

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.

Post by "Cassius" of January 4, 2026 at 2:18 PM

Is there more to this idea of dichotomy of control that we ought to include here? Separating those things that are "within our control" from those that are "not in our control" is one thing. But after you have the two categories, what are you supposed to do with them?

In going through Cicero's arguments about virtue it's clearly important to separate out virtue (as being under our control) vs other "goods" (which really don't even deserve the name as "good"). But to me the term "dichotomy of control" seems to omit some essential aspects without which it rings to me like "hammer" or "screwdriver."

What are we supposed to do with it and why?

Post by “Daniel188” of January 4, 2026 at 3:42 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

What are we supposed to do with it and why?

I believe that all concepts can be tested within the Epicurean worldview. In the sense that one can sometimes try to take a concept and adapt it to one's own purpose. In this particular case, I believe that the very idea of a dichotomy of control is useless in the pursuit of pleasure because it leads to the recognition of the superiority of reason over the body. Categorizing desires is much more sensible. Because categorizing desires directs us to reflect on desires in terms of their achievability, leaving much room for flexibility. It seems to me that this criticism may be useful in discussions with uneducated Stoics, because such Stoics often actually strive for mental peace, and not necessarily for what the ancients called "virtue". These Stoics often treat as sacred this principle of dividing dependent and independent things.

Post by “Matteng” of January 4, 2026 at 4:33 PM

Yes, the only good thing in the control dichotomy in my view is to don't worry about unchangeable things and to focus on what you can do.

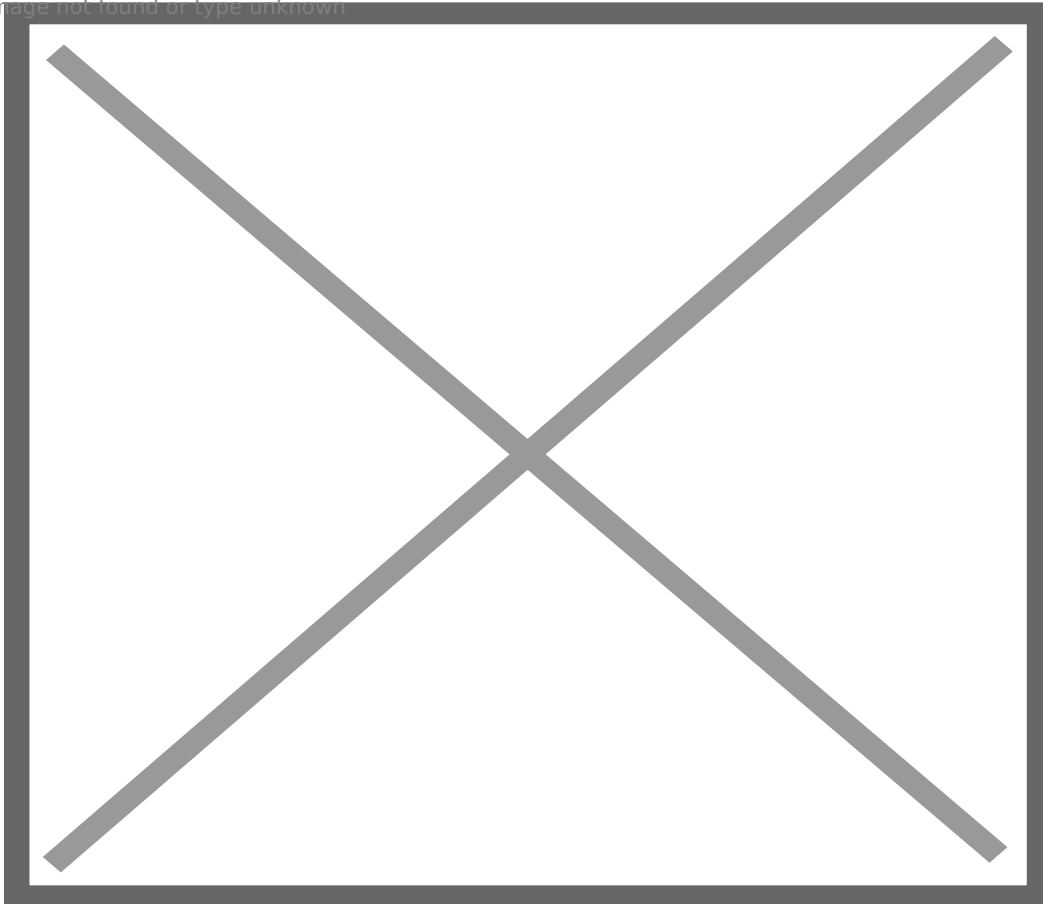
This is often seen as one of the greatest benefit of Stoicism but it was first in Epicurus Philosophy but without providential goodness for necessity.

Also there is the own agency stated as a source of causal power besides chance and necessity:

Letter to Menoeceus

„[133] Who, then, is superior in thy judgement to such a man? He holds a holy belief concerning the gods, and is altogether free from the fear of death. He has diligently considered the end fixed by nature, and understands how easily the limit of good things can be reached and attained, and how either the duration or the intensity of evils is but slight. Destiny, which some introduce as sovereign over all things, he laughs to scorn, affirming rather that some things happen of necessity, others by chance, others through our own agency. For he sees that necessity destroys responsibility and that chance or fortune is inconstant; whereas our own actions are free, and it is to them that praise and blame naturally attach“

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[Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus - Epicureanfriends.com](http://www.epicureanfriends.com)

www.epicureanfriends.com

Post by “Don” of January 4, 2026 at 4:50 PM

[Matteng](#) You went right where I was going. Here's my translation of the start of 10.133 (emphasis added):

[133] "Seeing that, whom do you consider is better or more powerful than one who holds pious beliefs concerning the gods; one who has absolutely no fears concerning death; one who has rationally determined the τέλος of one's natural state; and the one who grasps that, on the one hand, good things (namely pleasures) are both easily attained and easily secured, and, on the other hand, evil things (or pains) are either short in time or brief in suffering; someone who laughs at Fate which is introduced onto the stage of life by many as the mistress of all things? For that person, even though *some things happen by necessity, some by chance, and some by our own power*, for although necessity is beyond our control, they see that chance is unstable and there is no other master beyond themselves, so that praise and its opposite are inseparably connected to themselves."

To me. There's almost a "trichotomy of causes" (not a dichotomy of control) for Epicurus:

- things that happen by necessity
- things that happen by chance
- things that happen by our own power

This goes back to there being no divine plan. If something happens to us and we might want to mull or obsess about it, we can look at whether we did something to cause it or was it really by chance or necessity. If something pleasurable or painful happened, we can try to do it or not in the future. If, on the other hand, what happened really was a chance accident, it really was just chance.

Post by “Matteng” of February 19, 2026 at 12:03 PM

Found this Stoic text which claims that the dichotomy leads to undisturbable happiness.

The main point is that when you desire no things outside of your control (like life, health ...) you encounter no „unhappiness“ or when you desire only Virtue you get „complete“ happiness.

What would your response be to such arguments ?

[Core Stoicism](#)

Core Stoicism by Grant Sterling [A post to the International Stoic Forum, September 19, 2005.] I won't have much time to post for...
stoicnews.blogspot.com

Post by “Cassius” of February 19, 2026 at 1:23 PM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

The main point is that when you desire no things outside of your control (like life, health ...) you encounter no „unhappiness“ or when you desire only Virtue you get „complete“ happiness. I'd start by saying that their definition of "happiness" is absolute BS. No issues of control are even relevant until you forthrightly start with a clear explanation of what "happiness," means without the BS "virtue" overlay.

It appears that many Stoics are comfortable saying that they have no concerns about life and health. For my part I'd say that unless you have life and at least some degree of health, no happiness is possible.

This is an unbridgeable divide. The Stoics can go their way and I'll go mine.

Post by “Matteng” of February 20, 2026 at 5:42 PM

I try to deconstruct it a little bit, point for point, my statements come after "=>":

Quote

Th 1) Everyone wants happiness.
Th 2) If you want happiness, it would be irrational to accept incomplete or imperfect happiness if you could get complete [continual, uninterrupted] happiness.
2*) Complete happiness is possible. [To be proven below.]

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=> 1) Compatible with Epicurean Philosophy
2) questionable

Quote

Section Two: Negative Happiness

Th 3) All human unhappiness is caused by having a desire or emotional commitment [I will henceforth say "desire" for simplicity] to some outcome, and then that outcome does not result.

=> 3) Yes ok, but Pain Signals are important Information for life/Health/self preservation

Quote

4) Ergo, if you desire something which is out of your control, you will be subject to possible unhappiness. If you desire many things out of your control, the possibility of complete happiness approaches zero.

5) By 4, 2*, and Th2, desiring things out of your control is irrational [if it is possible to control your desires].

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=> 4,5) No, because life/Degree of Health is the foundation of happiness and are not completely in our Control. That's the reason Epicurus differs between desires

Quote

Th 6) The only things in our control are our beliefs and will, and anything entailed by our beliefs and will.

Th 7) Desires are caused by beliefs (judgments) about good and evil. [You desire what you judge to be good, and desire to avoid what you judge to be evil.]



Ergo, Desires are in our control.

9) By 5 and 8, desiring things out of our control is irrational.

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=> 7) Incomplete: not only by our beliefs but also desires are caused by our bodily and psychological Needs and self-preservation. They are not arbitrary.
So belief/will are in our control and we should only desire them ? But what are they About ?
Without Content they are empty and Nothing.

Quote

Th 10) The only thing actually good is virtue, the only thing actually evil is vice.

11) Ergo, since virtue and vice are types of acts of will, they are in our control.

12) Ergo, things that are not in our control [externals] are never good or evil.

13) [cf 9, above] Desiring things out of our control is irrational, since it involves false judgment.

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=> 10,11) just a Claim why is virtue good when not for its possible Outcomes ? Vice is in our Control so it would be rational to desire Vice ?

Quote

14) Ergo, if we value only virtue, we will both judge truly and be immune to all unhappiness.

=> 14) Virtue without Content and positive Outcome is empty and a phantasy. Believing in a positive phantasy can bring some Pleasure but it is short and in the consequence when desiring no positive Outcomes, no happiness will come but suffering.

Quote

Section Three: Positive Happiness or Appropriate Positive Feelings

15) Ergo, if we truly judge that virtue is good, we will desire it.

Th 16) If you desire something, and achieve it, you will get a positive feeling.

17) Ergo, if we correctly judge and correctly will, we will have appropriate positive feelings as a result.

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=> 15,16,17) Yes but is Virtue in the Stoic Theory really achievable ? It is very rare and means complete perfection in judging everything.

So it could be that it is an unreachable desire, in Epicurean teaching: An Empty / Unnatural desire.

Also this means that you have as a Stoic your whole life no positive Feelings until you are a perfect Sage and all your positive Feelings are doubtful and enjoying them must be seen als irrational. An instruction for unhappiness / depression in my view...

Quote

Th 18) Some positive feelings do not result from desires, and hence do not result from judgments about value.

[E.g., the taste of a good meal, the sight of a beautiful sunset, etc.]

19) Ergo, such positive feelings are not irrational or inappropriate. [Though if we desire to achieve them or desire for them to continue beyond the present, then that would involve the judgment that they are good, and hence that would be irrational.]

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=> 18,19,20) For life/Health and so for happiness it is rational to desire them when they Benefit.

Quote

Th 20) The universe is, or is governed by, Nature, Providence, God or the gods. [Different Stoics approach this idea differently.]

Th 21) That which is Natural, or is governed by Providence, God, or the gods is exactly as it should be. [Zeus is just, or however you wish to express this.] {Nota bene that this produces a problem for those stoics who are strict determinists, since it would mean that even acts of vice were somehow correct, and are not actually in our control in any important sense. But I don't think strict determinism about internal states is a core belief of Stoicism.}

Th 22) If you regard any aspect [or, better, all aspects] of the world as being exactly as it should be, you will receive appropriate positive feelings.

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=> 20-22) Stoic Physics. It is inhuman/unnatural to judge harmful Things positive. Accepting necessities is rational but also to learn from them and be motivated to do Things better or protect from bad Things if possible or to Change Things.

Quote

23) Ergo, the Stoic will be positively happy, will have positive feelings, in at least three ways: appreciation of his own virtue, physical and sensory pleasures, and the appreciation of the world as it is. The last of those three is something that the Stoic could experience continually, every waking second, since at every waking second one can perceive something as being what it is, and hence what it should be.

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=> 23) Ignoring harmful Things can have bad consequences in the Long run and reduces Motivation to Change for better or to value relationships/Things more. Emotions form Values and reminds us how fast we can lose People/Things.

Quote

Section Four: Virtue

Th 24) In order to perform an act of will, the act of will must have some content. The content is composed of the result at which one aims.

Th 25) Some things are appropriate objects at which to aim, although they are not genuinely good.

Th 26) Some such objects are things like life [our own, or others'], health, pleasure, knowledge, justice, truth-telling, etc.

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=> 24-26 Is there an difference between desiring and aiming ? Is there aiming without wanting ? Value consists in Feeling the evolutionary psychologists say. So it is an Illusion to think we can value/aim on Things without Feeling/desire. Here reason/logic tries to get rid of (human) Nature. Why not end the desire for the external "Life" than you are never "unhappy" but you will die

Quote

Th 27) Virtue consists of rational acts of will, vice of irrational acts of will.

=> 27) ah.. but vice and irrational Acts of will are in our Control so shouldn't we desire them ? The logic is not consequent here.

Quote

28) Ergo, any act that aims at an [external] object of desire is not virtuous, since all desires [for externals] are irrational.

29) Ergo, virtue consists of the pursuit of appropriate objects of aim, not the pursuit of the [external] objects of our desires. Such virtuous acts will give us good feelings [by 17], and since we have no desires regarding the actual outcome, they will never produce unhappiness for us.

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=> 28-end) So the Stoic Sage has good Feelings about pursuing (without desire) on rational aims but not on the Content of the aims....

So they are just happy About their thoughts and Need Nothing else but their own inner mind and everything outside of the mind they rationally choose but don't want.....

So in Terms of Epicurus desires: They deny the natural/necessary desire for Health and Life but pursue only the desire for Eudaimonia the happy life.

I think there are extreme situations in which Epicureans come the same conclusions for example when choosing to die for family/friend.

But in general I think Life/Health and choosing the risks of pain from missed Outcomes from Externals must be taken for Eudaimonia.

Post by "Cassius" of February 20, 2026 at 5:58 PM

Quote

Th 1) Everyone wants happiness.

i would say from the very first sentence you are not defining what happiness means, so that it would be unproductive to evaluate anything after that starting point without more specificity.

Post by “Cassius” of February 20, 2026 at 9:19 PM

Matt there is something else I want to add. I see that you are going through a long sequence of statements about Stoicism and analyzing the logic of them. Anytime I get confronted with a long intricate chain argument, I always remember this from Lucian's Hermotimus:

Quote

Perhaps an illustration will make my meaning clearer: when one of those audacious poets affirms that there was once a three-headed and six-handed man, if you accept that quietly without questioning its possibility, he will proceed to fill in the picture consistently—six eyes and ears, three voices talking at once, three mouths eating, and thirty fingers instead of our poor ten all told; if he has to fight, three of his hands will have a buckler, wicker targe, or shield apiece, while of the other three one swings an axe, another hurls a spear, and the third wields a sword. It is too late to carp at these details, when they come; they are consistent with the beginning; it was about that that the question ought to have been raised whether it was to be accepted and passed as true. Once grant that, and the rest comes flooding in, irresistible, hardly now susceptible of doubt, because it is consistent and accordant with your initial admissions

.

That is just your case; your love-yearning would not allow you to look into the facts at each entrance, and so you are dragged on by consistency; it never occurs to you that a thing may be self-consistent and yet false; if a man says twice five is seven, and you take his word for it without checking the sum, he will naturally deduce that four times five is fourteen, and so on *ad libitum*. This is the way that weird geometry proceeds: it sets before beginners certain strange assumptions, and insists on their granting the existence of inconceivable things, such as points having no parts, lines without breadth, and so on, builds on these rotten foundations a superstructure equally rotten, and pretends to go on to a demonstration which is true, though it starts from premises

which are false.

Just so you, when you have granted the principles of any school, believe in the deductions from them, and take their consistency, false as it is, for a guarantee of truth. Then with some of you, hope travels through, and you die before you have seen the truth and detected your deceivers, while the rest, disillusioned too late, will not turn back for shame: what, confess at their years that they have been abused with toys all this time? so they hold on desperately, putting the best face upon it and making all the converts they can, to have the consolation of good company in their deception; they are well aware that to speak out is to sacrifice the respect and superiority and honor they are accustomed to; so they will not do it if it may be helped, knowing the height from which they will fall to the common level. Just a few are found with the courage to say they were deluded, and warn other aspirants. Meeting such a one, call him a good man, a true and an honest; nay, call him philosopher, if you will; to my mind, the name is his or no one's; the rest either have no knowledge of the truth, though they think they have, or else have knowledge and hide it, shamefaced cowards clinging to reputation.

So while I am fine if others here want to go through the details of Stoic chain reasoning, my own recommendation is to follow what Lucian advises:

Start with their fundamental presumptions and don't get drawn into an argument about self-consistency. The Stoics are very good about drawing up self-consistent arguments that are absolute nonsense when you examine their premises. Whatever good there might be in examining whether an issue is under your control or not (and indeed there may be some good in that) their overall use of the argument poisons any benefit from traveling very far down their road.

I wouldn't advise traveling a step with them beyond those steps in which you are sure you agree.

Post by “Cassius” of February 21, 2026 at 1:57 PM

Going back to the recent question in which the Stoic article was cited, I want to add this:

[Quote from Matteng](#)

The main point is that when you desire no things outside of your control (like life, health ...) you encounter no „unhappiness“ or when you desire only Virtue you get „complete“ happiness.

Again, the entire discussion in the article gets off to a bad start by failing to be clear what is meant by happiness. But even within the general framework of "control" there are huge problems. OF COURSE I want life. OF COURSE I want health. And indeed those things are not guaranteed, and they are therefore not totally within my control. But unlike a Stoic I am not going to cry about it and revolt against Nature. Nature gives us life and health on the contingency that we act properly to secure it and keep it. It would be insane to discard life and health simply because I don't have total control over keeping it.

This entire logic game set forth in the article is exactly the same kind of nonsense that Lucian complains about in Hermotimus. OF COURSE if you exclude as a value anything that you don't have total control over, then you'll never fail in your values. "Expect the worst and you'll never be disappointed" is a logical consistency but it's also an unnatural and insane way to live life.

Stoicism is a reduction ad absurdum of certain trends in Socratic/Platonic thought that even Aristotle, who failed to reject the "prime mover" argument, could not accept. I wouldn't waste my time debating them unless and until one of them (who wouldn't be faithful to Stoicism if they did so) set forth a reasonable explanation of their terms of what life and happiness really entail. Divine fire and loving Fate and pursuing virtue in and for itself are pure nonsense. You're not going to reach a reasonable and acceptable set of conclusions when you start off with such a false foundation, no matter how logically consistent you might be at any single step along the way.

Post by “Matteng” of February 21, 2026 at 4:08 PM

[Cassius](#) Thank you, that really sums it up. After distancing myself more and more from Stoicism, when I read their arguments I'm still occasionally drawn to the dark side 😊

And as you write, if one accepts their premises too quickly, one is right in the middle of internally agreeing with their logical conclusions. This shows how certain logics and abstractions/words can distance one from reality.

As you write, their initial assumptions are flawed. Judgment/Virtue/Reason doesn't exist in a controllable vacuum.

One needs a certain degree of health/life for Virtue. Sure, one can sacrifice health/life (for friends, family...), but only if one has/had it before.

I can only help others if I have a certain degree of health/life.

I can only think/judge with a certain degree of life/health. With severe brain damage or sensory impairments, I can't navigate life.

Everything I do is based on the premise of having/pursuing life/health.

Perfect sense for me now makes the sentence in the letter to Menoecus (Actually, every sentence in it is pure gold.):

(Not only) wisdom, honor, and justice are necessary for Pleasure, but also Pleasure (in the sense of physical/mental health) is necessary for living prudently, honourably, and Just.

Something the Stoics would never admit, but which renders their entire ethics unrealistic and empty from the ground and maybe even dangerous in neglecting the own health / Life or think it is the duty / right reason to do so. One possible way to become depressed / mental ill.

Post by “Cassius” of February 21, 2026 at 7:07 PM

[Matteng](#) that is why I am finding the material we are covering on the podcast now so valuable. I too was attracted to Stoicism (many years ago now) and for a long time I favored it. But as I look back now I see that I should have immediately tried to question what exactly they thought their goal to be. The word "happiness" is interpreted in too many ways to accept it at face value as a goal without an understanding of what the person using the word means. Same goes for Epicurean philosophy, and Lucian makes that point too - that this problem applies to all schools. Socrates is wrong - it IS possible to be clear, and to clearly communicate something positive that you have confidence is true. But just like people use different languages, even within the same language different people use different words in different ways. Epicurus is right that it is essential to be clear, and the only way to do that in conceptual matters is to cite numbers of examples and to explain the entire concept in understandable words.

But to get back to the current material on the podcasts, this is why Stoicism was not accepted - not just by the Epicureans - but also by the majority of the Academy. Both Aristotle and the regular heirs of Plato understood that there is more subtlety involved in the word "Virtue" than just things that are under one's own control. The Stoics talk today as if they ruled the roost in the ancient world, but we can read Cicero and see plainly that both Aristotle and the New Academy saw the problems with Stoicism. I am no fan of Carneades, but he seems to have

directed at least as much, and probably more, of his fire at the Stoics than at the Epicureans. Aristotle has significant similarities with Epicurus as to certain views of pleasure, and even Socrates and Plato can be found to say occasional good things about pleasure. The distinguishing mark of Stoicism seems to be that they elevated the worship of Logic and Reason to an extreme that even Socrates and Aristotle and maybe even Plato himself would not have agreed with.

I perceive that everyone does not hold that Hermotimus dialog in the same esteem that I do, but if you haven't read the whole thing I highly recommend it. In my view it does an excellent job of making this point - that logical consistency is a dangerous trap if you start off at the beginning with premises that are not properly evaluated.

Even the introduction to the Epicurus Reader starts off with something similar, presuming that "Everyone wants to be happy." In a way that is true, and i say things like that myself sometime, but we're here to be clear about philosophy and how to pursue it, and in serious discussion the meaning of the word "happy" is NOT something to be taken for granted.

Post by “Don” of February 22, 2026 at 12:11 AM

[Quote from Matteng](#)

Perfect sense for me now makes the sentence in the letter to Menoeceus (Actually, every sentence in it is pure gold.):(Not only) wisdom, honor, and justice are necessary for Pleasure, but also Pleasure (in the sense of physical/mental health) is necessary for living prudently, honourly, and Just.

This idea occurs as PD5, VS5, and in *Menoikeus*, so it must have been important. I like Peter Saint-Andre's rendering:

It is not possible to live joyously without also living wisely and beautifully and rightly, nor to live wisely and beautifully and rightly without living joyously; and whoever lacks this cannot live joyously.

οὐκ ἔστιν ἡδέως ζῆν ἄνευ τοῦ φρονίμως καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως <οὐδὲ φρονίμως καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως> ἄνευ τοῦ ἡδέως· ὅτι δὲ τοῦτο μὴ ὑπάρχει, οὐχ ἔστι τοῦτον ἡδέως ζῆν.

Menoikeus gives the version:.

οὐκ ἔστιν ἡδέως ζῆν ἄνευ τοῦ φρονίμως καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως <οὐδὲ φρονίμως καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως> ἄνευ τοῦ ἡδέως. συμπεφύκασι γὰρ αἱ ἀρεταὶ τῷ ζῆν ἡδέως, καὶ τὸ ζῆν ἡδέως τούτων

ἔστιν ἀχώριστον.

a pleasurable life does not exist without the traits of wisdom, morality, and justice; nor do the traits of wisdom, morality, and justice without pleasure: because the virtues *grow together* with a pleasurable life and the pleasurable life is *inseparable* from these. (My translation)

So it doesn't say exactly what you paraphrased, but very close. From my reading, the living wisely and well and justly arises at the same time as living pleasantly, and vice versa. It's not that they're necessary, it's the fact that they're inseparable and they grow together with each other.

Post by “Cassius” of February 22, 2026 at 8:23 AM

[Matteng](#) here is another example of that problem of granting false presumptions, this from Plato's Phaedo:

Quote

[100b] “There is nothing new,” he said, “in what I am about to tell you; but only what I have been always and everywhere repeating in the previous discussion and on other occasions: I want to show you the nature of that cause which has occupied my thoughts, and I shall have to go back to those familiar words which are in the mouth of everyone, and first of all assume that there is an absolute beauty and goodness and greatness, and the like; grant me this, and I hope to be able to show you the nature of the cause, and to prove **[100c]** the immortality of the *psūkhē*.”

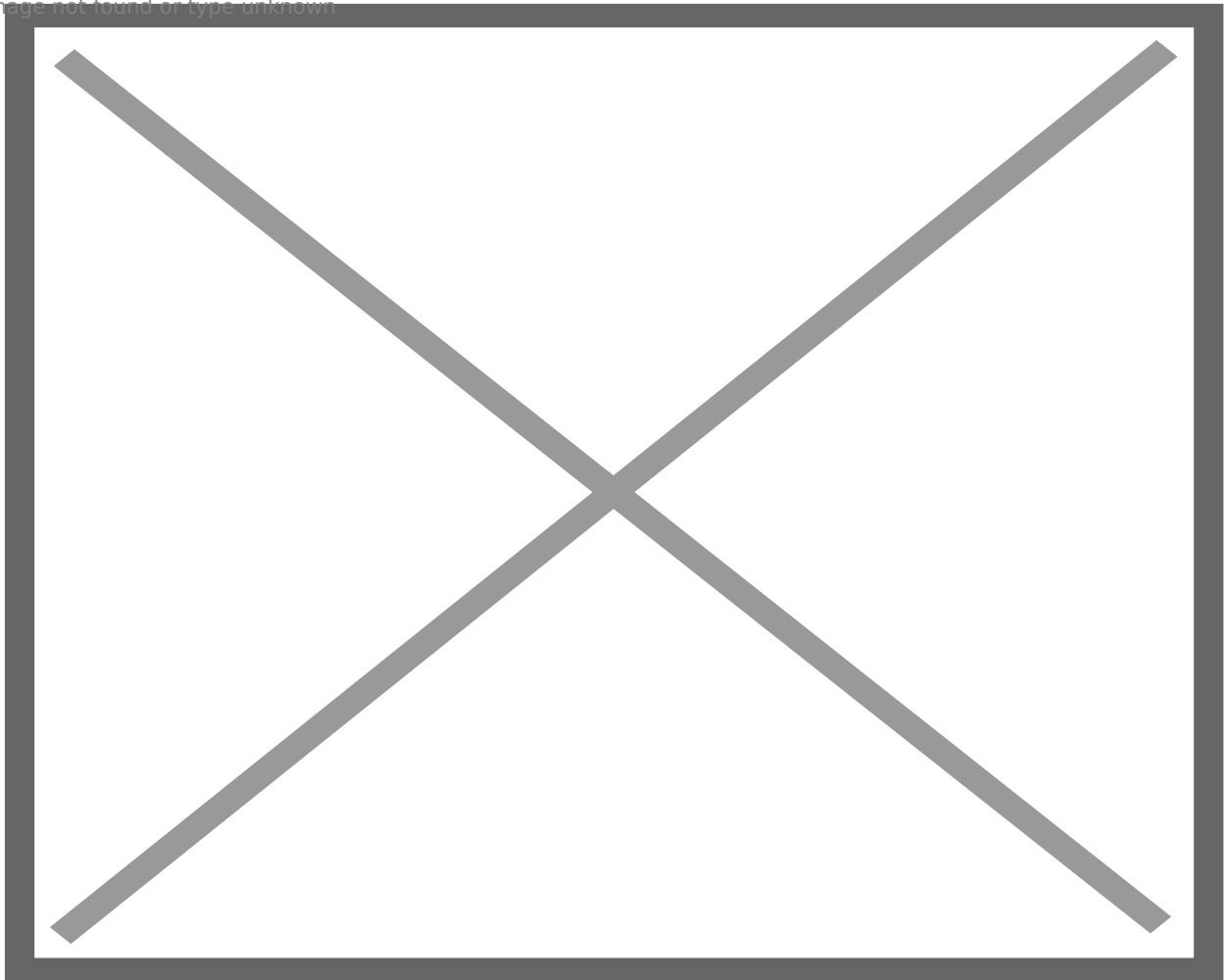
Cebes said, “You may proceed at once with the proof, as I readily grant you this.”

Hell, no, Socrates!

I do NOT grant you that there is an "absolute" beauty and goodness and greatness!

Read onward from there, and you see what a trap you are drawn into by accepting these initial premises:

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[Plato, Phaedo, trans. Jowett - The Center for Hellenic Studies](#)

Translated by Benjamin Jowett Adapted by Gregory Nagy, Miriam Carlisle, and Soo-Young Kim
Persons of the Dialogue Phaedo, who is the narrator of the dialogue...
chs.harvard.edu

And you have to smile - or want to strangle Plato - at the audacity of statements such as this:

Quote

Echecrates

Yes, Phaedo; and I don't wonder at their assenting. Anyone who has the least sense will acknowledge the wonderful clearness of Socrates' reasoning.

Post by "Don" of February 22, 2026 at 8:45 AM

Echecrates

By Zeus, Phaedo, they were right. It seems to me that he made those matters astonishingly clear, to anyone with even a little sense.

Ἐχεκράτης

νῆ Δία, ὧ Φαίδων, εἰκότως γε: θαυμαστῶς γάρ μοι δοκεῖ ὡς ἐναργῶς τῷ καὶ σμικρὸν νοῦν ἔχοντι εἰπεῖν ἐκεῖνος ταῦτα.

I find it intriguing that the word for *astonishingly clear* here is ἐναργῶς (enargōs), a form on the same word Epicurus uses to describe our apprehension of the guards in the *Menoikeus*.

Post by “Daniel188” of February 23, 2026 at 7:01 AM

Quote from Matteng

The main point is that when you desire no things outside of your control (like life, health ...) you encounter no „unhappiness“ or when you desire only Virtue you get „complete“ happiness.

It simply doesn't work that way. It's impossible to completely "not worry" about certain basic needs. Their absence will always worsen the quality of life. According to the Stoics, theoretically, even if you were stranded on a lonely island, you would be "happy," but that's simply impossible. It will always lead to negative psychological consequences. To some extent, it is also impossible to choose to desire virtue exclusively. Fundamental desires are by their nature such that they cannot be removed by a simple change of judgment.

This argument about virtue only works if we define happiness in isolation from feelings of pleasure. It seems to me that defining happiness this way is rather inappropriate. If someone is in a state where they don't experience even a shred of pleasure, they will never say they are "happy". Intuitively, through introspection, one can see that happiness is largely related to pleasure.

The Stoics believe that pleasure has no significance. From this perspective, we can indeed acknowledge that happiness is possible when we focus solely on virtue. Since happiness consists solely in fulfilling our rational nature, and this rationality is within our power, we cannot experience any failures. Although there are some reservations in this respect as well. The aforementioned virtue is not solely dependent on us. To be guided by virtue, one requires a proper bodily state. To achieve this state, one must strive to fulfill desires that are not inherent

in virtue.

An example of one such desire is the desire to eat. If you don't eat, your rational faculties will inevitably weaken in favor of your instincts. To engage in virtue at all, you must first have the material prerequisite. And this material prerequisite is not strictly within the individual's will. It is not dependent on our control. Hence, other philosophical schools, such as the Peripatetics, did not consider virtue to be self-sufficient.

Post by “Cassius” of February 23, 2026 at 9:29 AM

To those reading along I would amplify what Daniel has said about 1000 times. He's approaching the subject as it is generally approached nowadays - sort of clinically. Yes indeed if you define 1 as "courage" and 2 as "justice" and "complete happiness" as "courage + justice" then you are completely happy if you have 1 and 2. You could likewise define 1 as oranges and 2 as bananas and complete happiness as "orange + bananas" and if you have 1 + 2 you have complete happiness. And if you're stupid enough to do that you'll never miss, because 1 + 2 are defined as equaling 3.

But isn't it clear that this is nonsensical? It SHOULD be clear, but when you start the chain with "everyone wants happiness" and you don't make CLEAR what you mean by happiness then you can draw every sucker into the world into your trap, and that is exactly what Stoicism does.

There are many good people who get taken in by Stoicism, and I am all in favor of treating them diplomatically, because most of us ourselves were one in thrall of their slights of hand - just as many today are taken in by religion.

Stoicism in the hands of the innocent is a tragedy, but in the hands of those who should know better, it's one of the worst crimes in the history of the world. Pythagoras and Socrates and Plato and others in their line set all this in motion, and the Stoics simply abstracted it further to an absurd extreme. Their line deserves the full blame for what has happened as a result.

Epicurus points the way out of that trap, and his answer is by going back to the beginning of their denunciation of the senses. When you use them properly to look at nature and see that NATURE is supreme (not prime movers, divine fire, or universal intelligence) then you see the way out of the trap is really very simple.

Don't go down this false path in the first place, and if you're already trapped in it retrace your steps as quickly as you can. Nature through the senses, anticipations, and feelings can lead you out of this trap, but looking to "Nature" alone isn't good enough. The Stoics and Aristotle alike both claim to look to Nature. It's only when you reject the idea that you or your chosen idol are

over Nature and smarter than Nature that you are in tune with what Epicurus was teaching.

c

Post by “Pacatus” of March 10, 2026 at 12:36 PM

It seems to me that if the dichotomy of control (as in Epictetus) refers to whatever is completely within my control *versus* whatever is completely out of my control – then it is an idealistic abstraction, and not useful. (And I suspect that idealism is exactly how the Stoics saw it.)

For me, I think more in terms of likely effective agency – given the circumstances and my own abilities. That may be more “loosey-goosey,” but it’s also more pragmatic. What *can* I reasonably do in this situation? What can I reasonably *choose*? And what will be the likely outcome? (And the Epicurean trichotomy of desires comes right into play here.)

With regard to happiness, I equate it with pleasure (mental or physical, kinetic or katastematic). If I’m happy, I’m enjoying some pleasure. In that sense, I translate (for myself) *eudaimonia* as “happy well-being.” In that sense, I don’t find the word problematic, nor think of it solely as just an immediate “rush” of feeling (and I’m really not sure that most people do think of it only that way). But it is a term that needs to be unpacked (Emily Austin, it seems to me, does a good job of that).

To cast it all in a lighter, humorous frame, here is a cartoon I once posted elsewhere (especially the last two panels):



Post by “Cassius” of March 10, 2026 at 3:18 PM

[Quote from Pacatus](#)

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...ith regard to happiness, I equate it with pleasure (mental or physical, kinetic or katastematic). If I'm happy, I'm enjoying some pleasure. In that sense,

which calls to my mind Pacatus the question of whether to view happiness as *complete* pleasure or as some predominance of pleasure over pain. That seems to be a major point of dispute - whether to consider someone happy even when they are experiencing some degree of pain.

That's a hurdle that has to be overcome in the analysis of "absence of pain." Those who want things COMPLETELY under their control seem likely to insist on happiness being TOTAL absence of pain. I don't think Epicurus viewed it as helpful to see things in such black and white terms. Pleasure may be the "opposite" of pain, and pain not be present when pleasure is present, but if someone thinks that "I can't have any pleasure, or any happiness, at all so long as I am experiencing any pain," then they have set themselves up for failure.

Which I why I don't think Epicurus thought in those terms, and why we have to parse the meaning carefully.

Post by “Pacatus” of March 10, 2026 at 5:10 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

I don't think Epicurus viewed it as helpful to see things in such black and white terms

Totally agree, with all of this post. 😊

Post by “Don” of March 11, 2026 at 4:29 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

if someone thinks that "I can't have any pleasure, or any happiness, at all so long as I am experiencing any pain," then they have set themselves up for failure.

Well put.

Along those lines, Epicurus himself was experiencing severe pain in his last days but could also call that time blissful (μακαρίαν "blessed" aka like a god) and could experience the pleasure of the "gladness of mind" (χαῖρον a kinetic pleasure). That seems to me a perfect embodiment of what Epicurean eudaimonia encompasses.