

# The Stoic Art of Living: The Ethics of Freedom

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## *Historical & Biographical Context*

- The *Stoa Poikilē* in ancient Athens.
- Early Stoics:
  - Zeno of Citium (334–262 BCE) – founder of the school.
  - Cleanthes (331–232 BCE) – author of the “Hymn to Zeus.”
  - Chrysippus (c. 280–206 BCE) – great systematizer.
- Roman Stoics:
  - Seneca (c. 1 BCE–65 CE).
  - Epictetus (c. 55–c. 135 CE).
    - *Discourses*.
    - *Handbook (Enchiridion)*.
  - Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE) – emperor of Rome, 161–180 CE.
- Simplicius (6<sup>th</sup> c. CE) – Platonist, author of a commentary on Simplicius’ *Handbook*.

## *“The Ethics of Freedom” – Unpacking our Title*

- Three parts of (Stoic) philosophy: logic, physics, ethics.
  - “Ethics” as responding effectively to the world as it is.
- Two meanings of “freedom” and “free will”:
  - Contemporary: the freedom of indifference.
  - Classical: not having my will obstructed.
- Freedom: always there, or an achievement?
- Both senses of freedom in Epictetus?

## *What is “Up to Myself”?*

- Distinguishing self, body, and possessions.
- What things are good? Bad? Indifferent?
- Preferred indifferents.
- Giving (or withholding) assent to impressions.



## Anger

- Understanding the phenomenon – three questions:
  1. **At whom** am I angry? (Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.18, §§1–11)
  2. **About what** am I angry? (Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.18, §§11–20)
  3. **What is it like** to be angry? (Seneca, *On Anger*, book 1)
    - Affectively?
    - Psychologically/ethically?
- Anger and *akrasia* (“weakness of will”):
  - “I know that what I intend to do is bad,  
But anger is master of my plans.”  
– Euripedes, *Medea* 1078-79.
  - Two etymologies of *akrasia*:
    - With short A: from *kratein*, ‘to rule, to master.’
    - With long A: from *krasis*, ‘mixture’ (cf. *krater*, ‘a mixing-bowl’).

### “On Freedom from Fear.” (Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.7)

- Who is afraid of the tyrant’s guards?
- Paths to indifference:
  - Madness (*mania*).
  - Habit.
  - Reason & demonstration.
- Two parts of the demonstration:
  1. Divine providence:
    - Understanding the order of the whole, and of each part.
    - Seeing our place as parts within that whole.
  2. What is up to us:
    - Understanding what is within the sphere of choice (and therefore free from hindrance).
    - Locating my good only in those things.
  - Failure regarding (1) is impiety. Failure regarding (2) is slavery.
  - We’ll look closely at (1) during next Saturday’s workshop!



# Activities

## *Pre-Meditation*

Epictetus discusses a version of this activity in *Discourses* 3.8 (pages 159–160); Marcus Aurelius has some encouragement in *Meditations* 2.1 (page 17) and 10.13 (page 136).

Set aside a few minutes in your day—perhaps first thing in the morning, as many of the ancient Stoics suggested, or perhaps at another time which better suits your schedule—consider one unpleasant thing which might happen to you. Imagine that thing, or that event, fully and vividly, as if you were experiencing it right now. Then step back mentally, and ask yourself:

- Is this something that is up to me (that is, within my sphere of choice)?
- Does it affect my power of choice, or only my body and possessions?
- Does this appear unpleasant because it really is that way (for everyone, at all times), or is the sense of being unpleasant something which I add to it, through my own beliefs and judgments?
- If my beliefs and judgments are making the situation more unpleasant: Why do I hold these beliefs, and what other judgments might I choose to make?
- What choices can I make, with regard to how I respond to this event?

Take as long as you need to reflect on these questions, then imagine yourself doing whatever is within your power, to respond to the situation in the best possible way. This might involve, like Epictetus, saying “That is outside the sphere of choice, so it is nothing bad,” or “You may seem bad, but you are only an impression, not under my control.” It may involve taking actions which are under your control, in the way which preserves your freedom and integrity. Or you may see other ways of responding effectively.

Whatever response you have imagined, ask yourself, “Does this make the situation less unpleasant?” and “Do I see how to maintain my integrity and freedom?”

## *Evening Recollection*

As the last thing you do before falling asleep in the evening, recall the events and choices of the day, starting with the moment you got into bed, and continuing in reverse order from the end of the day to the beginning. As you go, note the places where events were outside your control, and the places where you had the opportunity to make choices about what to think, say, or do. Don’t worry if you fall asleep; just go as far back as you can, until you doze off.

Especially once you have been doing this for a while, you may find patterns emerging in the way that you often respond (or fail to respond) to certain people, events, feelings, places, or situations. Make note of these situations, and consider using them as starting points for the premeditation activity discussed above. Pay attention to which parts of your day are within your control, and which parts are not. With practice, you may find yourself with a greater ability to note challenging situations at the moment they arise, so that you can respond from a place of freedom rather than compulsion.

While it’s helpful to note which parts of your day were good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, conducive to flourishing (*eudaimonia*) or not, try not to get too caught up in praising or blaming yourself. Instead, focus on observing the patterns of your life, so that you can keep hold of the patterns which serve you well, and change the ones which do not. Once they are done, past actions are no longer under our control; but what is under our control is how we intend to act in the future.

# Readings & Resources

## *Epictetus*

A truly superb translation of Epictetus' complete works, with helpful notes, is:

- Epictetus, *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, translated by Robin Hard. Oxford World's Classics, 2014.

If you only pursue one of the resources mentioned here, choose this one!

## *Seneca*

There are many translations available of Seneca's letters. The two volumes linked below (covering the first two-thirds of the letters) have some slightly archaic language, but also the great virtue of being in the public domain, and therefore free. The Latin original and English translation appear on facing pages.

- Volume 1: <https://archive.org/details/adluciliumpistu01sene/page/n21>
- Volume 2: <https://archive.org/details/L076SenecaTheYoungerEpistulaeMoralesV6692/>

The letters are short and self-contained, so there's no need to read them in order. You can simply flip around until you find a topic that's of interest.

Also in the public domain is a collection of Seneca's essays, including the lengthy work *On Anger* (listed in the table of contents by its Latin title, *De Ira*):

- <https://archive.org/details/moralesayswithe01seneuft/page/106/mode/2up>

The first two books of *On Anger* analyze the phenomenon on anger; the third book gives Seneca's practical for dealing with it.

## *Marcus Aurelius*

For Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, there are many translations available. I don't have a particularly strong preference, but one readable version is:

- Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, translated by Gregory Hays. Modern Library, 2002.

## *Simplicius*

Simplicius' commentary on Epictetus's *Handbook* has been translated in two volumes.

- Simplicius, *On Epictetus Handbook 1–26*, translated by Tad Brennan and Charles Brittain. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014 [originally Duckworth, 2002].
- Simplicius, *On Epictetus Handbook 27–53*, translated by Tad Brennan and Charles Brittain. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014 [originally Duckworth, 2002].

## *Podcasts*

Peter Adamson's podcast, "The History of Philosophy Without any Gaps," gives a nice overview of Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius in episodes 65 through 67, respectively:

- Seneca: <https://historyofphilosophy.net/seneca>
- Epictetus: <https://historyofphilosophy.net/epictetus>
- Marcus: <https://historyofphilosophy.net/marcus-aurelius>