

UNITED WISDOM

The Dichotomy of Control: Stoicism and the Formula of Inner Freedom

Freedom and Action

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The Dichotomy of Control: Stoicism and the Formula of Inner Freedom

The inner judge and the formula of freedom

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> ***Archival editor's note.*** *This translation follows the supplied Russian archival edition. Quotations are translated from that edition, not certified against Greek originals or named English editions. The existing website English text substitutes numerous quotations and changes the venue of Stockdale's lecture; those substitutions have not been silently adopted. Historical assertions, including the stated two-century distance between Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius (which conflicts with the dates given in the article), remain visible as archival claims. Connections with psychotherapy and Advaita are the authors' comparisons, not a demonstration of clinical or doctrinal equivalence. Statements about inner consent must not be used to blame victims, deny physical or psychological harm, or imply that trauma responses are freely chosen. No new scientific, clinical, historical, or source verification was performed.*

I. A slave and an emperor

The history of Stoicism is framed by two figures separated by a gulf of status and almost nothing else.

At one end — Epictetus. Born around 50 CE in Hierapolis, in Phrygia, a slave. His master in Rome broke his leg — Epictetus was lame for the rest of his life.

Freed in mid-life, he opened a school in Nicopolis and taught the sons of senators. He never wrote a line himself. His words were preserved by his student Arrian — the Discourses and the short Enchiridion, "the handbook that is always at hand."

At the other end — Marcus Aurelius. Emperor of Rome from 161 to 180. He governed two hundred million people, fought on the Danube frontier, and between marches wrote short notes to himself in Greek, never expecting them to be published. Those notes have come down to us as the Meditations.

Between them lie two hundred years, but one language. The slave and the emperor read the same teachers and worked with the same distinction: some things are in our power, others are not.

II. What it says literally

The Enchiridion opens with no preamble:

“Of all things, some depend on us and others do not. Opinion, impulse, desire, aversion — in a word, everything that is our own doing — depend on us. The body, property, reputation, offices — in a word, everything that is not our own doing — do not.” (Enchiridion 1.1; the archive describes its Russian translation from Greek as close to Long and Hard.)

The Greek phrase behind it is ta eph' hēmin: literally, "what is up to us." Not "what we control" — that translation has already shifted the sense toward a technique of management. Closer: "what belongs to us," "what is attributed to us," "what we, not circumstance, are answerable for."

From the outset Epictetus lists four things in this domain: hypolēpsis — judgment, the forming of an opinion; hormē — impulse toward action; orexis — desire, a pull toward something; ekklisis — aversion, a pushing away. All of these are movements within the soul. Outside it — the body, property, reputation, office — ta ouk eph' hēmin, what does not belong to us.

This is not a claim about the metaphysical order of the world. It is a claim about where the boundary of responsibility runs.

III. Prohairesis

To understand why the Stoics insisted so stubbornly on this boundary, one term has to be introduced, without which the whole rest of the structure falls apart: prohairesis.

In translation it flickers between "will," "choice," "the faculty of decision." None of these words is exact. Prohairesis is the part of a person that passes judgment and chooses what counts as good and what as bad, what to approve and what to reject. Epictetus speaks of it as "what we really are": the body can be broken, property taken, reputation ruined, but prohairesis is the one thing that cannot be taken from a person from outside. It can only be broken from within — by consenting to a lie, to cowardice, to surrender.

“No one can harm you unless you yourself consent to it” is not a rhetorical figure. It is a technical claim about what Epictetus called prohairesis. External events can hurt the body, take away freedom of movement, and deprive you of your home. But turning you from honest to dishonest, from steadfast to cowardly — only you can do that yourself.

Hence the formula: the dichotomy of control draws the line not between "important" and "unimportant," but between the domain where a person can be the author, and the domain where he is only an observer and a participant, among other forces.

IV. Adiaphora

Everything that does not belong to prohairesis, the Stoics called adiaphora — "indifferents."

And here is one of the most common mistakes in reading Stoicism.

"Indifferent" does not mean "not mattering." Wealth, health, reputation, the love of one's family — a Stoic is not indifferent to these in the ordinary sense. They simply do not enter into the definition of his own virtue. Such things are proēgmena, "preferred": it is reasonable to want them, reasonable to pursue them. But if they go, a person does not lose what makes him himself.

The distinction is fine and not intuitive. A Stoic can love his children and grieve their death. A Stoic does not claim that this death is "indifferent" in the sense of "not mattering." He claims that this death does not belong to his prohairesis: he did not choose it and could not prevent it. Within prohairesis only one thing remains — what stance he will take toward the loss. Will he deny the pain, curse the gods, take revenge on the world? Or will he manage to acknowledge the loss without turning it into a catastrophe for life itself?

"Indifferent" is a technical word meaning: not within the domain I am answerable for. Not "I don't care."

V. The three disciplines

In the Discourses (3.2) Epictetus gives the reader a map:

“There are three areas in which anyone who wishes to become good and excellent must train. The first concerns desires and aversions, so that they neither miss what they desire nor encounter what they reject. The second concerns impulses to act or refrain, and what is appropriate in general: so that they act in an orderly way, according to reason, rather than at random. The third concerns freedom from deception and haste in judgment, and everything connected with assent.”

The French philosopher Pierre Hadot, in Philosophy as a Way of Life, gave these three fields the names by which they are now known: the discipline of desire, the discipline of action, the discipline of assent. This is not a theoretical scheme. It is a practical program a student of the Stoic school worked through for years, day after day.

VI. The discipline of desire

The first discipline teaches a person to want correctly. Not "want less," not "want nothing" — but want what depends on you, and stop chaining your desire to what does not.

Epictetus puts it in one of the strongest lines in the whole school:

“Do not seek to have events happen as you wish; wish them to happen as they do, and your life will flow smoothly.”

This is not passivity. It is a reorientation: instead of straining to hold attention on the outcome ("let this work out," "let him agree," "let the weather be good"), the Stoic directs desire toward what is in his power — the quality of his own action, the honesty of his own judgment, fidelity to his own duty.

The Latin phrase Nietzsche picks for this discipline, later taken up by the whole tradition, is amor fati. Love of fate. Not resignation, not forced agreement, but — yes, this is happening, and this is my life, and I will not waste it arguing with reality about what it ought to be.

VII. The discipline of action

The second discipline concerns how a Stoic acts in the world. And here the school has a broad political and social program that modern "bro-stoicism" prefers not to notice.

The key concept is oikeiōsis: "appropriation," "making one's own." The Stoics held that a person by nature cares for himself — for his own body, his own survival. But this care is not a limit; it can and should be extended. First to family, then to friends, to fellow citizens, to all of humanity, and finally to everything rational in the cosmos.

Hierocles, a second-century Stoic, pictured this as a series of concentric circles: the self at the center, then family, then neighbors, then the city, then the people, then humanity. The Stoic's task is to draw the outer circles toward the center — to treat a fellow citizen as a brother, a foreign people as fellow citizens, a person from another era as a contemporary.

Out of this grows Stoic cosmopolitanism: “My nature is rational and social; my city and my homeland, insofar as I am Antoninus, are Rome, but insofar as I am a human being, they are the world” (Marcus Aurelius, Meditations VI.44).

VIII. The discipline of assent

The third discipline is the subtlest. It concerns what Epictetus calls synkatathesis — "assent," the moment when we agree with an impression and begin to treat it as truth.

At every instant impressions arrive — phantasiai. External ones (this is motion, this is noise, this is a face) and internal ones (this is fear, this is offense, this is desire).

Most people assent to impressions automatically: the impression "he insulted me" arrives, is accepted as fact, and behavior starts to unfold around that fact.

Epictetus teaches inserting a pause between impression and assent. And in that pause, addressing the impression directly:

“You are only an impression, and not at all what you appear to be.”

This micro-gesture — the delay before automatic acceptance — is Stoic practice properly speaking. Not at the level of major life decisions, but at the level of the milliseconds between stimulus and reaction. Modern cognitive therapy will later call this cognitive distancing, "defusion," the decoupling of thought from fact. But Epictetus described the technique first.

IX. Zeno and Chrysippus

The school in which Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius grew up began almost five hundred years earlier, in Athens around 300 BCE. Its founder was Zeno of Citium, from Cyprus.

According to tradition, Zeno came to philosophy after a shipwreck in which he lost a cargo of purple dye. “A good voyage,” he later said. “Now I know what to do.”

Zeno taught under a painted colonnade, the Stoa Poikilē, on the Athenian agora. The school took its name from the colonnade.

It was Chrysippus of Soli, the school's third head, who lived in the third century BCE, who gave Stoicism its systematic form. It was said of him: “Without Chrysippus there would have been no Stoa.” Chrysippus wrote more than seven hundred works and worked out Stoic logic, physics and ethics as a single whole. Only fragments survive.

The Stoicism of Zeno and Chrysippus differs from the Roman Stoicism of Epictetus and Seneca. The early Stoics have more system, more physics, more theory. The Romans have more applied ethics and practice. But the foundation stayed the same: the world is rational, a human being is part of that reason, virtue is the only true good, and happiness is possible only through a life in agreement with nature — that is, with reason.

X. Epictetus: teacher of the elite

Epictetus's biography is itself an argument for Stoic ethics. A slave becomes one of the most respected philosophers of late antiquity. Future senators, officials, and generals attend his school in Nicopolis. People travel to him specially, across the whole empire.

In the Discourses recorded by Arrian, we see a living teacher. Epictetus is sharp, ironic, unsparing of vanity. He likes examples from everyday life: the baths, the market, the road. He often calls the body a “poor clay jug” that can be broken. His favorite rhetorical device is to address an imaginary interlocutor complaining about fate: “They threw you in prison? — No, they threw my body in prison. — They slandered you? — No, the person they imagined me to be.”

Epictetus’s central thought compresses into one line: look for no greater harm than this — the destruction of someone who could be trusted.

XI. Marcus Aurelius

The Meditations is the strangest of the surviving Stoic texts. It is not a treatise, not letters, not dialogues. It is hypomnēmata — "notes at hand": the record a Stoic keeps for himself, to have his key principles ready.

Marcus Aurelius wrote them in military camps between battles of the Marcomannic Wars. The addressee is himself.

The book opens with a list of debts: what the emperor learned from his grandfather, his mother, his teachers, his brothers. Twelve books — twelve passes over the same themes. The memory of death. Accepting the will of the whole. Attention to the present moment. Patience with fools and scoundrels. Returning to one's own prohairesis when external events knock you off course.

In Gregory Hays's translation (Modern Library, 2002), now the standard English edition, these notes sound startlingly modern. This is not rhetoric, and it is not literature. It is an intimate document — a man at war talking to himself so as not to break.

XII. Seneca

Lucius Annaeus Seneca is the other pole of Roman Stoicism. A wealthy senator, tutor to the young Nero, owner of several estates, and author of tragedies. People reproached him for the mismatch between his philosophy and his life. Seneca replied: “I speak not of what I am, but of what one should strive toward.”

The Letters to Lucilius are a hundred and twenty-four letters, written in the last years of his life (62–65 CE), after Seneca had withdrawn from court and understood that Nero would sooner or later order him to die. That happened in 65: the emperor sent a centurion, and Seneca opened his veins and died, dictating to his secretary until the last minute.

The letters are short, each on one subject. Friendship. Reading. Anger. Losing loved ones. Poverty. Death. Seneca is the most literary of the Stoics, fond of aphorisms and paradoxes:

“No wind is favorable to someone who does not know which harbor they are sailing toward”; “Life is a play: what matters is not how long you are on stage, but how well you play.”

XIII. Praemeditatio malorum

One of the exercises Seneca returns to most often is praemeditatio malorum: rehearsing evils in advance. In Epistle 91, written after the fire that destroyed Lyon:

“Those who have seen much are surprised by little. Nothing happens to the wise person contrary to expectation… they constantly keep before their eyes everything that may happen.”

The practice is simple and counterintuitive. Morning or evening, the Stoic runs through, in his mind, what could happen and usually frightens the imagination: illness, the loss of a job, the death of someone close, exile, poverty, one's own death. Not in order to sink into anxiety, but to strip these scenarios in advance of their air of catastrophe. Once an event has been pictured, thought through, lived out in imagination, it loses part of its hold on the psyche.

In modern psychology an analogous technique works under the name "premortem": before a project begins, the team imagines that it has failed and looks for the causes. Gary Klein introduced the technique into management practice in the 1980s, without knowing — or without saying — that it had Stoic roots.

Praemeditatio differs from anxious catastrophizing in one respect: it is intentional, bounded in time, and ends with a return to the present — with gratitude that, at this moment, the scenario has not come true.

XIV. Memento mori

A parallel exercise is memento mori, “remember death.” Marcus Aurelius says: “Act in everything you do as if it were the last action of your life” (II.5). Seneca: “Every day we die a little… death is not somewhere ahead; it is already coming toward us.”

This motif is easy to read as grim. In the Stoics it works the other way: the memory of finitude is an instrument of freedom. If you remember that a conversation might be the last, you do not put off the admission you owe. If you remember that a meeting might be the last, you do not cut it short to save time. If you remember that your own life is finite, you stop spending it on what, in the long view, you would not have chosen to spend it on.

Memento mori is not an invitation to melancholy. It is a technique that gives weight back to the present moment.

XV. The view from above

A third exercise, described by Hadot and running through the whole of Roman Stoicism, is the "view from above." The Stoic mentally rises above the earth and sees his city, his country, the continent, the planet, the solar system. Against that perspective, personal affairs shrink to the scale of an anthill.

“How many cities like this have there already been?” Marcus Aurelius asks. “How many empires? How many people struggled, suffered, triumphed — and where are they now? All of this is for a short time; all of this is dust.”

The goal is not to devalue the personal but to put it in scale. After the view from above, it is easier not to inflate a grievance into an existential catastrophe, and easier to value the simple things that, seen too close, become invisible.

XVI. What Stoicism does not say

Before going further, it is worth naming the three most common misreadings of the school.

The first is that Stoicism teaches the suppression of emotion. It does not. The Stoic distinguishes pathē (passions — irrational movements of the soul, based on false judgments) from eupatheiai (good feelings — joy, caution, desire, based on correct judgments). The Stoic is not required to be unfeeling. He is required not to let passions dictate his actions. Seneca, having lost a friend, wept, and wrote: “Why should I be ashamed of tears? They are an expression of love.”

The second is that Stoicism teaches passivity. It does not. The Stoic dichotomy concerns one's stance toward the outcome, not one's stance toward action. The Stoic acts with maximum effort — and at the same time holds the outcome open. The action is his; the outcome belongs to the world.

The third is that Stoicism is egoism, a closing-in on the self. It is not. The concentric circles of Hierocles, the cosmopolitanism of Marcus Aurelius, the political activity of Cato and Seneca — all of it says the opposite. The Stoic cares for himself in order to be capable of being useful to the whole.

XVII. Stockdale at Hanoi

The best modern testimony to how Stoicism works under extreme conditions comes from James Stockdale — an American naval aviator shot down over North Vietnam in September 1965, who spent seven and a half years as a prisoner in the "Hanoi Hilton." The senior officer among the American prisoners of war, he was tortured fifteen times, spent two years in leg irons, and four in solitary confinement.

A year before he was shot down, Stockdale, preparing for a transfer off his carrier, was studying philosophy at Stanford. Professor Philip Rhinelander gave him Epictetus's Enchiridion with the words, “You may need this.” Stockdale later recalled receiving the gift with polite bewilderment.

In captivity he remembered it. In "Courage Under Fire," a lecture delivered at Stanford in 1993, Stockdale describes the moment he was dragged, having ejected, down the street of a Vietnamese village:

“I put everything out of my head except one line from Epictetus: I am leaving the world of technology and entering the world of Epictetus.”

In the camp, Stockdale organized a secret tap-code network between the cells, drew up a code of conduct for prisoners of war under the name BACK US — Don't Bow in public, stay off the Air, admit no Crimes, never say goodbye — and, above all, held in others the capacity not to break. This is Stoic prohairesis at work: the body can be broken, reputation can be taken away, but consent to one's own betrayal comes only with one's own consent.

After his release in 1973, Stockdale received the Medal of Honor and spent the rest of his life as a senior research fellow at the Hoover Institution. He often said that everything he understood about survival in captivity, he had learned from Epictetus.

XVIII. Viktor Frankl

A parallel story, on the other side of the war and in a different philosophical tradition, is Viktor Frankl. A Viennese psychiatrist of Jewish descent, sent in 1942 to Theresienstadt, then to Auschwitz, Kaufering, Türkheim. He survived. His wife, parents, and brother did not.

In Man's Search for Meaning, written in nine days after his liberation, Frankl formulates what Gordon Allport's preface calls "the last of the human freedoms":

"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."

Frankl himself never called himself a Stoic. He drew on existentialism, on Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche. But the formula is an almost word-for-word translation of

Epictetus's central thesis into the language of the twentieth century: the body is not in your power, circumstance still less, not even life itself — but your stance toward them is yours.

Frankl named his school logotherapy: healing through meaning. Stoicism would name the same thing prohairesis, turned toward the good. The names differ. The inner mechanism is one: a person is free in what he agrees to grant meaning to.

XIX. Albert Ellis

In 1955 in New York, the American psychotherapist Albert Ellis, disillusioned with psychoanalysis, worked out a new approach — Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT). The central formula Ellis repeats for the rest of his life is Epictetus's own: "Men are disturbed not by things, but by the views which they take of them."

In his first major publication on REBT, Ellis refers directly to Epictetus and calls him "a remarkably wise Stoic who pointed out, some two thousand years ago, that you choose to overreact to the obnoxious behavior of others when you could far more wisely choose to react quite differently."

Ellis borrows from the Stoics not isolated ideas but a whole framework: the ABC scheme (Activating event — Belief — Consequence), where a belief stands between the event and its emotional consequence and determines the strength of the reaction; the technique of disputing irrational beliefs; the idea that a person can change his emotions by changing the judgments they grow from. This is, in effect, a translation of Epictetus into the language of clinical psychology.

XX. Aaron Beck

At the same time in Philadelphia, Aaron Beck, a psychiatrist trained in psychoanalysis, noticed that depressed patients did not so much suppress feelings as systematically distort their judgments about reality — overrating the negative, discounting the positive, generalizing single failures into "I always lose." In the 1970s he worked out cognitive therapy, which later merged with behavioral therapy and became CBT, the most researched form of psychotherapy in the world.

In his first book, Beck writes directly: "The philosophical underpinnings [of this approach] go back thousands of years, certainly to the time of the Stoics, who considered man's conceptions (or misconceptions) of events, rather than the events themselves, as the key to his emotional upsets."

This is not a rhetorical bow. It points to a lineage: CBT, as millions of clinicians from Boston to Bangkok practice it today, is the Stoic model of emotion, reformulated in the terms of cognitive

science. Between Epictetus and Beck lie two thousand years, and one and the same basic thought: between the stimulus and the reaction stands a judgment, and it is the judgment one can work with.

XXI. The dangers of bro-stoicism

In the last decade Stoicism has gone through an unexpected revival — in popular books, podcasts, morning routines, social media. The movement has done some good: the texts of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius have become available to a mass readership. But it has also produced a caricature that can be called bro-stoicism.

Three typical distortions.

The first — Stoicism as a cult of productivity. Cold nerve, discipline, early rising, cold showers — all of it gets called "Stoic." In fact Epictetus took very little interest in productivity. What interested him was prohairesis, the inner judge. You can get up at five and be dishonest; you can sleep until noon and be a Stoic, if at your own noon you are honest and care for others.

The second — Stoicism as the suppression of feeling. Already covered above. The Stoic does not suppress; he distinguishes — passion from good feeling, false judgment from true.

The third — Stoicism as individualism. "Focus on yourself, on your own sphere of influence; the rest is none of your business." Hierocles, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca would object. The concentric circles of oikeiōsis run outward, not inward. The Stoic cares for himself in order to be capable of caring for others — not the other way around.

XXII. What remains

Strip away the modern wrappings around the dichotomy of control, and one simple operation is left: in every situation, ask which part of it belongs to you and which does not. And direct your strength only into the first part.

This is not a philosophy for the confident. It is a technique for those who often lose to circumstance and grow tired of carrying blame for everything. Stoicism puts the weight back where it rightly belongs — on one's own prohairesis. And lifts it from where carrying it makes no sense — off the weather, off other people's opinions, off what could not have been prevented.

The same figure that appears in Advaita shows up here from another side: attention turns toward the source of attention, toward the one who judges. Only Advaita says "and this is already Brahman," and the Stoic says "and this is already your freedom." The names differ. The pointer is one — at the observer, not the observed.

Epictetus died around 135 in Nicopolis. Marcus Aurelius in 180, at Vindobona on the Danube front, of plague. Between them, two hundred years; between them and us, almost two thousand. And the first line of the Enchiridion still opens like a door:

“Some things are in our power, others are not.”

Your move.

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

United Wisdom · One source — many languages

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