitive behavioral therapy widely in use today. He also deeply influenced James Stockdale who called Epictetus his patron saint.

The book is packed with Big Ideas. I’m excited to share some of my favorites so let’s jump in!

HERCULES W/OUT CHALLENGES = ROLLING OVER, BACK TO SLEEP

“What would have become of Hercules, do you think, if there had been no lion, hydra, stag or boar? — and no savage criminals to rid the world of? What would he have done in the absence of such challenges? Obviously he would have just rolled over in bed and gone back to sleep. So by snoring his life away in luxury and comfort he never would have developed into the mighty Hercules. And even if he had, what good would it have done him? What would have been the use of those arms, that physique, and that noble soul, without crises or conditions to stir him into action?”

“In short, I will show you that I have the strength of a philosopher.” And what strength would that be? A will that never fails to get what it wants, a faculty of aversion that always avoids what it dislikes, proper impulse, careful purpose and disciplined assent. That’s the human specimen you should prepare yourselves to see.”

~ Epictetus

" Bearing all this in mind, welcome present circumstances and accept the things whose time has arrived. Be happy when you find that doctrines you have learned and analyzed are being tested by real events."

~ Epictetus

Well that's a good question. What would have become of Hercules if he never faced any of his challenges? No hydra. No lion. No stag. No boar. No Hercules.

Epictetus tells us that without these and his other challenges, our mighty Hercules would have had NOTHING to do and would have just rolled over in bed and gone back to sleep. (Hah!!)

He NEEDED those challenges to develop his noble soul. And, of course, SO DO WE.

Knowing this, why do we resist and complain about every challenge?

Epictetus tells us the wise person doesn't. The wise ones scream "BRING IT ON!" to their challenges, *knowing* that their INFINITE (!) potential exists on the other side of whatever is currently freaking them out at the moment.

Cultivating that sense of presence, calm and courage in the midst of an engaged life is, essentially, what this book is all about.

P.S. Here's another way Epictetus puts it (he's super funny/feisty with his students—challenging them to actually APPLY the wisdom he's teaching them): *"If you didn't learn these things in order to demonstrate them in practice, what did you learn them for?"*

I suppose there might be some who are sitting here losing patience and thinking, 'Why don't I get to face the kind of challenge he did? I am growing old in a corner, when I could be winning a crown at Olympia! When will I be nominated for a similar trial?'

This is the attitude that all of you should adopt. There are gladiators at Rome who get frustrated if they are not called out and matched with an opponent, all the while begging God and their own supervisors to be allowed to do battle one-on-one. None of you here shows anything like the same mettle. Which is why I would like to escape to Rome to see my favorite wrestler in action, he, at least, puts policy into practice."

P.P.S. In the last Note I did on [Iconoclast](#), we talked about how important it is to calm your amygdala and not let fear drive the show if you want to make a significant difference in the world (and/or if you want to live a happy life).

The key way to do that? What cognitive scientists and therapists call "cognitive reappraisal." The key source of how to reappraise things? Stoic philosophy. (Recall Epictetus's influence on [Albert Ellis](#), et al.)

By simply shifting from "OMG! Why is this happening to me?!" to "Nice, calm, deep breath. Hmmm... Awesome. Challenge. This is good. Let's put all this stuff we've been studying into practice. How can I bring my best self to this situation and get a little stronger by meeting this challenge head on? OK. Time to do that. Let's go!" we're mastering the art of living with virtue and actualizing our potential.

Remember: If you didn't learn these things in order to demonstrate them in practice, what *did* you learn them for?

WANT SOMETHING GREAT? LOOK AT A FIG.

"Nothing important comes into being overnight; even grapes or figs need time to ripen. If you say you that you want a fig now, I will tell you to be patient. First, you must allow the tree to flower, then put forth fruit; then you have to wait until the fruit is ripe. So if the fruit of a fig tree is not brought to maturity instantly or in an hour, how do you expect the human mind to come to fruition, so quickly and easily? Don't expect it, even if I were to personally tell you it was possible."

We covered this Idea in our Note on the [Enchiridion](#). It's one of my absolute favorites and worth a repeat.

"What else is freedom but the power to live our life the way we want?"

~ Epictetus

In fact, I've often repeated this as a mantra-like-prayer-reminder to myself on hikes (near an orange orchard): "No great thing is created overnight. If you tell me you desire a fig, I answer that there must be time. First it must blossom. Then bear fruit. Then ripen."

As a recovering, impatient perfectionist, I've found this wisdom particularly helpful.

This is the core of our approach in [Conquering Perfectionism 101](#) and the whole idea of the Incremental Optimizer—one who goes after and celebrates tiny improvements, knowing that the magic exists via incremental optimization aggregated and compounded over time.

Are you thinking you should be able to snap your fingers and optimize your life overnight?

If so, you may want to re-read that passage a few (hundred) times and burn it into your consciousness.

Remember: No great thing is created suddenly. Give it time.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE INDIFFERENT

"Material things *per se* are indifferent, but the use we make of them is not indifferent. The question, then, is how to strike a balance between a calm and composed attitude on the one hand, and a conscientious outlook that is neither slack nor careless on the other. Model yourself on card players. The chips don't matter, and the cards don't matter; how can I know what the deal will be? But making careful and skillful use of the deal—that's where my responsibility begins. So in life our first job is this, to divide and distinguish things into two categories: externals I cannot control, but the choices I make with regard to them I do control. Where will I find good and bad? In me, in my choices. Don't ever speak of 'good' or 'bad,' 'advantage' or 'harm,' and so on, of anything that is not your responsibility."

This is THE central theme of Epictetus's wisdom/Stoic philosophy.

Here's the deal: Some things are within our control. Some things are not. We want to discipline ourselves to only care about the things that are WITHIN our control.

The trick is to get REALLY good at identifying what's within our control and what's not and then practice making wise choices related to the things that are within our control rather than wasting time fretting about all the stuff *outside* our control.

So, what's within and outside our control?

Well, let's model ourselves after the card player. The only thing within the card player's control is how he chooses to respond to the deal he's received. It does him NO good to complain about a poor hand or any other circumstance. The *only* useful thing to do is make the next best choice given the data currently available.

And, so it is with our lives.

It's all about the CHOICES we make in response to life's circumstances. As we discuss all the time, this is a moment to moment to moment deal. We can either choose to respond by fully expressing the best version of ourselves—living with areté—or not.

That choice is ALWAYS (!!!) ours.

Therefore, Epictetus tells us that "good" and "evil" exist SOLELY within our choices—our will. We can choose to act with virtue (good!) or not (evil!).

Everything outside of that is, in Epictetus's mind, "indifferent."

So, again: Good and evil lie within our will.

Everything else (our fame, wealth, health, reputation, life, death) that's outside of our will? Indifferent.

"Whenever I see a person suffering from nervousness, I think, well, what can he expect? If he had not set his sights on things outside man's control, his nervousness would end at once."

~ Epictetus

*"Where does the good lie?
'In the will.'
And evil?
'Also in the will.'
And things neither good nor
bad-
'... lie in whatever is external
to the will.'
Very good! But how many of
you remember this outside
class?"*
~ Epictetus

—> "Of things some are in our power, and others are not... examine it by the rules which you possess, and by this first and chiefly, whether it relates to the things which are in our power or to the things which are not in our power: and if it relates to anything which is not in our power, be ready to say, that it does not concern you."

That's how the Stoic rolls.

P.S. Here's how [James Stockdale](#) frames it in *Thoughts of a Philosophical Fighter Pilot*: "stop kidding yourself, just do the best you can on a commonsense basis to make your station of life what you want it to be, but never get hooked on it. Make sure in your heart of hearts, in your inner self, that you treat your station in life with indifference. Not with contempt, only with indifference."

And so on to a long list of things that some unreflective people assume they're assured of controlling to the last instance: your reputation, for example. Do what you will, it's at least as fickle as your station in life. Others decide what your reputation is. Try to make it as good as possible, but again, don't get hooked on it. In your heart, when you get out the key and open up that old rolltop desk where you really keep your stuff, don't let 'reputation' get mixed up with what's within your moral purpose, what's within the power of your will, in other words, what's up to you. Make sure it's in the bottom drawer, filed under 'matters of indifference.' And so too with your health, your wealth, your pleasure, your pain, your fame, your dispute, your life, your death. They are all externals, all outside your control in the last instance, all outside the power of where you really live. And where you really live is confined to the regime of your moral purpose, confined to matters that can be projected by your acts of will: like desires, aims, aversions, judgments, attitudes, and, of course, your good and your evil. For a human, the moral purpose, the will, is the only repository of things of absolute value. Whether they are projected wisely or foolishly, for good or for evil, is up to you. ... Your deliverance and your destruction are 100 percent up to you."

In sum: Our moral purpose of living with areté gets our attention. Everything else? Filed in the bottom drawer under "Matters of Indifference."

OUR #1 THREAT? "IMPRESSIONS."

"With these thoughts to defend you, you should triumph over any impression and not be dragged away. Don't let the force of the impression when first it hits you knock you off your feet; just say to it, 'Hold on a moment; let me see who you are and what you represent. Let me put you to the test.' Next, don't let it pull you in by picturing to yourself the pleasures that await you. Otherwise, it will lead you by the nose wherever it wants. Oppose it with some good and honorable thought, and put the dirty one to rout. Practice this regularly, and you'll see what shoulders, what muscles, what stamina you acquire. Today people care only for academic discussion, nothing beyond that. But I'm presenting to you the real athlete, namely the one training to face off against the most formidable of impressions."

So, we need to use the force of our will to make wise choices.

The primary obstacle to that? What Epictetus calls "impressions"—or, what we may call "thoughts" or "feelings" or "impulses."

These impressions enter our minds and, for most of us most of the time, they take over and we are driven by impulses, violating our dearly held moral truths and wondering what happened x minutes/hours/days later.

What do we need to do next time an impression intrudes? Here's a re-cap of the formula:

Step 1. Notice it. Surprisingly harder than it sounds. Hence, the importance of training our attention via meditation + practicing this stuff all the time.

*"Freedom is not achieved
by satisfying desire, but
by eliminating it. Assure
yourself of this by expending
as much effort on these
new ambitions as you did on
those illusive goals: work day
and night to attain a liberated
frame of mind."*
~ Epictetus

*"What does Socrates say?
'One person likes tending
to his farm, another to his
horse; I like to daily monitor
my self-improvement."*

~ Epictetus

Then, "Don't let the force of the impression when first it hits you knock you off your feet; just say to it, 'Hold on a moment; let me see who you are and what you represent. Let me put you to the test.'" <— Love that.

So, we press pause and put the impression to the test. Does it represent the best within us?

Next, if we don't want to be led by the nose by these impressions, we need to cognitively reappraise it and substitute the potentially ignoble course with a noble one. Put the dirty thought to rout by replacing it with an honorable one.

Then we need to remember: "Practice this regularly, and you'll see what shoulders, what muscles, what stamina you acquire. Today people care only for academic discussion, nothing beyond that. But I'm presenting to you the real athlete, namely the one training to face off against the most formidable of impressions."

Love that. Epictetus constantly uses the metaphors of Olympic wrestlers and elite athletes to bring the point home to his young noblemen.

The only way to get good at this (the most important game of life!) is to PRACTICE. We need to TRAIN our will like an elite athlete—stepping in between stimulus and response and choosing the most honorable course.

Speaking of elite athletes, here's how [George Mumford](#) (Jordan + Kobe's mental toughness/mindfulness coach) echoes this wisdom in *The Mindful Athlete*: "Think about the eye of a hurricane, or the calm still center in the middle of a cyclone. No matter how intense the storm or what's swept up in its gale-force winds, that calm, blue center is always there. This is the metaphor I like to use when talking about the space between stimulus and response. We all have this quiet center within us. Mindfulness reconnects us to this center space, where we fully experience the present moment and have access to the transcendent wisdom that's often associated with conscious flow. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, neurologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl famously described it this way: 'Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.'"

*"When you get angry, you
should know that you aren't
guilty of an isolated lapse,
you've encouraged a trend and
thrown fuel on the fire. ... It
is inevitable that continuous
behavior of any one kind is
going to instill new habits
and tendencies, while steadily
confirming old ones."*

~ Epictetus

Between stimulus and response there is a space. That's where all the great teachers tell us we will find our freedom.

btw: Here's the path to being invincible: "We should discipline ourselves in small things, and from there progress to things of greater value. If you have a headache, practice not cursing. Don't curse every time you have an earache. And I'm not saying that you can't complain, only don't complain with your whole being. If your servant is slow to bring you a bandage, don't roll around and yell, 'Everybody hates me!' Who wouldn't hate such a person? Walk upright and free, trusting in the strength of your moral convictions, not the strength of your body, like an athlete. You weren't meant to be invincible by brute force, like a pack animal. You are invincible if nothing outside the will can disconcert you."

HOW TO AVOID GETTING TOO GRIMY

"It is inevitable if you enter into relations with people on a regular basis, either for conversation, dining or simple friendship, that you will grow to be like them, unless you can get them to emulate you. Place an extinguished piece of coal next to a live one, and either it will cause the other one to die out, or the live one will make it reignite. Since a lot is at stake, you should be careful about fraternizing with non-philosophers in these contexts; remember that if you consort with someone covered in dirt you can hardly avoid getting a little grimy yourself."

There's an old-school reflection of the modern adage that we're the average of the five people with whom we spend the most time.

"This is my ambition: I aspire to make you proof against force, obstruction, and disappointment; free, content, and happy, with your attention fixed on God in every matter great and small."

~ Epictetus

Here's another old-school gem on the same theme via Buddha: *"If you find no one to support you on the spiritual path, walk alone. There is no companionship with the immature."*

Seneca echoes this as well: *"Retire into yourself as much as possible. Associate with people who are likely to improve you. Welcome those whom you are capable of improving. The process is a mutual one. People learn as they teach."*

How're you doing on this front? Let's be the live coal and fire up those around us when/if we can while choosing to surround ourselves with more and more people equally fired up with life and committed to noble ideals!

LET US BE AN EXAMPLE OF MORAL EXCELLENCE!

"Step forward and make use of what you've learned. It isn't more logic chopping that is needed—our Stoic texts are full of that. What we need now are people to apply their learning and bear witness to their learning in their actions. Please, be the one to take on this character, I am tired in my teaching of invoking examples from the past, I want to be able to hold up an example from my time."

I'm smiling as I type that imagining Epictetus chiding his young pupils—many of whom were destined to become future senators and leaders.

"I'm tired of having to go back in history to give examples of moral excellence! Would you PLEASE live this stuff and demonstrate it's truth so I can use YOU as the exemplar?!"

May we answer his call as we step forward into our highest potential, optimize, actualize and give our greatest gifts in greatest service to the world.

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you'll probably like...

[The Enchiridion](#)

[Meditations](#)

[Letters from a Stoic](#)

[On the Shortness of Life](#)

[The Obstacle Is the Way](#)

[Courage Under Fire](#)

[Thoughts of a
Philosophical Fighter Pilot](#)

[Extreme Ownership](#)

About the Author of "Discourses"

EPICETUS



Epictetus (AD 55–AD 135) was a Greek Stoic philosopher. He was probably born a slave in modern day Turkey and lived in Rome until his exile to Nicopolis in northwestern Greece, where he lived most of his life and died. His teachings were noted down and published by his pupil Arrian in his *Discourses*. Philosophy, he taught, is a way of life and not just a theoretical discipline. To Epictetus, all external events are determined by fate, and are thus beyond our control, but we can accept whatever happens calmly and dispassionately. Individuals, however, are responsible for their own actions which they can examine and control through rigorous self-discipline. Suffering arises from trying to control what is uncontrollable, or from neglecting what is within our power.

About the Author of This Note

BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.