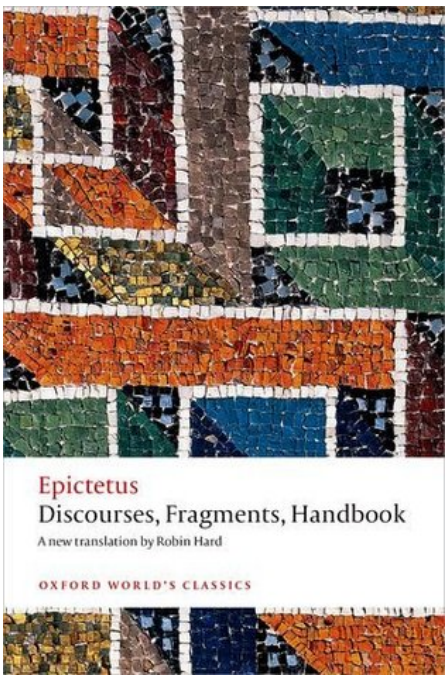

Discourses, Fragments, Handbook

Epictetus , Robin Hard (Translator) , Christopher Gill (Introduction/Notes)

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'About things that are within our power and those that are not.' Epictetus' *Discourses* have been the most widely read and influential of all writings of Stoic philosophy, from antiquity onwards. They set out the core ethical principles of Stoicism in a form designed to help people put them into practice and to use them as a basis for leading a good human life. Epictetus was a teacher, and a freed slave, whose discourses have a vivid informality, animated by anecdotes and dialogue. Forceful, direct, and challenging, their central message is that the basis of happiness is up to us, and that we all have the capacity, through sustained reflection and hard work, of achieving this goal. They still speak eloquently to modern readers seeking meaning in their own lives.

This is the only complete modern translation of the *Discourses*, together with the *Handbook* or manual of key themes, and surviving fragments. Robin Hard's accurate and accessible translation is accompanied by Christopher Gill's full introduction and comprehensive notes.

Discourses, Fragments, Handbook Details

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From Reader Review Discourses, Fragments, Handbook for online ebook

C.K. Shaw says

The Stoics provide a powerful answer to the question of how one should live life. In the Stoic view, living a satisfying life requires the recognition of what lies within the sphere of one's power and what lies without. Epictetus very convincingly argues that the only thing that is entirely within one's power is one's choice. He recommends that we use our power of choice to exercise virtue, which is the only good, and avoid placing any of our concern or happiness in the "indifferents", such as health, wealth, or status. According to the Stoics, this approach to life grants us true freedom as absolutely nothing can harm us because nothing can touch our power of choice. Thus, destructive emotions and thoughts become unnecessary, and one is free from the only prison that actually exists: the prison of the mind whose bars are the improper desires and aversions we create out of ignorance. The Stoics place heavy emphasis on rationality, living in accordance with nature, and support their position by arguing that rationality is central to human nature. This school of thought provides very **clear, rational, and timeless advice** for developing a more fulfilling and ethical orientation toward life. While some might think that the Stoic goal might not be ideal or achievable, I think incorporating even a little of the Stoic approach would provide a lot of benefit to not only yourself, but also to everyone with whom you come into contact.

After reading the works of the three most popular ancient Stoics (Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Epictetus), I have enjoyed Epictetus the most. He conveys the Stoic philosophy in a very powerful way, elucidating his points with evocative metaphors and illustrations. Moreover, **this translation is clear, concise, and lively**. **I highly recommend the works of Epictetus and this translation specifically!**

Paola says

After reading the Handbook, all I want to be in life now is a Stoic.

Joe Newell says

One of the most important books I've ever encountered. Life changing.

Garret says

Mildly redundant but nonetheless worthwhile. Full of practical and applicable wisdom.

Michael Baranowski says

My favorite Stoic, and in my favorite everyday translation. The Loeb hardback versions look prettier, but

they cost more and - even more importantly - there's no Kindle version.

Joan Porte says

Well I'm not completely happy with the translation this is a very interesting look at an early philosopher. It is amazing how many of his concepts are Buddhist in nature.

Roy Lotz says

> *But to begin with, keep well away of what is stronger than you. If a pretty girl is set against a young man who is just making a start on philosophy, that is no fair contest.*

Epictetus forms one part of the triad of classic stoic authors, along with Seneca and Marcus Aurelius.

Born a slave, sent into exile, never rich nor powerful, he certainly had more need of the stoic philosophy than Aurelius, an emperor, or Seneca, a senator. His course of life was closer to that of Socrates. Like Plato's hero (and unlike Plato himself), Epictetus did not trouble himself with questions of logic, epistemology, or metaphysics. His concern was ethics; his aim was to learn how to live the best possible life. Also like Socrates, he did not write anything down himself. All of "his" works were set to paper by his pupil, Arrian.

In character, too, he is far removed from either Aurelius or Seneca. Aurelius's voice is intimate and frank; he speaks as a friend. Seneca is sophisticated, suave, and cosmopolitan; he is easy to imagine as a witty dinner guest. Epictetus is like a sassy staff-sergeant. His mode is vituperation; he is a teacher who will mock and chide you into shape. The basic idea of his philosophy could hardly be simpler. His goal is only to instill this idea into your mind so deeply that it reforms your whole character.

What is his philosophy? The basic message is this. The external world is ultimately outside of our control. We cannot determine whether we will be rich or poor, whether our loved ones will die, whether we will be banished, imprisoned, or executed, whether we will be favored or persecuted by the emperor, whether we will get sick, whether other people will like us, or a thousand other things. The outside world—the world outside our minds—will always be able to overpower us, outmaneuver us, and surprise us.

Only the internal world is within our control. This is what Epictetus calls the "realm of choice." We cannot choose our circumstances, but we can choose how we react to those circumstances. We cannot, for example, prevent ourselves from being robbed; but we can choose not to place value in our jewelry, and so maintain peace of mind in the event of a robbery. Everything, even our lives and our loved ones, only has value because we give it value with our minds. You can laugh at your own executioner if you don't regard execution as an evil. This power—the power to change our attitude towards the external world—Epictetus regards as the ultimate and quintessential human faculty. This is the power of choice, and constitutes human freedom.

> 'He has been taken off to prison.'—What has happened? He has been taken off to prison. But the observation 'Things have gone badly for him' is something that each person adds for himself.

He is unwaveringly concerned with the practical rather than the theoretical. This book is full of castigation for philosophy students who consider themselves successful when they can satisfactorily summarize and refute a logical argument. Logic is just a plaything, Epictetus says, and all this argument is entirely besides the point. How will you react when you're in a ship that's being tossed about in a storm? How will you react if you're banished or if your loved one dies? How will you face death? Remember, he says, that books are ultimately just another external good, like money or power, and by prizing them, like any external good, we simply make ourselves victims of circumstances.

Epictetus's stoicism is more explicitly deistic than Seneca's or Aurelius's. He regards all humans as children of God (Zeus), whom he pictures as running every detail of the universe. Thus a large part of his philosophy consists of acting in accordance with God. If you want to live in Rome, but circumstances prevent it, don't whine and moan, but accept that God has other plans for you. If you go bankrupt and end up a beggar, accept this new role and play your part in the grand design. To reject God's plan is foolish impiety. It is to overlook all of the blessing bestowed on you—not least life itself—and focus on one small part of the universe that you find unpleasant: *"So because of one miserable leg, slave, you're going to cast reproaches against the universe?"* (Epictetus was lame in one leg.)

Although sometimes Epictetus pictures Zeus as a personal god, for the most part it is easy to see his Zeus as merely a personalization of the universe. In any case, Epictetus's conception of death is entirely materialistic. There is no afterlife; death is the end of existence. But it is only an end from your point of view. The materials of your body will be released and used for other things. Indeed, says Epictetus, we really do not possess anything. Everything—our house, our family, our body itself—is just on a loan from the universe. If Zeus asks for it back, we would be rude to refuse.

Books like these can easily become moralizing and unpleasant; but this one is saved by Epictetus's rollicking humor and puckish wit. Epictetus is often shown discoursing with a pupil, upbraiding, reprimanding, scolding, chiding, and finally encouraging. His style is distinguished by its relentless use of rhetorical questions. For a philosopher, he can be rather cheeky:

> I must die; so must I die groaning too? I must be imprisoned; so must I grieve at that too? I must depart into exile; so can anyone prevent me from setting off with a smile, cheerfully and serenely?

The only thing that makes this book occasionally unpleasant to read is its repetitiveness. The same ideas are put forward in a hundred different ways; the same theme is returned to again and again. There is little plan or order to the sections. There is no grand unifying scheme, merely a succession of chapters haphazardly arranged. I should admit, however, that this repetition can be partly excused by the need of a moralist to firmly instill his principles: *"One should know that it isn't easy for a person to arrive at a firm judgment unless, day after day, he states and hears the same principles, and at the same time applies them to his life."*

There are theoretical troubles, too. I could not entirely agree with his division of the universe into things falling within or without the sphere of choice. Surely it is more accurate to think of a scale, or a gradation, of things more or less within our power. We can minutely influence an election, we can somewhat influence our friends, we can usually control our bodies, and we can almost always control our attitude. Thus, instead of saying "Only worry about things within the sphere of choice," it would be more accurate to say "Only worry about things insofar as your choices can affect them." And then, even so, in practice it is so often difficult to tell whether we are fulfilling our duties to the best of our abilities.

This is related to another theoretical weakness. The stoics make much ado about living in harmony with

nature (or Zeus). And yet, how can anyone act otherwise? If we are a part of nature, and bound by her laws, how can any of our actions be out of sync with nature? Let's say, for example, that you get banished from Rome. Epictetus advises you to accept your fate as God's will and make a new life. To protest your fate would be to act against nature. But what if it's Zeus's (or whoever's) will that you protest? And how can Epictetus know that, by protesting, you won't be readmitted to the capital? Maybe your protest will be an event in the history of Rome and change the practice of banishment forever?

By this I am led to another potential shortcoming in Epictetus's system: fatalism. If everyone is entirely responsible for their own peace of mind, and if circumstances play no role in human happiness, then there is no reason to help anybody or to try to improve the world: *"If anyone suffers misfortune, remember that he suffers it through his own fault, since God created all human beings to enjoy happiness, to enjoy peace of mind."* Again, in this situation I think Epictetus's hard division between things outside or within our control blinds him to the dialogue between attitude and circumstances that comprise human life and happiness.

The modern use of the word "stoic"—someone imperturbable, unemotional, unfeeling—is not entirely accurate as regards the original stoics. Seneca was witty, cosmopolitan, and certainly not unfeeling. Yet in Epictetus we see this stereotype borne out more accurately. The majority of these dialogues is concerned with avoiding disturbance and maintaining peace of mind. Epictetus is constantly warning his pupils what not to do, what actions, people, and things to avoid in order to be properly philosophical. Very little is said about the joys of life. Indeed, unlike Seneca, who was a fan of Epicurus, Epictetus repeatedly denounces Epicureans without seeming to understand their doctrine.

These criticisms are minor when I consider that this book is easily one of the greatest books on the art of living that I have yet read. So often Epictetus seems to be speaking directly to me, with frightening relevance. He is not interested in any of my excuses, but shames me into virtue with his sharp-tongued and good-natured scolding. And it is, perhaps, unfair to criticize the theory of a philosophy whose end is practice. For my part, Epictetus is easily the most powerful of the three classic stoic authors, one who I will be sure to return to when life tosses me about.

Anna says

These times in which we now live demand normal daily functioning, combined with active resistance to viciously regressive political forces, in a chaotic atmosphere of propaganda and violence. For some this state of being is nothing new, but for white left-wingers in the UK and US, I suspect it's largely novel and shocking. Personally, I find the current state of things (which I dread to think of as a new normal) horrifying and depressing, as I discussed in this review. Amongst other coping mechanisms, I'm finding thoughtful non-fiction helpful. Stoic philosophy seemed appropriate in part because it is one of the roots of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This ancestry was often evident while I read; Epictetus demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of psychology many centuries before such a discipline existed.

It was interesting to read Epictetus as an atheist. Central to his Stoic teaching is the need to resign yourself, ideally in a joyful spirit, to all that outside your control. Epictetus assigns this realm to God/the gods/Zeus, effectively interchangeable terms. When applying this to myself, I experimented with reading God as fate, destiny, chaos, and simply the universe. Since I don't specifically believe in a preordained fate or destiny, I was most comfortable interpreting what's outside my control broadly as 'shit that happens'. I don't think that anyone or anything is in control, but things happen nonetheless. If anything, I think this atheist reading strengthens Epictetus' arguments. If there is no God deciding your way in life, all the more reason to

carefully contemplate your impressions and actions. Railing against the chaos of the universe is no more helpful than condemning the capriciousness of God or gods.

I went through Epictetus at approximately half my usual reading speed, as I am unaccustomed to philosophy and wanted to understand it as best I could. The experience was rewarding. Epictetus has much to say about freedom and a good life that resonates today. It's tempting to see Stoicism as passive and fatalistic, but I came to consider that a function of modern individualism and impatience. Epictetus makes it clear that Stoic philosophy is not something you read in a book, or a fashion choice (he specifically complains about hipsters dressing 'philosophically'!), but an integral part of daily life. To simplify, he seems to say that you should live a good life insofar as you can: consider all your behaviour carefully, be content with what you have, accept that all things are fleeting, and quietly set a good example rather than evangelising. This, it seems, will bring you true freedom and happiness. The term Stoic has become synonymous with uncomplaining suffering, which isn't really what Epictetus advocates. He suggests that you aim not to suffer at all, to accept what is outside your control and be happy about the little that is within it. He does accept this is very difficult, perhaps impossible for many, and he struggles himself. Which doesn't mean, he argues, that everyone shouldn't aspire to it:

> ”And you, are you free?” the man asks.
> By the gods, I want to be and pray to be, but I'm not yet able to look my masters in the face, I still attach value to my poor body, and take care to keep it whole and sound, despite the fact that it isn't so. But I can show you a free man, to save from having to search any longer for an example. Diogenes was free.

Diogenes the Cynic and Socrates are the two most often cited by Epictetus as good examples to follow, both men he describes as humble, ascetic, and unafraid to speak unwanted truths to power. I found this comment arresting:

> Only, consider at what price you're willing to sell your power of choice. If nothing else, make sure, man, that you don't sell it cheap. But what is great and exceptional is perhaps the province of others, of Socrates and people of that kind.

In addition to personal ethical endeavour, Epictetus talks of humans (just men, inevitably) as citizens, going to so far as to lecture on how antisocial it is not to keep yourself clean. I liked this part:

> ...If you consider yourself as a human being and as a part of some whole, it may be in the interest of the whole that you should now fall ill, now embark on a voyage and be exposed to danger, now suffer poverty, and perhaps even die before your time. Why do you resent this, then? Don't you know that in isolation a foot is no longer a foot, and that you likewise will no longer be a human being? What, then, is a human being? A part of a city, first of all that which is made up of gods and human beings, then that which is closest to us and which we call a city, which is a microcosm of the universal city.

Stoicism thus refutes passivity, as it makes clear that the good citizen should be prepared to stand up for what is good and right, if necessary dying for it. Discourse 2.10 asks you to ‘consider who you are’ and then lists the three most important answers: a human being, a citizen of the world, a son, and a brother. Each of these roles requires certain standards of behaviour; Epictetus is arguing for civic virtue as well as personal disregard of material possessions and other worldly benefits.

The elements of CBT can be found most specifically in two dialogues: 3.8 on training yourself to deal with impressions (the cognitive) and 2.18 on the cultivation of habits (the behavioural). Both of these approaches are very helpful in dealing with distress: the first involves stepping back from your feelings to analyse and try to alter them, the second cultivating behaviours that calm your mind. Epictetus is aspiring beyond the alleviation of distress, of course, towards true freedom and happiness. He describes the former vividly:

> So accordingly, that person who doesn’t allow himself to be overpowered by pleasure, or by suffering, or by glory, or by wealth, and who is capable, whenever he thinks fit, of spitting his entire miserable body into some tyrant’s face and taking his leave - to what can such a man still be a slave, to whom can he still be subject?

That certainly seems like something worth aspiring to. Perhaps more immediately applicable was the commentary on reading in discourse 4.4, in which Epictetus points out that reading should be for a purpose: to help you live better. Thus time spent outside books is an opportunity to put into practise all that you’ve read. I think he has a good point there, although I greatly enjoy a bit of escapist reading. I also sympathise with his dislike of having a body, which is after all a real drag:

> At any rate, we love our body and take care of it, the most unpleasant and foulest of all things. [...] In truth, it is amazing that we should love something for which we have to perform so many services day after day. I stuff this sack here, and then I empty it; what could be more tedious? But I have to serve God; and for that reason, I stay here and put up with having to wash this poor wretched body of mine, and feed it, and shelter it.

Interjections like this prevent the reader becoming tired of Epictetus’ lecturing style, which often sounds a lot like browbeating to the unaccustomed ear. I found the whole book both thought-provoking and accessible, undoubtedly aided by the relative informality of the translation style. (The notes at the end were terribly stolid, however.) There is definitely something to be said for Stoicism, for focusing on what you can do rather than what you can’t, for cultivating a healthy mind (and leaving the body to itself), for disregarding material things and accepting that nothing lasts. I was reminded of the recently-read novel Stoner, which concerns a man with definite Stoic tendencies but much more concern for his family roles than any wider civic responsibility.

I will end this rambling review with my two favourite quotes from the book, the first found in the Handbook:

> Never say about anything, ‘I’ve lost it,’ but rather, ‘I’ve given it back’. Your child has died? It has been given back. Your wife has died? She has been given back. ‘My farm has been taken from me’. Well, that too has been given back. ‘Yes, but the man who took it is a rogue’. What

> does it matter to you through what person the one who gave it to you demanded it back? So long as he entrusts it to you, take care of it as something that isn’t your own, as travellers treat an inn.

The second, a delightfully gothic epigram, I found amongst the Fragments:

> You’re a little soul carrying a corpse around.

Am I alone in finding that curiously comforting? I recommend Epictetus as a boost to mental fortitude when the daily news seems determined crush your peace of mind.

Davidius says

http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epi...

"Suffering arises from trying to control what is uncontrollable, or from neglecting what is within our power."

Need re-reading over time. Currently like:

1. The things in our control are by nature free, unrestrained, unhindered; but those not in our control are weak, slavish, restrained, belonging to others. Remember, then, that if you suppose that things which are slavish by nature are also free, and that what belongs to others is your own, then you will be hindered.
> know self vs else; control former not worry latter

11. Never say of anything, 'I have lost it'; but, 'I have returned it.'...While he gives it to you to possess, take care of it; but don't view it as your own, just as travelers view a hotel.
> steward not own

13. If you want to improve, be content to be thought foolish and stupid with regard to external things...For, it is difficult to both keep your faculty of choice in a state conformable to nature, and at the same time acquire external things. But while you are careful about the one, you must of necessity neglect the other.
> grow inner over outer

19. You may be unconquerable, if you enter into no combat in which it is not in your own control to conquer...for, if the essence of good consists in things in our own control, there will be no room for envy or emulation...don't wish to be a general, or a senator, or a consul, but to be free; and the only way to this is a contempt of things not in our own control.
> how to win

46. Never call yourself a philosopher, nor talk a great deal among the unlearned about theorems, but act conformably to them...Thus, therefore, do you likewise not show theorems to the unlearned, but the actions produced by them after they have been digested.
> show/act over tell

Kathy Lu says

Mind Opening, Great Thoughts for Pondering.

Philipp says

> How much longer will you delay before you think yourself worthy of what is best, and transgress in nothing the distinctions that reason imposes? You've acquired knowledge of the philosophical principles that you ought to accept, and have accepted them. What kind of teacher, then, are you still waiting for, that you should delay any effort to reform yourself until he appears? You're no longer a youth; you're a full-grown man. If you're now negligent and idle, and are constantly making one delay after another, and setting one day and then another as the date after which you'll devote proper attention to yourself, then you'll fail to appreciate that you're making no progress, but will continue to be a layman your whole life through until you die.
> So you should think fit from this moment to live as an adult and as one who is making progress; and let everything that seems best to you be an inviolable law for you. And if you come up against anything that requires an effort, or is pleasant, or is glorious or inglorious, remember that this is the time of the contest, that the Olympic Games have now arrived, and that there is no possibility of further delay, and that it depends on a single day and single action whether progress is to be lost or secured.

Three books in one, all overlap, none actually written by Epictetus but by students of his - Discourses is in the form of monologues with occasional student questions and makes up about 3/4 of the collection, Fragments are a few aphorisms, and Handbook is somewhat of a FAQ of stoicism. They all overlap, and if you're pressed on time, the Handbook alone may be enough. The Discourses have some parts that are interesting as windows into a different time than for their philosophy (there's a whole chapter where Epictetus gets angry about a student who spends too much time on his looks - then there's another one later where Epictetus gets angry about some people being too dirty).

Epictetus certainly wasn't easy to discuss with, he's got a style of discussion which you nowadays see only on 4chan ("Whom do you want to please? The women? Then please them as a man. 'Yes, but they like smooth-bodied men.' Go hang yourself."), but it's entertaining and easy to read - the gist being that we as humans have only a small sphere of choice where our influence counts, and that is inside us - everything outside that (including our body) is outside our sphere of choice, so why should we care about what happens there? It's not exactly the attitude that let's you change the world, but it's something to keep in mind when you live in a hyperconnected society that gives you information on every single fart at the other end of the world.

Having written that, there are some choice bits here on how to live:

> It is difficulties that reveal what men amount to; and so, whenever you're struck by a difficulty, remember that God, like a trainer in the gymnasium, has matched you against a tough young opponent.

P.S.:

> Does a horse roll around in the mud, or even a well-bred dog? No, but pigs do, and filthy geese, and worms, and spiders

spiders used to be weird

Kevin Smith says

One of my favorite translations; up there with William Abbott Oldfather's. It also includes a helpful footnotes and index. Recommended.

Jaidyn says

This really is the best modern translation of the works of Epictetus you can find today. It is highly accurate while also being very readable for modern audiences, whether for scholars or non-scholars.
Epictetus is mostly known in and outside of the Stoic community for his Enchiridion, but that is only a summary of his Discourses, of which this book has all 4.
If you are non-religious, he can come off slightly preachy, but his religion is more of a pantheistic type. Yes he mentions Zeus and the other gods, but even so it is very applicable to anyone including those who are much more atheist/secular.
There are other versions of the works of Epictetus out there that are even easier to read than this one, but they either don't have all of the writings, or there are some that are only selections leaving out some of the Discourses.
The first Discourse has 30 sections,
The second and third have 26 sections,
and the fourth has only 13 for 95 sections within 4 Discourses (chapters) in total.
This also contains fragments of his writings, and the Enchiridion.

Suffice it to say, this ranks as one of the best books a person can buy, and this translation in particular.

Zezan says

The most clearly written and manual-like of the big three Stoic texts. I found the Discourses hard to read at first, but progressively I came to realise they were covering the same core themes and so found them more

easy to digest and enjoyable, as the core ideas began to sink in. The Handbook I found to be a good summary to read after the Discourses.

Önder Kurt says

This is a good guide for those who aspire to learn how to die an honorable and dignified death and how to live a wretched and miserable life elegantly. Too much repetition though. Same principles are put forward over and over again through different metaphors.

Stoicism is vulnerable to be abused by Libertarians who sorely need for their superficial, childish egocentricism. If not properly defeneded, it can be marketed as a new ideology for Capitalistic individualism against collectivitism , a new kind of “opium” in an age of declining religiosity, to make working classes to embrace their wretched conditions with an air of philosophical attitude. Take this passage for an example:

“.but I for my part have someone whom I must please, whom I must submit to, whom I must obey, namely, God, and after him, myself. [12] He has commended me to myself, and has brought it about that my choice should be subject to myself alone, giving me rules for the right use of it; and when I follow those rules with due care, I pay no heed to anyone who says anything different, I give no thought to anyone who makes use of equivocal arguments. [13] Why do I get annoyed, then, with those who criticize me in the most important matters? Why should I be troubled in that way?” 4.12.11
