

What's Up to Us

Merlin CCC, April 2023

The *Handbook* of useful ethical advice from the Stoic philosopher Epictetus famously opens with the distinction between “what’s up to us” and what isn’t. But this foundational distinction is not unique to the Stoics. In this evening’s discussion, we’ll begin with a general look at Epictetus’ statement, and then step back to consider *why* this might be an accurate account of human life. We’ll consider arguments for the distinction drawn from Epictetus’ Platonic commentator Simplicius, based on the nature of the human being (and so, the Delphic maxim “know thyself,” which was central to the Hellenic philosophical tradition from Socrates onward). And we’ll conclude with some reflections on how this account of “what’s up to us” might shape our participation in the civic life of our communities.

Here are the opening lines of Epictetus’ *Handbook*:

Of existent things, some are up to us, some are not up to us. Up to us are belief, impulse, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is our work. Not up to us are the body, possessions, reputation, political power, and, in a word, whatever is not our work. And the things that are up to us are by nature free, unhindered, and unimpeded; whereas the things that are not up to us are weak, servile, hindered, and not our own. Remember then that if you think things that are servile by nature are free, and think that things that are not your own are your own, you will be impeded, and grieve, and be disturbed; and you will blame both the Gods and human beings. But if you consider only that what is yours to be yours, and consider what is not yours just as it is, i.e. not yours, then no one will ever compel you, no one will ever hinder you, you will blame no one, you will accuse no one, you won’t do a single thing against your will, you won’t have an enemy, and no one will harm you, because you won’t suffer any harm.¹

As it stands, this passage could be very inspiring, or could express a deep resignation and giving up. The ambiguity arises because Epictetus does not give us an argument for what the world, and the human individual within that world, are actually like; rather, his argument focuses on the consequences of adopting a certain picture of the human being: if we adopt his anthropology, then we’ll find ourselves free from hindrance, coercion, and the like. That may (or may not) be the case. But even if those results follow, we still might worry that they come at the cost of self-delusion, and of giving up something that is properly part of ourselves. In

1 Epictetus, *Handbook* chapter 1, trans. Brittain & Brennan (see note 2). For comparison, here is an alternative translation of the same passage by Robin Hard (from *Epictetus: Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, Oxford World’s Classics, 2014):

“Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing. The things that are within our power are by nature free, and immune to hindrance and obstruction, while those that are not within our power are weak, slavish, subject to hindrance, and not our own. Remember, then, that if you regard that which is by nature slavish as being free, and that which is not your own as being your own, you’ll have cause to lament, you’ll have a troubled mind, and you’ll find fault with both Gods and human beings; but if you regard only that which is your own as being your own, and that which isn’t your own as not being your own (as is indeed the case), no one will ever be able to coerce you, no one will hinder you, you’ll find fault with no one, you’ll accuse no one, you’ll do nothing whatever against your will, you’ll have no enemy, and no one will ever harm you because no harm can affect you.”

other words, we're invited to ask a further question which Epictetus does not directly take up here, namely: Regardless of what does (or does not) follow from adopting it, is Epictetus' account of what is (and what isn't) up to us actually true, as a description of how reality is?

To address that question, we can turn to Simplicius' commentary on this opening chapter of the *Handbook*:

By “up to us” he means those things which we are in control of and over which we have authority. [...] The motions of the soul, which arise internally from itself according to its judgment and choice, are like this. For choice can't be moved from outside. Rather, even if the object of choice [i.e., the thing being chosen] is external, the choice itself and the motion towards the object of choice are internal. Having a belief of one sort or another about things – for instance, that wealth or death or something else is good or bad or indifferent – is also like this. Even if we form a judgment this way or that way about it after we've heard someone else, providing we do form a judgment, rather than speaking like trained birds (which say “I drink spiced wine” without knowing what they are saying), this opinion or belief is our own movement; it may sometimes be provoked from the outside or elicited by someone teaching us, but it is not implanted by him. Impulse towards something is also like this, since it too is internal.²

At a general level, we should note how this passage introduces two of Simplicius' key themes. First, Simplicius begins from a theory of the soul, which for the Platonist (and really, for most philosophers of antiquity) *just is* the human being – in contrast with the body, its possessions, etc., any of which might *belong to* a human being, but which never in any way *constitute* the human being. Second, we glimpse Simplicius' general account of choice, according to which choosing remains an act that arises internally, from within the soul herself, irregardless of any external promptings. Both of these themes will be developed further as we proceed.

More narrowly, this passage also has important implications for understanding what's going on in education, and what kinds of goals any educator might appropriately have – by contrast, perhaps, with a different sort of persuasive speaker, “influencer,” etc. Is the teacher drawing out something that is proper to the student himself (and thus, treating the student as a human, that is, a rational soul), or is he trying to implant or control an outcome (thus reducing the student to the level of a trained parrot)? The theme of education as “drawing out” (which is the literal meaning of the Latin root) is taken up more fully in Plato's *Meno*, where we find a metaphysical justification for this account of what education is, which in turn underwrites the moral claims.

After moving through a variety of specific objections, Simplicius finally arrives at a general argument, based in the nature of the human being; that is, of the human rational soul, which by definition is self-moving (“autokinetic,” if you want to get fancy and Greek-derived about it, in distinction to purely material bodies, which are moved not from within themselves, but

² Simplicius, *On Epictetus' Handbook* 4,1–19, (trans. pp. 40–1). Throughout the paper, unless otherwise noted, quotations are from *Simplicius: On Epictetus Handbook 1–26*, translated by Charles Brittain and Tad Brennan (Bloomsbury, 2014) with references to the marginal line numbering as well as to the pages of this English translation. Parentheses in the quotations are from the translators, used to mark off subordinate or explanatory remarks found in Simplicius' original text; square brackets are mine, generally supplying something that is clear from the larger context but ambiguous in the excerpts as quoted.

merely from the pushings and pullings exerted by external forces, and are thus “heterokinetic”).

But now let us make the general point against all these objectors that people who rule out what is up to us don’t understand the self-determination of the soul, and hence destroy its essence. First, they rule out its self-motive power, which is its essential property. For either it is a self-mover, and hence it rouses itself internally from itself to desires and impulses, and is not dragged or shoved around from some external source like bodies; or it is moved from the outside, and hence is not a self-mover. Secondly, people ruling out what is up to us don’t take into account the vital extension of the soul, and its assent and refusal. But doesn’t everyone have an awareness of being willing and unwilling, and of choosing and avoiding, and of assenting and refusing? Yet all of these are internal motions of the soul itself, not external shovings or draggings of some sort, as is the case with inanimate things. For it is by their internal motion that animate bodies are distinguished from inanimate bodies. But if this is true, then what moves animate bodies is a self-mover, and not something moved from outside. For if the self-moved soul were moved from outside, then the body too would be moved in the first instance by that external thing, as I said earlier, and thus the body would no longer be moved from within by externally, like other inanimate things, and would itself be inanimate. Thirdly, by ruling out what is up to us (as well as willing and not willing, choice and decision, desire and aversion, impulse and assent, etc.), they also rule out the distinction between the virtue and vice in souls. Hence they leave no room for merited praise and blame, and overturn the laws quite properly established to cover these things – and think what human life would be like if the laws were abolished: no different from the life of beasts!³

Simplicius then takes up the problem of people who seem to act by compulsion, making an important distinction between what is voluntary (i.e., in accordance with our will; from Latin *voluntas*, “will”) and what is up to us. We should start from that distinction:

The voluntary is not identical with what is up to us. Rather, the voluntary is what is choiceworthy per se, while what is up to us is that over which we have the authority to choose, whether on its merits per se or owing to our flight from something worse. And there are even times when the voluntary is mixed with the involuntary, when the object of choice is not purely choiceworthy, but instead participates in the unchoiceworthy as well.⁴

Here, it becomes clear that a “free will” in Simplicius’ sense (a sense broadly shared by his contemporaries) is quite distinct from the modern usage. Whereas for us, “free will” consists merely in the ability to choose either A or B (or C, etc.) without outside constraint (a view that modern scholars term “the freedom of indifference”), for the ancients, “free will” is the ability to pursue what is in reality our own actual, objective good (in contrast, for example, with a slave or hired worker who labors for his master’s interest rather than his own).

Compare what Simplicius has to say a bit earlier about the nature of “choice”:

3 Simplicius, *On Epictetus’ Handbook* 13,49–14,24 (trans. Brittain & Brennan, p. 52).

4 Simplicius, *On Epictetus’ Handbook* 14,45–51 (trans. Brittain & Brennan, p. 53).

When the choice is unconstrained and pure — i.e. is the the choice of the rational soul itself, according to which we have our essence — it is moved towards what is genuinely good and truly the object of choice. Hence the proper good of the soul is called “virtue,”⁵ because it is the object of choice strictly speaking, and comes about according to genuine choice. But when the soul desires along with the irrational emotions, and considers their good to be proper to it, its choice is falsely named, since the object of choice is also falsely named, in that a non-good is being chosen as a good.⁶

With this in mind, we may consider the case of people who seem to act under compulsion. Note the different sources from which Simplicius says that compulsion might come: not only human tyrants, but also emotions and the like.

“But so what?” someone may object. “Aren’t we often compelled by tyrants, or by our own emotions, sympathies, or antipathies, and so choose to do something (or have something done to us) even though we don’t want to? How are what is up to us and self-determination going to be found in such cases?” In reply, I say that even in these cases choice is self-determined. For even if the thing towards which we are drawn was not choiceworthy per se, still, it does seem choiceworthy in comparison to something worse, and we do choose it. It is impossible to do anything without previously giving one’s consent to doing it: anyone who seems to do something without choosing, e.g. someone who unwillingly collides with another because of being shoved by someone else, is acting like an inanimate thing, and hence should not be said to act, strictly speaking, but rather to be acted on. So even if we act involuntarily, still we do nonetheless choose and only then act. This is why when the same compulsion is brought to bear on them, some people choose to perform what was commanded, through fear of something worse, while others choose not to, judging that to perform what was commanded is itself worse than what was threatened for those who do not perform it. So in this way what is up to us and self-determination are preserved, even in those who seem to be doing something involuntarily.⁷



So much, at least in very abbreviated form, for Simplicius’ basic account. Yet many readers or hearers find themselves at this point with a profound difficulty. The account we’ve just received can seem overly narrow, even solipsistic. Shouldn’t we be concerned with making the world around us a better place? This is a worry that feels especially acute in a society like ours, where some form of utilitarianism or consequentialism is the dominant, almost unquestioned ethical paradigm. It’s also a worry that Simplicius himself was well aware of:

“What about me?” a philosopher might say: “How can I be useful to [my city]?” It’s in response to this person that [Epictetus] rightly replies: If you provide it with another trustworthy and respectful citizen, won’t you have furnished it with something more needful than the blacksmith? This is especially the case if you also

5 The Greek term *aretē*, which is often (as here) translated “virtue,” literally means “excellence” — a sense retained in English when we speak, for example, of the virtues of medicinal herbs or artistic compositions.

6 Simplicius, *On Epictetus’ Handbook* 7,23–33 (trans. Brittain & Brennan, pp. 44–5).

7 Simplicius, *On Epictetus’ Handbook* 14,25–44 (trans. Brittain & Brennan, pp. 52–3).

provide it with other people of this kind, by giving advice and teaching, and by becoming an example to others of a fine and good citizen. But even if you don't do that, by just providing it with yourself as such a person, what you provide to the country is more useful than what the others provide.⁸

Here Simplicius is certainly referring back to Epictetus' own words from the *Handbook*:

If you provided [the city] with another trustworthy and respectful citizen, wouldn't you be benefitting it at all? "Yes." So you wouldn't be useless to it yourself, then, either. "Then what place will I have in the city?" The one you can achieve while keeping that trustworthy and respectful person around. But if you throw away these goods in your desire to benefit it, what use would you be to it when you've become shameless and untrustworthy?⁹

But it's quite likely that Simplicius is also thinking of a passage from the sixth book of Plato's *Republic* which seems to have been quite popular in sixth-century philosophical circles, given the harrowing circumstances in which the philosophers of Athens, Alexandria, and elsewhere found themselves over the preceding centuries: mob violence, confiscation of property, exile, and outright murder, all with the blessing of civic and religious authorities. Here, Socrates is addressing how a philosopher might best make his way when forced by circumstances to live in a profoundly unjust city:

And even of these few, such as are tasting, and have tasted, how sweet and blessed the acquisition of philosophy is, and have sufficiently seen the madness of the multitude, and how none of them, as I may say, effects any thing salutary in the affairs of cities, and that there is no ally with whom a man might go to the assistance of the just and be safe; but that he is like one falling among wild beasts, being neither willing to join them in injustice, nor able, as he is but one, to oppose the whole savage crew; but, before he can benefit the city or his friends, is destroyed, and is unprofitable both to himself and others; reasoning on all these things, lying quiet, and attending to his own affairs, as in a tempest, when the dust is driven, and the sea agitated by winds, standing under a wall, beholding others overwhelmed in iniquity, he is satisfied if he shall himself anyhow pass his life here pure from injustice and unholy deeds, and make his exit hence in good hopes cheerful and benignant.¹⁰

If Simplicius' commentary has helped us to find such "good hopes, cheerful and benignant," then we've gone most of the way toward resolving the initial dilemma raised by Epictetus' opening passage: in favor of inspiration, and against dependent resignation.

8 Simplicius, *On Epictetus' Handbook* 64,32-42 (trans. Brittain & Brennan, p. 118).

9 Epictetus, *Handbook* chapter 24 (trans. Brittain & Brennan).

10 Plato, *Republic* VI, 496c-e; trans. Thomas Taylor.