

## **The Wisdom to Know the Difference Distinguishing between What We Can and Can't Control**

**By  
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November 4, 2018**

Last month I introduced the topic of Stoicism, a 2,300-year-old school of thought that helped move Greek philosophy from the abstract to the practical and personal. It emerged at a time in Greek society during which, much like today, as Samuel Enoch Stumpf puts it, “individual citizens lost the sense of their own importance and their ability to control or perfect their social and political destiny. Individuals increasingly felt this loss over collective life as they were absorbed into the growing Roman Empire.”<sup>1</sup> In short, things had gotten real, and everything was too troubling and uncertain for anyone to spend much time worrying about abstract ideas that didn’t help them feel better about the world. They wanted to know how they were going to get through the takeover of their country by an authoritarian government, through the shock, the depression, the powerlessness, the uncertainty of all that was going on. They needed a way to keep their sanity, to take heart, and to still make a difference. They wanted some control, something to help them feel empowered.

Stoicism helped because it was one of only three philosophical movements at the time that made philosophy personal and practical, the other two being Epicureanism and Cynicism; hedonism and asceticism, respectively. Stoicism was more the middle-way, allowing its adherents to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, so long as doing so didn’t interfere with what matters most, maintaining peace of mind and doing what is right whatever the circumstances. Virtue is the greatest good, they thought, because it is the only thing that is useful in all circumstances. Virtue—which they defined as wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance—is always in one’s control no matter what’s happening. We may not have control of much else, they thought, but we can control our attitude and our response to what’s going on around us.

To maintain what the stoics called, *eudaimonia*, a “good spirit,” the life worth living, they developed several practices to keep their, *ataraxia*, their “peace of mind.” These included *premeditatio malorum*, “foreseeing bad things.” Through negative visualization they imagined what it might be like to lose the things most valuable to them, their wealth, their possessions, their reputations, their loved ones, even their own lives; not to become desensitized to loss, but to appreciate what they had. The stoics believed one of the greatest threats to our tranquility was our chronic desire for what we don’t have, due to a lack of appreciation for what is already ours. Thus, regularly imagining what it might be like to be without such things makes us more grateful and, thus, content with what we have.

They also regularly kept account of and meditated on their daily successes and failings to help them be more aware of what’s working in their lives and what isn’t, of the patterns to encourage and those to be abandoned. They also practiced self-denial, not fulfilling every

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<sup>1</sup> Stumpf, Samuel Enoch, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, NY, 1971, 1983, p. 106.

craving, to teach themselves they can live without satisfying every want and still be happy. Sometimes they even practiced discomfort, doing things they didn't like doing, like taking a cold bath or going hungry until they were truly starving, to practice keeping a positive attitude even when things aren't optimal, and to toughen themselves up. Stoics didn't pamper themselves or think they had a right to always be comfortable. Stoicism accepts that life is painful and unjust, and we better find a way to deal with it, not just complain about it.

Being in harmony with nature was also a key component of stoic practice. Every creature must be true to its own nature, they thought, and it is human nature to be social and reasonable. To be human means being in relationship with and caring about the welfare of others, and to use our power of reason to make society better for everyone. So stoics practiced logic. Musonius Rufus said, "to shun selfishness and to have a high regard for fairness and, being a human being, to wish to help and to be unwilling to harm one's fellow [humans] is the noblest lesson, and it makes those who learn it just."<sup>2</sup>

But the stoic discipline I want to most focus on now, which is also central to understanding stoic philosophy, is its *dichotomy of control*. Even if we don't practice negative visualization, self-denial, or discomfort, and if we aren't very social or logical, so long as we practice this principle we are well on our way to being good stoics. The *Serenity Prayer* may be the best example of this dichotomy and the dilemma it presents. It's been made familiar through the AA program, and is attributed to theologian Richard Niebuhr, who, though not himself a stoic, often referenced stoicism.

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,  
The courage to change the things I can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.*

It seems a simple supplication, but it suggests how confusing it can be to distinguish between what we can and can't control. The very first line of Stoic philosopher, Epictetus' *Handbook* states, "Of all existing things some are in our power, and others are not in our power."<sup>3</sup> Epictetus goes on to distinguish precisely the things he thought we *cannot* change and those we *can*; "In our power are thought, impulse, will to get and will to avoid, and, in a word, everything which is our own doing. Things not in our power include the body, property, repudiation, office, and, in a word, everything which is not in our doing."<sup>4</sup> Coming from one who was born a slave and with a disability, Epictetus' list of things he considered not in our control shouldn't be surprising—essentially what happens to our body and our social status. For these same reasons, what he felt is in our control shouldn't be surprising either, namely, our attitude and how we respond to whatever circumstances befall us. Can we remain true to our values no matter what?

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<sup>2</sup> Lutz, Cora E., *Musonius Rufus: "The Roman Socrates"*, *Yale Classical Studies Vol. 10*, Bellinger, Alfred R., ed., Yale University Press, U.S., 1947, p. 49.

<sup>3</sup> Oates, W.J., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers*, Random House, New York, NY, 1940, p. 468.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Nowadays, since the advent of psychology, we may not agree as easily that our thoughts and impulses, or our values for that matter, are completely within our control. They may well be driven by unconscious forces and social conditioning, including the desire to fit in with others and to be safe by doing and believing what is expected of us. And even if we are conscious of some of the negative drives motivating us, perhaps through lots of therapy or learning the hard way, they can still be difficult to control. We can practice breathing techniques to shift our mood, or try counting to ten before reacting to a situation, or take up yoga or Tai Chi to help us develop a calmer demeanor, and still our emotions can sometimes get the best of us. But if we agree things like our thoughts, impulses, and values are at the core our identity and, thus, should be in our control, then we at least have the power to regularly question our motivations, so we may better trust our thoughts, feelings, values, and even our responses, are authentic. As Socrates said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Unlike ancient Roman society, in which people were born into slavery and its existence was believed to be ordained by Zeus—that if God willed it, that is, our bodies belonged to others—today more and more of us demand the right to control our own bodies. This is what the Me Too movement is all about, and why we struggle for reproductive freedom, and why many now recognize both athletics and mass incarceration are an extension of slavery because they allows others to profit from the use of black bodies, in particular, and to control their wills, especially by preventing them from voting and having political power of their own. For the first time, the injustice of this system is being exposed and called into question. But even if things improve and bodily autonomy becomes a norm for everyone in our society, none of us can have complete control over what happens to our bodies. We can’t prevent sometimes getting sick, or injured, or stop them from eventually dying.

Whatever is on our list of the things we can and can’t control, Epictetus makes a good point in stating, “Things in our power are by nature free, unhindered, and untrammelled; things not in our power are weak, servile, subject to hindrance, dependent on others.”<sup>5</sup> If this is so, then it’s good news because the things we can control are the things worth controlling, and the things we can’t, aren’t usually worth controlling to begin with. Yet how many of us spend most our time worrying about the things we can’t control that are of no real use, instead of concentrating on the important things we can? If we worry about the things we can’t control, Epictetus further remarks, “you will be hampered, you will mourn, you will be put to confusion, you will blame gods and [others],”<sup>6</sup> but if we worry about what is in our power to change, he says, “no one will ever put compulsion or hindrance on you, you will blame none, you will accuse none, you will do nothing against your will, no one will harm you, you will have no enemy, for no harm can touch you!”<sup>7</sup>

That’s a pretty bold statement! Epictetus, a disabled slave, sounds more like an invincible superhero, so powerful nothing and nobody could stop him, overpower him, or harm him. He wasn’t made of steel, of course. His body wasn’t more powerful than locomotive. He couldn’t move faster than a speeding bullet or leap over tall buildings in a single bound. What

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

he meant, rather, is that he and he alone had control over how he responded to his circumstances. Even death was of no concern for the stoic because he believed his body was not his own to begin with, that in death, he said, he would, “gives back what is not his own.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, this attitude, which he believed was in his complete control, may have been more the unconscious biproduct of his Hellenistic society, which presumed a mind/body duality. It’s certainly too dualistic for my philosophical tastes, but whether we believe we have a spirit or soul that’s separate from our body or not, I think we’d all agree that eventually our bodies perish and, until science or medicine can prevent it, this is something none of us has any control over. So, worrying too much about our bodies should go on the list of things that weaken, enslave, hinder, and make us dependent.

But what we want to mostly focus on here is “the wisdom to know the difference” between what we can and can’t control. It’s easy to spend a lot of time regretting the past, for instance, or being upset about present circumstances. But if we focus too much of our energy on, say, what happened during the last national election, or wishing whoever is in office now wasn’t, our energy is mostly wasted. Fantasizing about how things should have been or should be may give us brief solace, until we come back to reality, but, chances are, imagining things that aren’t true and will never be true will only lead to more disappointment. As Epictetus says, “It is impossible that happiness, and yearning for what is not present, should ever be united.”<sup>9</sup> When it comes to the past and immediate present, we need “the serenity to accept the things we cannot change” if we are to have *ataraxia*, peace of mind.

Although we can’t control the future, we may have some power to influence how some things end up. It’s easy to feel powerless when we focus too much on the past, or can’t cope with the way things are, because we truly are powerless over these things. During the past national election, for example, some voters were so upset that Bernie Sanders wasn’t the nominee, and were rightfully angry over the Democratic National Committee’s unfair shenanigans thwarting him, that they couldn’t bring themselves to vote. It may be there were enough of them to have unintentionally impacted the outcome of the election anyway. Worrying too much about the past, or being too depressed about the present to care, can rob us of what power we do have to influence the next moment, tomorrow, and the far future. This requires us to “have the courage to change the things we can” if we are to have *ataraxia*, peace of mind.

This week, for example, we can vote in a midterm election, the outcome of which will be crucial regarding the direction our country takes in the coming months and years. Voting may seem a small, almost impotent act for one person, and, if doing so represents the extent of one person’s political power in what’s supposed to be a democracy, it is too small. A robust democracy requires more opportunities for individual citizens to engage in the political process than just slipping a ballot in the mailbox or into a voting machine. But let’s not worry about that now. The fact that the enemies of democracy, those who work against the idea of every person having an equal voice and vote, have worked so hard to weaken the power of

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<sup>8</sup> Oates, *ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>99</sup> Irvine, William B., *A Guide to the Good Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2009, p. 85.

the individual voter, especially Democratic voters, through gerrymandering voting districts using sophisticated computer algorithms, massive voter purging and draconian voter ID laws targeting minorities, trick ballots with hanging chads, mass voter disenfranchisement through a racist criminal justice system, and, at this very moment, attempting to do so by taking away the birthright citizenship of brown people, while sending thousands of troops to the southern border to prevent more brown people from coming, tells us just how powerful our votes are considered by some.

To better grasp the difference between what we can and can't control, stoic philosopher, William Irvine reminds us that what we're really talking about is a *trichotomy* of control. "There are things over which we have complete control," he says, "things over which we have no control at all, and things over which we have some but not complete control."<sup>10</sup> In gaining the wisdom to know the difference, the notion of "some control" is an important nuance. In my opinion, there's much we have no control over whatsoever, and very little, if anything, we really have complete control over. Even our attitude and will, which the stoics considered completely in our own control, may be more the product of unconscious and social forces. I'd say most of what we can control falls under this third category of "some, but not complete control." This may be why most of us think the future is also beyond our control, and why, therefore, we don't have the wisdom to know we can make a difference. Though it may not be much, however, we do have some control over the future. We may fail, that is, but we can still try to make it better, not by just voting, but by working toward the changes we hope to see in a variety of ways.

Even then, just as we can, at least, control our attitudes and responses to the past and present, we should internalize our goals for the future as much as possible. In other words, we should commit to doing our best and being our best, regardless of the outcome. We can't usually guarantee the outcome, but we can always do our best. The goal of the stoics, Irvine says, "was not to change the world, but to do their best to change it."<sup>11</sup>

Whether the future or otherwise, the wisdom to know the difference between what we can and can't control, challenges us to mostly concern ourselves with what we have some but not complete control over. On the one hand, this should provide us with some relief because we're off the hook as far as ultimate outcomes. All we must do is our best. On the other hand, knowing there's a chance of failure may discourage some from ever trying. I've often heard it said, "Don't pick a fight you can't win," or "you've got to choose your battles carefully," but if we don't risk losing, there's never any opportunity to win. When, in 2004, I vowed to stop performing weddings for anyone until I was free to perform them for everyone, especially gay and lesbian couples, I was often told, "Well you'll never perform weddings again," or, "You'll be waiting a very long time." But I was back in business just eight years later, largely because millions of people like me were sacrificing and working hard to shape the future we're now in. I've lost more battles than I've won, which, I guess, makes me more of a loser than a winner. But that's okay because winning isn't the point. The point is doing and being my best.

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<sup>10</sup> Irvine, *ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

In addition to the future, I'd add a couple other things to the list of what we have "some but not complete control" over. As I've said, psychology has shown that the ancient stoics got it wrong, that we don't necessarily have control over our thoughts, values, and attitudes, because they may be driven by unconscious forces and social pressures. Likewise, our emotions are hard to control. They usually are upon us, sweep over us, and diminish before we even know what hit us. No, we don't have complete control over our internal life, our unconscious and emotional life, though it often seems to have more control over us than we want to admit. But this doesn't mean we don't have some control. We can't help what feelings come over us, but we can control how we respond to them, or how we react to what's causing them, to others or circumstances. We may be the unwitting pawns of cultural paradigms, but we can continue to examine the worth of our beliefs, to question and challenge them, rather than thoughtlessly accepting them as common sense, or succumbing to the fear we experience whenever our ideas are challenged. We may not have complete control over our attitude, but we do have some, and sometimes that's enough to help us sustain our peace of mind.

Finally, I'd add another dimension to the dichotomy of control. In addition to the things we have complete control over, the things we have no control over, and the things we have some but not complete control over, we should consider *there are some things we have control over that we should not control*, things it would be unethical to control. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* illustrates why this is so, because sometimes our science and technology can get ahead of us. Yes, we can decapitate mountains to extract coal, but should we? Yes, we can build atomic bombs and drop them on our enemies, but should we? Yes, we will soon be able to make designer babies, something that was previously called, eugenics, but should we? There are many things our species has the power to control, but this doesn't mean it is always moral to do.

These, however, are grand examples. On a personal scale, I'd say there are two things within our power to control that we should not. Firstly, we shouldn't take on responsibilities that aren't our own. It's hard to say "no," or, "I'm sorry but I can't help," especially when we are caring persons, and there are so many worthy causes inviting our involvement. But we must allow others to have their own responses to the world, be true to ourselves, and use our time wisely, because there is only so much we can do, and only so much we should expect of ourselves. Let others deal with what is important to them, and don't feel obligated to take on someone else's "great idea," or be uncomfortable saying, "no."

This ties in with the second thing—others. We sometimes can, but we shouldn't try to control others. We shouldn't try to control their mindsets, or their feelings, or even their behavior, so long as their behavior doesn't harm or violate the rights of others. Much of human history, at least the bad parts, have been about some person or persons gaining control over others. It may not be as atrocious, but it's no less immoral for us to try controlling the minds and wills of others, forcing our wishes upon them without listening or giving others a genuine voice in the decisions impacting them. I'm so committed to this value that when I recently wanted to hold a public screening of a controversial film at our church, I called for a congregational vote and even asked that we skew the decision in favor of those who disagree

with me by requiring a two-thirds majority. I realize as the minister here I have a lot of political influence and could have tried pushing my will through, but this would have been unethical, and ultimately destructive and unloving. There are so many tricks we use against others to manipulate them into getting our way that I won't take time trying to outline them. It must be enough to acknowledge that dominating the wills of others just to get our way is a poor way of relating to the world. Just because we can control others, doesn't mean we should.

Today there are many things that overwhelm us and seem out of our control. News about Global Warming and the destruction of the environment becomes more alarming each day. Yet another authoritarian leader was put into power just this week in Brazil. There have been so many mass shootings in our country, and no responses to our cries for change, we've finally stopped asking. Income inequality, White Nationalism, fascism, and the list of things that seem beyond our control continues to mount.

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The courage to change the things we can,  
And the wisdom to know the difference.*