

The Hand-Page to the Handbook of Epictetus

James Daltrey: Living Stoicism February 2023

Living a good life requires a good understanding of Nature, the living world, and our place in it. This requires the best possible knowledge of the value and appropriate uses of, and responses to, what we encounter in the world, for our own benefit and the common good.

The accuracy and coherence of our evaluative thinking leads to a coherent character and an independent life of personal and ethical integrity, free from frustration, self-deception, and ignorance. The pursuit of this understanding of values is the pursuit of **arete** [virtue, excellence].

Like all animals, we are born with an innate understanding of the principles of benefit and harm. Things in accordance with Nature are beneficial, not in accordance, are harmful. While animals grasp this instinctively, we must learn intelligently over time. We do this with language, identifying which is which in which situations. We gain this rational expertise through experience and reflection. Epictetus calls this intelligence **prohairesis**, [rational choice or volition] the ability to reflect upon, and evaluate our evaluations.

Epictetus collectively refers to all our mental events as **phantasia** [impressions, appearances]. Impressions are our thoughts, memories, and anything that passes through our minds. The function of **prohairesis**, is to make proper use of impressions; to improve this ability throughout our lives.

The process works through language, through our inner dialogue. We truth-check our judgments and assess the appropriateness of our motivations with our reflective self-talk. Thus we adjust the values and assumptions behind our desires and aversions, identifying what is appropriate to pursue or avoid.

Prohairesis determines everything we intentionally do and forms and transforms our characters over time.

Prohairesis is the origin of our deliberate actions. It is us doing what we do. It is our best understanding of the world and what is best for us and others, and get that right or wrong. **Prohairesis** is our “self.”

Epictetus distinguishes our internal ability to evaluate ourselves and the external things we evaluate. The ability to assess our own values lies within us. The things we evaluate are value-neutral [indifferent] without our evaluation, although natural human priorities, like health, family and security are preferred.

The mistake is losing our autonomy by placing false values in externals above the actual value of our own virtue and integrity. The way to be free of destructive emotions and bad choices is to know the value of externals lies in our treatment of them, if in accordance with Nature or not .

This ability to make value judgments lies solely within us. To make progress towards living a good life, we improve our rational value judgments. According to Epictetus, this requires:

- Understanding what does and does not belong to us.
- Understanding how we come to our values and apply them to the common good.
- Understanding the truth or falsity of our reasoned judgments.

Enchiridion 1:

Some things in the world are up to us, while others are not. Up to us are our faculties of judgment, motivation, desire, and aversion, and in short, everything that is our own doing.

*Not up to us are our body and property, our reputations, and our official positions, and, in short, everything that is not our own doing**

Interpretation:

There is that which is ours, internal, rationality the use of impressions, gives value: either true or false, good or bad.

There is that which is not ours, external to us, indifferents, receives value: neither good nor bad

In Plain English

What is ours is our faculty of reason in short whatever is our own reasoning

What is not ours is everything that is not our own reasoning