

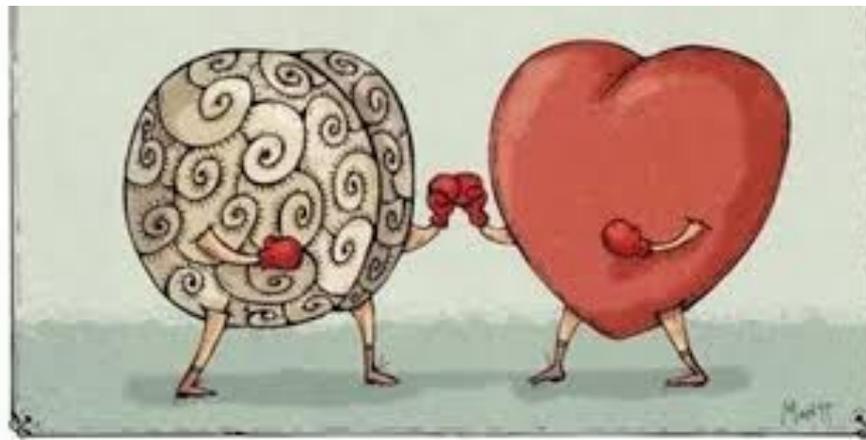
# PHI 1500: Major Issues in Philosophy

## **Session 18**

November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2015



# Philosophy of Action: Epictetus

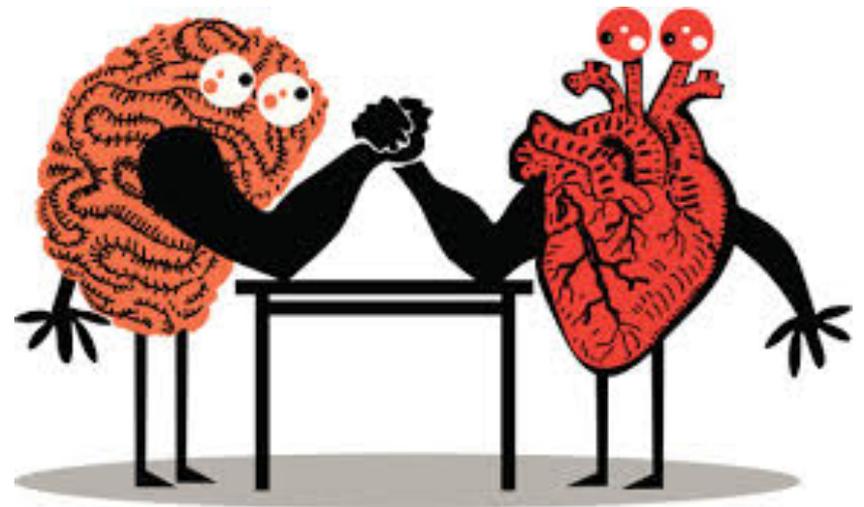


➤ **Quick poll:**

- **Is it better to make decisions by:**
  - **following your head** (reasoning through your options and going with what *seems the most logical* solution),
  - **or following your heart** (going with what *feels like the right* solution)?

– *Think about how you decided:*

- to attend Baruch
- the major you chose
- what classes to take
- what to wear today
- who to date/marry



In this brief unit on philosophy of action, we address the question:

➤ ***How should we deal with our emotions?***

» This is a *normative* issue: it concerns what we ought to do and what would be best for us.

In philosophy as in ordinary life, emotions are often pitted against reason.

- E.g., people often speak of having to choose between following their head (rational intellect) or following their heart (passionate emotions).



In the dialogue *Phaedrus* (370 BCE), Plato compared our reason to a chariot driver,

- who has to control his course by holding the reins on two wild horses, representing our desires & our emotions.
  - People seem to have something like this analogy in mind when they speak about needing to use their thoughts to ‘rein in’ their emotions.

**Epictetus** (55-135 CE) was an ancient Greek philosopher in the *Stoic* tradition.



- ***The Enchiridion*** ('The Handbook') is a guide to living, which expresses the Stoic doctrine that
  - we should avoid emotional responses at all costs, and instead cultivate cool, rational minds.
    - (Today we call someone 'stoic' if they do not feel or express emotions)
- The Stoics were **rationalists**,
  - who believed that our decisions & actions should be guided by *thought*, rather than by emotion.
    - Next class we will contrast rationalism with a **sentimentalist** view on decision-making & behavior.

***“Some things are in our control and others not.***

- Things **in our control** are *opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion,*
  - ...*whatever are **our own actions.***
- Things **not in our control** are *body, property, reputation, command,*
  - ...*whatever are **not our own actions.***

The things in our control are by nature *free, unrestrained, unhindered;*

- [Epictetus is saying that things in our control are not determined or restricted by anything except our free will,]

...but those not in our control are *weak, slavish, restrained, belonging to others.*

- [...everything else is determined by forces outside our control, like nature, a higher power, chance, other people’s wills]



*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...*

**Remember, then, that**

- **if you [confuse what is out of your control with what is in your control,]**
  - **then you will be hindered.**
  - You will lament, you will be disturbed,...you will find fault both with gods & men.” (1, ¶ 1)



**Epictetus is warning us against treating things beyond our control as if we are responsible for them.**

» He thinks we should *avoid getting emotionally invested in anything outside of our control.*

### **Argument:**

1. If **one does not respond emotionally to events beyond our control**, then **one will not get upset by those events.**
  2. **Do not respond emotionally to events beyond your control.**
  3. Consequently, **you will not get upset by those events.**
- **“...if you suppose that only to be your own which is your own,**
  - **and what belongs to others such as it really is,**
    - **then no one will ever compel you or restrain you” (1, ¶ 1)**
      - **– i.e., *you’ll never feel wronged by things beyond your control.***
      - **“...you will find fault with no one or accuse no one...**
      - **No one will hurt you, you will have no enemies, and you not be harmed.”**
        - » **Divorcing our emotions from anything beyond our control is a way of *protecting ourselves from emotional harm.***

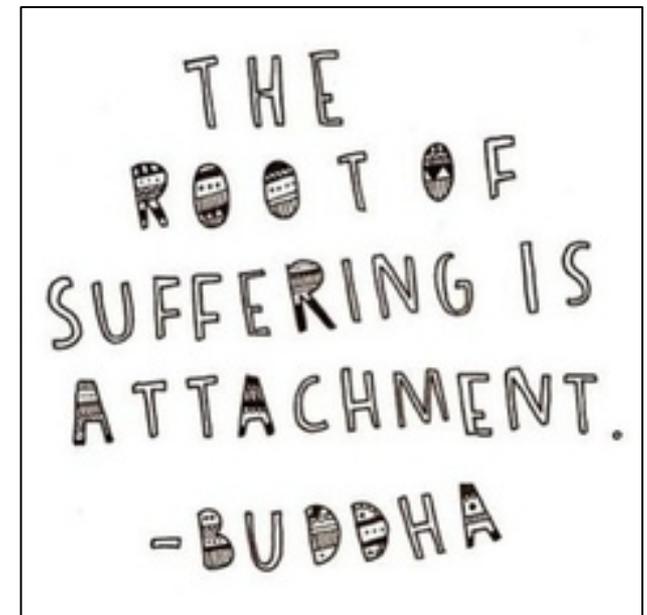
“Work, therefore to be able to say to every harsh appearance,

➤ ‘You are but an appearance, and not absolutely the thing you appear to be.’

- [He is urging us to recognize that we do *not* see things objectively,
  - but rather have some *choice* about how we interpret & relate to objects, events, people. etc.]

➤ ...then examine [any harsh appearance] by this:

- whether it concerns the things which are in our own control,
- or those which are not;
  - and, *if it concerns anything not in our control,*
    - *be prepared to say that it is nothing to you.”* (1, ¶1)



**He believes we should control our aversions, i.e. what we want to avoid.**

- ...he who fails to obtain the object of his desire is disappointed,
  - and he who incurs the object of his aversion wretched [miserable].
    - **...if you are averse to sickness, or death, or poverty, you will be wretched.**
      - ...because you are likely to encounter at least one of these things in your life, and you are powerless to prevent them from happening to you or your loved ones.
- **Remove aversion, then, from all things that are not in our control”:**
- » In other words, don't worry about avoiding what you have no power to prevent.

Even more strongly, **he advises that we “totally suppress desire:**

- for, if you desire any of the things which are not in your own control,
    - you must necessarily be disappointed;
  - and of those which are [in your control], & which it would be laudable to desire,
    - nothing is yet in your possession.” (1, ¶2)
- He thinks **we shouldn't dwell too much on things we want,** but instead **focus on making the most of what we already have.**



## Epictetus warns us against getting too attached to things or to people:

- “With regard to whatever objects give you delight, are useful, or are deeply loved,
- remember to tell yourself of what general nature they are, beginning from the most insignificant things.



- If, for example, you are fond of a specific ceramic cup,
- remind yourself that it is only ceramic cups in general of which you are fond.
  - Then, if it breaks, you will not be disturbed.”
    - You will not get torn up about losing that particular cup, and realize there are plenty of others still unbroken.
- If you kiss your child, or your wife,
- say that you only kiss things which are human,
  - and thus you will not be disturbed either of them dies.” (1-2, ¶3)
    - ...because you can just get another one?



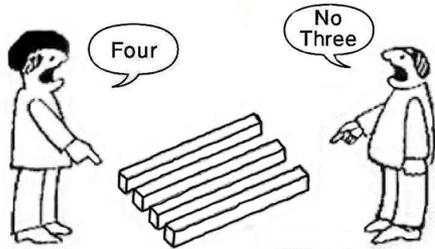
- » **Attachment cultivates strong affection,**
  - **and makes us *vulnerable* to deep grief** upon the inevitable loss of things & people.

“Life is ten percent what happens to you and ninety percent how you respond to it.”

-Lou Holtz-

Epictetus insists that our *perspective* makes all the difference in how events affect us.

- “Men are disturbed, not by things, but *by the principles and notions which they form concerning things.*
  - *Death, for instance, is not terrible, else it would have appeared so to Socrates.*
  - *But the terror consists in our notion of death that it is terrible.*
- When therefore we are hindered, or disturbed, or grieved,
  - *let us never attribute it to others, but to ourselves;*
    - *that is, to our own principles.*



- An uninstructed person will lay the fault of his own bad condition upon others.
- Someone just starting instruction will lay the fault on himself.
- Some who is perfectly instructed will place blame neither on others nor on himself.” (2, ¶ 5)

- He says our perspective is the only thing we can reasonably be *proud of*,**
- **because it is one of the few things which are truly *ours* (under our control).**
    - **“These reasonings are unconnected [i.e., each is a *non sequitur*]:**
      - "I am richer than you, therefore I am better";
      - "I am more eloquent than you, therefore I am better."
    - **The connection is rather this:**
      - "I am richer than you, therefore my property is greater than yours;"
      - "I am more eloquent than you, therefore my style is better than yours."
        - **...you, after all, are neither property nor style,"** since these don't really belong to us: we don't choose them ourselves.
    - **“Don't be prideful with any excellence that is not your own.**
      - If a horse should be prideful and say, " I am handsome," it would be supportable [i.e., acceptable].
      - But when you are prideful, and say, 'I have a handsome horse,' know that you are proud of what is, in fact, only the good of the horse.
    - **What, then, is *your own*? Only *your reaction to the appearances of things*.**
      - Thus, when you behave conformably to nature in reaction to how things appear, you will be proud with reason;
        - for you will take pride in some good of your own.” (2, ¶ 6)

## He thinks changing our perspective makes it easier to cope with *loss*:

- **“Never say of anything, ‘I have lost it’; but, ‘I have returned it.’**
  - Is your child dead? It is returned. Is your wife dead? She is returned.
  - Is your estate taken away? Well, and is not that likewise returned?
    - ‘But he who took it away is a bad man,’ [you might think].
      - What difference is it to you who the giver assigns to take it back?
    - **While [whoever] gives it to you to possess, take care of it;**
      - **but don't view it as your own, just as travelers view a hotel.”** (3, ¶11)
- “When you see anyone weeping in grief because his son has gone abroad, or is dead, or because he has suffered in his affairs,
- *be careful that the appearance may not misdirect you.*
  - Instead, **distinguish within your own mind, and be prepared to say,**
    - *‘It's **not the accident that distresses this person,***
    - ***...it is the judgment which he makes about it.’***
  - As far as words go, however, don't reduce yourself to his level,
  - and certainly do not moan with him. Do not moan inwardly either.” (3-4, ¶16)

## Epictetus recommends:

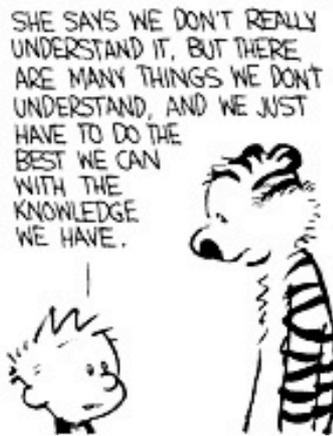
- “Let death and exile, and all other things which appear terrible be daily before your eyes...
  - and you will never entertain any abject thought, nor too eagerly covet anything.” (4, ¶ 21)
- “If you wish your children, and your wife, and your friends to live for ever, you are stupid;
  - for you wish to be in control of things which you cannot,
  - you wish for things that belong to others to be your own.
- But, if you wish **to have your desires undisappointed, this is in your own control.**
  - ***Exercise, therefore, what is in your control***
    - **namely, your attitudes towards death & tragedy.** (3, ¶ 14)
      - » *What would Epictetus say about Calvin’s response to death in the following cartoon?*
      - » *Do you agree with Epictetus on this matter?*







I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW HE EXISTED A FEW DAYS AGO AND NOW HE'S GONE FOREVER. IT'S LIKE I FOUND HIM FOR NO REASON. I HAD TO SAY GOOD-BYE AS SOON AS I SAID HELLO.





Epictetus thinks that **we should not only suppress emotions towards things that are outside of our control,**

- **but moreover, *avoid feeling* them in the first place.**

But note that **he thinks we are justified in feeling *some* emotions toward what *is within our control.***

- For example, we can be *proud* of the virtues we have cultivated,
- including our abilities to:
  - manage our emotions toward things outside of our control,
  - exercise self-restraint, patience, and moderation,
  - succeed in our occupation, etc.



## He advises that we exercise moderation:

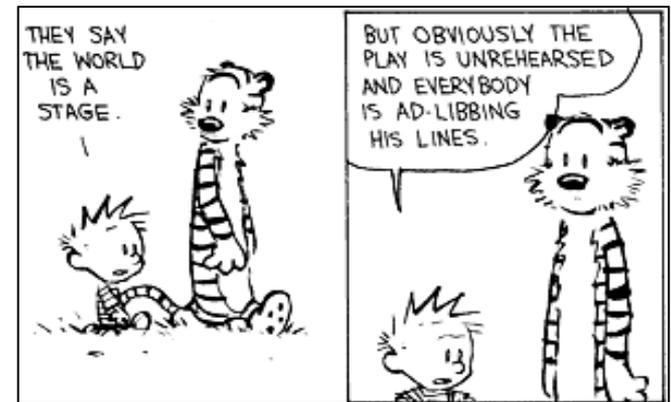
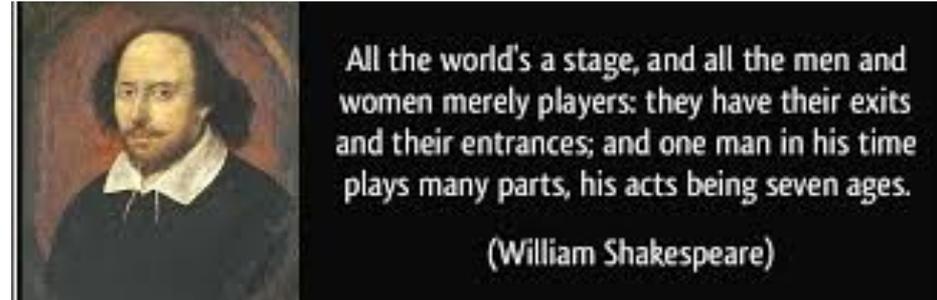


- “Remember that you must behave in life as at a dinner party.
  - Is anything brought around to you? Put out your hand and **take your share with moderation.**
  - **Does it pass by you? Don't stop it.**
  - **Is it not yet come?** Don't stretch your desire towards it, but **wait till it reaches you.**
- Do this with regard to children, to a wife, to public posts, to riches,
  - and you will eventually be a worthy partner of the feasts of the gods.”
    - » (Good things come to those who wait)
- And if you don't even take the things which are set before you, but are able even to reject them,
  - then you will not only be a partner at the feasts of the gods, but also of their empire.” (5, ¶15)
    - » Best case scenario is that you have so much control over your desires that you can restrain yourself entirely.



## Another metaphor he uses is:

- “...you are an actor in a drama [a play], of such a kind as the author pleases to make it.
  - If short, of a short one;
  - if long, of a long one.
  - If it is his pleasure you should act a poor man, a cripple, a governor, or a private person,
  - see that you act it naturally.
  - **For *this is your business, to act well the character assigned you;***
    - to choose [the character] is another's.” (4, ¶17)



- Sartre would say that someone who follows this advice acts in *bad faith* by accepting their apparent role, instead of exercising their freedom to do otherwise.
  - *Who's right: Epictetus or Sartre?*



## Epictetus has strong opinions on how we should make decisions:

- “In every affair consider what precedes and follows, and then undertake it.
- Otherwise you will begin with spirit; but not having thought of the consequences, when some of them appear you will shamefully desist.”



- » Epictetus thinks we should *never* just ‘go with our gut’ when making decisions.
- » We should make our choices coolly and calmly, and carry out the course of action we have chosen methodically.

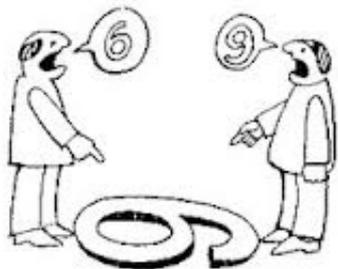
- “Consider first...what the matter is, and what your own nature is able to bear... for **different persons are made for different things.**” (5, ¶ 29)



- He thinks people shouldn't try to become whatever they want;
- they should go into whatever role or occupation they are best suited to succeed in.

He also believes we should forgive other people,  
on the assumption that their perspective is simply different from ours.

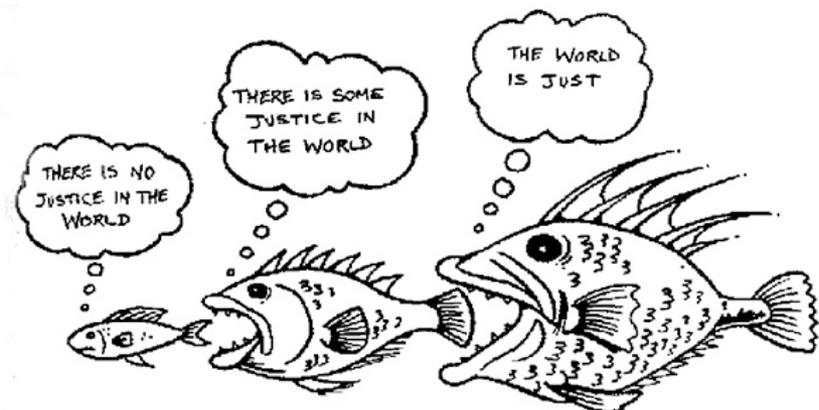
- “When any person harms you, or speaks badly of you,  
remember that he acts or speaks from a supposition of its being his duty.



- Now, it is not possible that he should follow what appears right to you, but [only] what appears so to himself.
- Therefore, if he judges from a wrong appearance, he is the person hurt, since he too is the person deceived.

– ...Setting out, then, from these principles,

- **you will meekly bear a person who reviles you**, for you will say upon every occasion, ‘It seemed so to him.’ “ (5-6, ¶42)

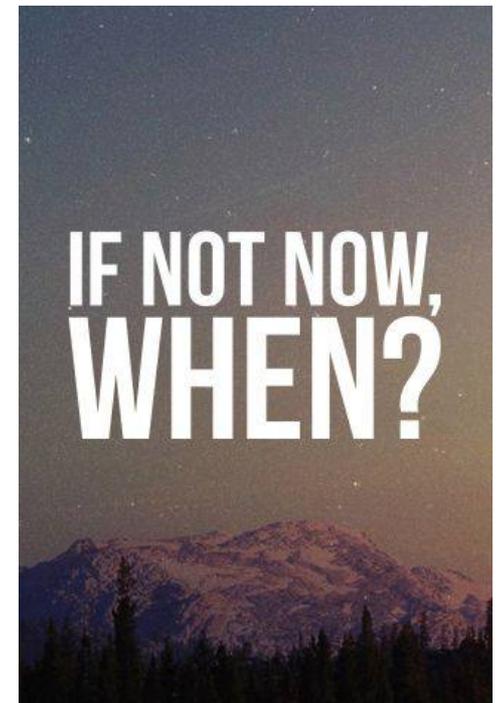


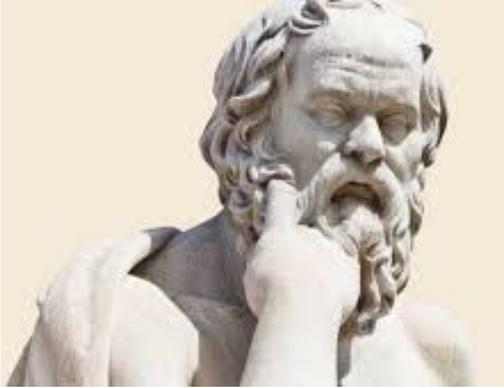
**Epictetus is recommending that we forgive and excuse people who seem to do us harm,**

- by reasoning that they must have had good reasons to do so – even if those reasons don’t seem good from our own perspective.
- *Do people always deserve benefit of the doubt?*
- *Are some actions or insults unforgiveable?*

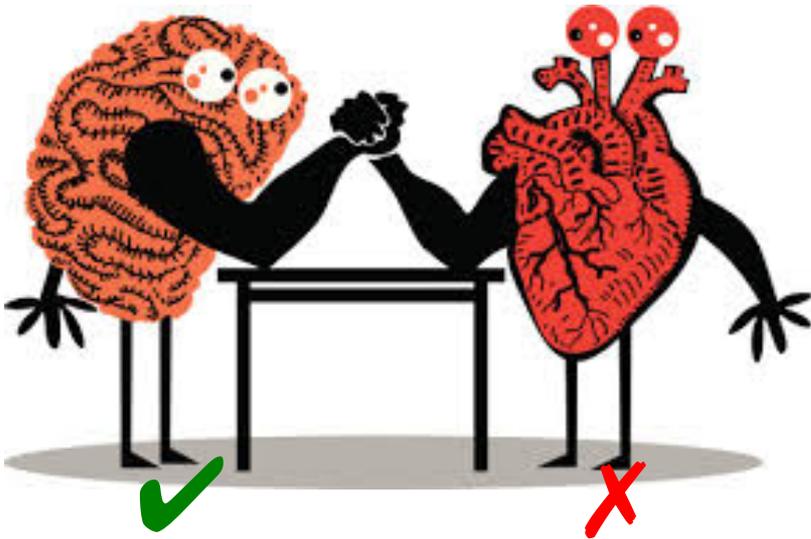
## Epictetus urges us to act upon what we believe to be true:

- *“Let whatever appears to be the best be to you an inviolable law.”*
  - **“Whatever moral rules you have deliberately proposed to yourself, abide by them as they were laws,**
  - and as if you would be guilty of impiety by violating any of them.
    - *Don't regard what anyone says of you,*
    - *for this, after all, is no concern of yours.”*
- “How long, then, will you put off yourself worthy of the highest improvements and follow[ing] the distinctions of reason?
  - You have received the philosophical theorems, with which you ought to be familiar, and you have been familiar with them.
  - What other master, then, do you wait for, to throw upon that the delay of reforming yourself?” (6, ¶ 50)





- “Thus **Socrates became perfect**, improving himself by everything, *attending to nothing but reason*.
  - » And though you are not yet a Socrates,
  - » you ought, however, to live as one desirous of becoming a Socrates.” (6, ¶ 50)



- *Are you convinced that everything would be easier if you set aside your emotions and only followed reason?*
- *Are you convinced that it would be possible for you to do so?*
- *Are you convinced that it would be best for everyone to do so?*