Stoicism: The Ethics of Dispassion

by Sophia

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

Stoicism was a school of philosophy that flourished in ancient Rome. It was not the philosophy of one philosopher but of a group of like-minded individuals. In fact, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius was a stoic philosopher and author. However, Stoicism was not only a set of philosophical beliefs but a way of life based upon those beliefs. Therefore, "Stoicism" is a legitimate answer to the question, "what's your philosophy?"

In this tutorial, we will investigate the central tenets of Stoicism and how it served as the basis of a system of ethics (and a way of life). We will focus on the teachings of Epictetus who, though he was not one of the first Stoics, was one of the most influential and admirable. Beginning as a crippled slave, Epictetus became a sought-after thinker. Like Socrates, he wrote nothing, but his work was recorded by his followers.

This tutorial examines "the ethics of dispassion" in three parts:

1. Focusing on What Is in Our Power

★ BIG IDEA

The most important tenet of Stoicism is to focus on what we can control and to not be upset by things that are beyond our control.

It is important to realize that the Stoic definition of "control" is limited, that "*the things in our power are by nature free, not subject to restraint or hindrance.*" However, more things are within our control than most of us realize.

⤳ **EXAMPLE** Am I free to drive to work? Only if my car starts. Therefore, I am free to *choose* to drive to work, or *want* to drive to work but, despite my choice or desire, there may be limits to my freedom. As a result, there is an important sense in which I am not free to drive to work.

Our main freedoms lie in *how we react* to the world, rather than in the world itself.

Let's revisit the example above, and consider all of the aspects of your drive that are *not* under your control. One aspect is red lights. You cannot control when a traffic light turns red (or doesn't), but how you *respond* to the light turning red *is* under your control, including whether you get angry, upset, or worried.

This illustrates what is perhaps the most helpful insight of Stoicism: No good comes from getting upset at things you cannot change. We cannot change the past, or the laws of physics. This seems like a trivial insight until we consider how much energy we waste worrying about things that we cannot change.

⚙ THINK ABOUT IT

In what situations have you seen people become upset by things that are out of their control? Consider politics and the extent to which people are upset by things that are out of their control. Have you observed this response by friends, family, or on social media? People spend months (or years) lamenting the fact that their candidate didn't win. But you cannot control what other voters do, or how Congress votes. To focus on things like this, or to allow them to upset us, is absurd. Instead, what can we control? The answer is, we can control our actions and reactions.

2. How We Direct What Is in Our Power

The preceding example may have led you to think of things about politics that you *can* control, such as canvassing your neighborhood, trying to persuade your friends, voting, writing to your congressional representatives, signing petitions, etc. (i.e., activities related to active citizenship). However, Stoicism suggests something more basic than this. As indicated above, what is in our control is our desires, emotions, and judgments. Everything else depends on things that are outside of us in the world, which may not proceed as we intend. As a result, we must focus on our desires, reactions, and judgments.

Controlling these things is not as easy as flipping a switch. That's why, as a first step, Epictetus tells us, "*Take away then aversion from all things which are not in our power, and transfer it to the things contrary to nature which are in our power. But destroy desire completely for the present. For if you desire anything which is not in our power, you must be unfortunate; but of the things in our power, and which it would be good to desire, nothing yet is before you.*" A Stoic begins by eradicating *all* desire—not permanently, but only for the present. We must remove the old house before building a new one. We must eliminate all desires, and then reintroduce those desires that are appropriate and helpful.

Easier said than done. But consider the benefit to be obtained if you *didn't* start your morning commute with a desire to get where you need to go quickly. Without that desire, red lights are of no concern to you. Neither is the driver who refuses to pass in the passing lane. Without that desire (note that it *is* a desire for something you cannot control), your morning commute can be pleasant. Epictetus maintained that the bad things we encounter (e.g., red lights) are the price we pay for tranquility, for freedom from disturbance.

❓ DID YOU KNOW

Stoicism is popular in military training because it emphasizes self-control and the control of emotions, of doing the job you are assigned skillfully and dispassionately.

This leads to a second point: we must realize that reality is neither bad nor good. It is *our judgment* about reality that upsets us. For example, are traffic lights bad? Of course not. But if traffic lights are in use on the roads, *someone* must need to stop for a red light at all times. So I don't claim that it is bad that there are traffic lights on the road, or even that a particular traffic light is bad. Instead, I judge that it is bad for me (e.g., because I must wait for this light to change, I may be late for work). Stoics maintain that this is true of everything (including death, as we will consider below). Reality is value-neutral. It is our judgments about reality that assign (dis)value to it.

Consider a familiar example: food. Suppose I am in the mood for some *foie gras* from the French Riviera, and am lamenting the fact that all I have in my lunchbox is a peanut butter sandwich. The *foie gras* seems good, but the peanut butter sandwich does not. However, if Epictetus was right, this is merely a judgment.

To prove this, let's replace "I" with a child in this example. The child loves the peanut butter sandwich much more than the *foie gras*. This shows that "good" is not a property of the *foie gras* itself. Rather, it is my judgment regarding the meal. If I put my mind to it, I can genuinely relish the peanut butter sandwich as much as the French delicacy, because it is my judgment, not the food itself, that makes it desirable (or not). Judgments (with practice) are under my control.

Therefore, two crucial steps to becoming a good Stoic (i.e., to focusing on what is in our control) are:

1. Eliminating desires
2. Realizing that value is in our judgments, not in the world

To further illustrate the Stoic way of thinking, let's consider a topic they discussed often: death.
Death is something we cannot control. We all must die. Since we cannot control it, there is no advantage to getting upset about it. Instead, as Stoics, we must focus on what we *can* control: what we feel about death. The Stoic neither fears death nor hides from it.
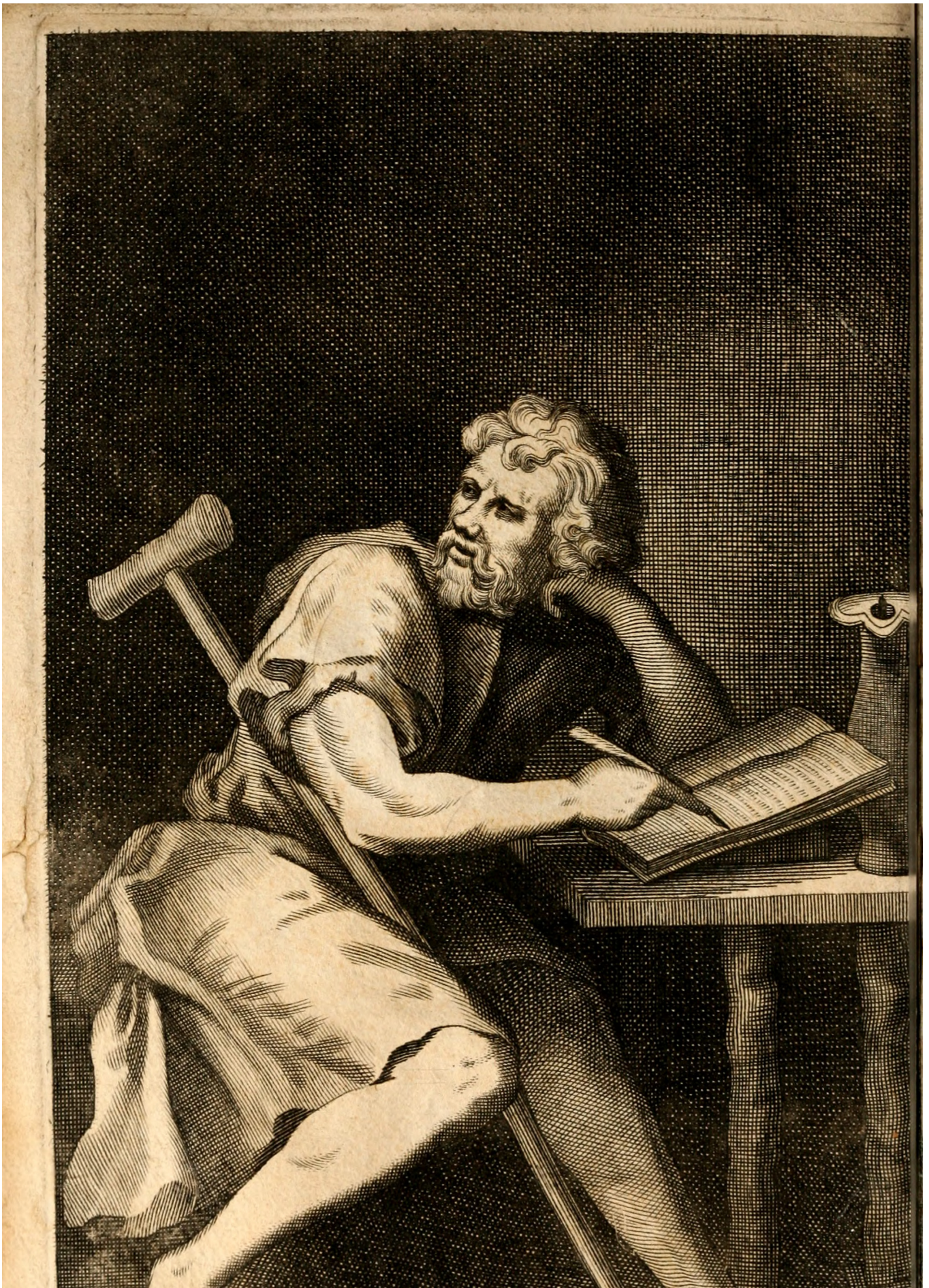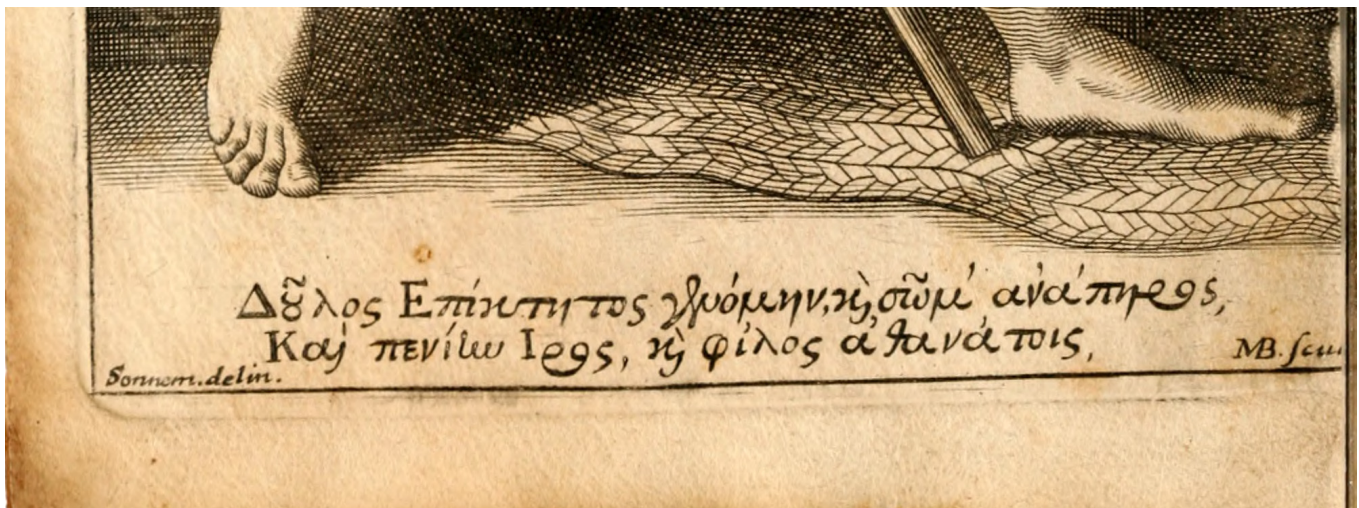
Epictetus says that we should think of death every day to discourage ourselves from desiring anything too much. Having the largest U-Haul trailer attached to your hearse is not a worthwhile goal. To Epictetus and the other Stoics, a desire to accumulate riches is the wrong kind of desire.

How can we avoid the fear of death? First, by making sure that we only desire what is within our power. We cannot control how long our lives will be, so our focus should be not to live long, but to live well. We must understand that death, like everything else in the world, is neither bad nor good. Those are only our judgments. Living well is the basis of Stoic ethics.

3. Ethics as a Role

Epictetus explained the need to live well, given what is under our control, with an analogy. He wrote, "*Remember that thou art an actor in a play, of such a kind as the teacher (author) may choose; if short, of a short one; if long, of a long one: if he wishes you to act the part of a poor man, see that you act the part naturally; if the part of a lame man, of a magistrate, of a private person, (do the same). For this is your duty, to act well the part that is given to you; but to select the part, belongs to another.*" We cannot control where we are born, who is in our lives, how long we will live, etc. Our duty is to play our part well.

"Playing a role well" may seem like a less-than-substantial basis for ethics, but it is not. Our "role" is deeply connected to the relationships we have with other people, and those relationships determine our duties.

For example, as a philosophy professor, I have a specific relationship with my students which entails many duties (e.g., providing a satisfactory learning environment, conveying class materials, grading fairly). However, I also play the role of husband, which entails many other duties, as do my roles of son, brother, uncle, etc. Additionally, I am a citizen of the U.S., which entails a relationship (and therefore duties) to other citizens. If I am to play the role of citizen well, I must follow the laws, be active politically, defend the country as needed, respect fellow citizens, etc. Therefore, it is not difficult to derive an extensive, robust system of ethics from the duties that must be fulfilled, based on our relationships.

MAKE THE CONNECTION

If you have studied Confucianism, you may notice that Confucius made a similar connection between ethics and our natural duties.

☑ SUMMARY

In this lesson, we discussed **Focusing on What Is in Our Power**, **How We Direct What Is in Our Power**, and **Ethics as a Role**. Stoicism is a philosophical way of life that focuses on what is in our power, while remaining impassive towards what is not. Although this can be difficult to put into practice, Stoicism helps us to minimize desire in general, but especially the desire to seek benefit through external things. Stoicism also maintains that that (dis)value exists in judgment, not in the world.

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