

Critique of the Control Dichotomy as a Useful Strategy

Post by “Daniel188” of January 4, 2026 at 10:42 AM

Greetings to all supporters of practical philosophy.

Surely everyone interested in the practical aspects of philosophy and inspired by the doctrines of the wise men of ancient Greece has become familiar with the dichotomy of control. Many modern Stoics take this as a fundamental reference for their lives (though they do not necessarily understand the meaning of the original doctrine). I have used this idea myself for a long time along with the rest of Stoic philosophy and I find that this doctrine is not as useful as it is made out to be. I will try to explain my position in this post and I am open to criticism of my positions.

1. Explaining what this dichotomy is.

So let's start by explaining what this dichotomy is. In fact, no ancient Stoic except Epictetus uses something like this. The popular dichotomy of control usually involves separating things that are within our control and those that are not. People typically group health, relationships, work, and so on into dependent things. But this doesn't constitute the true dichotomy of control promoted by Epictetus.

The dichotomy of control, as Epictetus perceived it, was that the only thing that depends on us is prohairesis. Prohairesis means the ability to make judgments. Thus, Epictetus states that relationships, health, or even the body do not fall into this category. The only thing that falls into this category is judgment. It's noticeable that Epictetus doesn't perceive "control" as we do. For him, it simply means something being free from external factors, from obstacles. It's not even control in the sense that we are able to freely shape our thoughts and judgments. According to Epictetus, we can only refine our judgments, but this doesn't mean complete control over this ability in the sense that we can do whatever we want with it. For example, when it's daytime, you can't fool yourself into thinking it's nighttime.

This view that only judgment matters is connected to the Stoics' general worldview, namely providential determinism. According to the Stoics, everything that happens is planned by providence, and we have a certain part of God within our minds (as described in Epictetus's Discourses). This part of God is the only one not subject to external limitations. Epictetus explains this by saying that fate can bring us all kinds of misfortunes, but it cannot force us to accept truth as falsehood.

2. Practical criticism

We can immediately see that this entire doctrine is based on a providential order. Judgments are dependent on us, while everything else is not. This leads to the conclusion that virtue should be the goal of life, because the Stoics interpreted virtue as a form of knowledge (Socratic ethical intellectualism). As we well know from our Epicurean education, concepts such as virtue are ambiguous and difficult to define. Therefore, this can lead to consequences that are detrimental to our happiness. For example, someone might conclude that it is virtuous to always obey one's father because providence placed him in that role. Even if this father harms you or causes you pain, you might conclude that feelings should be ignored in the name of virtue (Epictetus would say that judgment causes suffering, not the event). As the Stoics themselves assume, pleasure and pain are indifferent.

A consequence of this is the view that mind is superior to matter. Stoics will assume that through changes in judgment, you can generally control your state and thus always be virtuous. But even to truly pursue "virtuous actions" in some way, you must satisfy your needs. Reason is highly dependent on the body. Even bacteria in the stomach can influence the judgments we make. Therefore, Stoics who say that prohairesis is the only thing dependent on us are making a mistake. Even if we accept the view that virtue is crucial in life, the capacity for it is so dependent on the body that it cannot be said that all other things are indifferent.

3. Summary

So, moving on to the practical Epicurean perspective, we can conclude that this idea is largely unhelpful. Simply changing our judgments will prevent us from achieving pleasure, as the body is inextricably linked to the mind. Of course, there are certain judgments that, if changed, will affect our state. Examples include the judgments and attitudes we hold toward the gods and the afterlife. But we cannot fill our bellies simply by thinking.

A person who adheres to the dichotomy of control will avoid planning their life and exerting control over their environment. If someone insults them, rather than severing contact with them, they will assume that it is better to simply change their judgment. This can lead to unnecessary pain. A more practical doctrine is Epicurus's categorization of desires. Epicurus points us to the things that are easiest to achieve and that will give us the most pleasure. At the same time, by categorizing desires, we avoid devaluing our feelings and can achieve true happiness.