

The Central Argument

- P1. If you want your life to go well [to be happy], things must happen as you want.
- P2. How things happen is not up to you.
- P3. What you want *is* up to you.
- C1. Therefore, you should either
 - (a) Want things to happen as they do happen (sect. 8), or
 - (b) Want nothing at all. (See section 2: “And for the time being eliminate desire completely. . . .”)

Option *b* is for people making progress. It won't make you happy, but it will ensure that you are not “unfortunate,” and this is necessary in order to become a sage. Only the sage is capable of *a*: wanting things to happen as they do happen. Therefore, only the sage is truly happy.

Empirical Objections to P3: that “What You Want is Up to You”

What I want is *not* up to me because:

1. My wants are caused at least partly by my bodily needs. E.g., when I’m hungry I can’t help wanting food; when I’m exhausted I can’t help wanting to sleep, etc.

Replies:

Your bodily needs are probably less of a factor than you assume. Consider how you’re less prone to feel hunger or exhaustion when you’re completely absorbed in doing something you enjoy.

Even though you can’t help feeling physical discomfort, your mental attitude (or judgment) transforms it into something bad – something you don’t *want*. Consider how athletes speak cheerfully of “feeling the burn.”

2. My wants are caused by my emotions, and my emotions are caused by chemicals in my brain.

Best examples: Mood Disorders, such as depression

Possible Replies:

- (1) The objection is reasonable: Stoic teachings are limited insofar as they focus on emotions, not on moods, and certainly not on mood disorders. They are intended to help ordinary people, not to treat mental illness.** *Emotions* are directed to specific situations. For example, you are angry *about* your grade on an exam, the tedious nature of the reading assignments, etc. Why? Because you believe these things are bad, and you want good things. There are reasons for your anger. In contrast, *moods* are often not directed to specific situations, and the reasons for them, if any, are less clear. With mood disorders, both of these problems are especially pronounced, so that someone with a mood disorder might need medication in order to return to a more normal condition.
- (2) The objection has a weaker empirical basis than most people think.** There is considerable debate about (a) whether low levels of serotonin are a cause, as opposed to an effect, of depression, and (b) whether anti-depressant medications “work” only because the people who take them *think* that they will work (the placebo effect). See S. Begley, “The Depressing News About Antidepressants,” *Newsweek*, Feb. 8, 2010.

Another Empirical Objection:

Even if we were able to eliminate all of our desires, the effect would not be beneficial to us – because if we wanted nothing, we would have no motivation to *do* anything. We would not even bother to get out of bed.

Reply:

Stoics advise against “wanting” (becoming attached to) things that are not up to us. They advise people still making “progress” to work at wanting nothing because we are poor at recognizing the many things that are not up to us.

The ultimate goal is to want things to happen as they do happen and be “joyful” about what is truly our own (Sect. 6). We may *wish* for something “indifferent” to happen in the future because wishing does not involve attachment; hence it does not lead to anger, envy, disappointment, or blame.

Normative Objections:

1. Even if we could avoid feeling grief at the death of our spouse or child, we should not try to avoid it.

Why?

Because the feeling of grief is beneficial? If so, to whom?

Because people who do not feel grief are morally inferior to those who do?

If so, what makes them morally inferior? “Insensitivity”? (Is this a defect of moral character?)

2. A good friend is one who to some extent shares our suffering when we ourselves are miserable. We would not want someone as a friend who merely “went through the motions” of sympathizing with us.

Why?

Because we want the power to make our friends suffer?

The Big Picture: Divine Providence

“. . . Nothing bad by nature happens in the world. (Sect. 27).

God is good (always brings benefit). God is intelligence, knowledge, right reason.

(*Disc.*, p. 9)

Every creature is made by god for a (good) purpose. Everything that happens is for a (good) purpose. (*Disc.*, p. 6)

- Analogy: the beneficial effects of forest fires, predators, and scavengers

Humans have the faculties of reason and understanding so that we can be an interpreter of god's works. We should be grateful for our rational faculties and use them for the purpose intended: living in harmony with nature. (*Disc.*, p. 6)

Because we have these special faculties, we are *fragments* of god. We carry god within us and should live accordingly. (*Disc.*, p. 10)

God has assigned to each us our own *personal daemon* as a guardian. Thus we are never alone: “god is within, and your daemon is within, and what need have they of light to see what you are doing?” (*Disc.*, p. 9)

Problems:

1. Do we need to understand how the universe works as a perfect whole in order to attain happiness? Do we need at least some understanding of “physics,” or is it enough to believe that the universe always works rationally, for the good?
2. Is the personal daemon that god gave each of us like a guardian angel, or is it simply our own power of reason?
3. Does the claim that we are fragments of god mean anything more than that we have rational faculties? (Does Epictetus personify god and the daemon only as a concession to popular opinion about the gods?)
4. Stoics argue that nobody is a slave by nature: no human being is just a “living tool,” designed by nature or god to be used by other people. In contrast, Stoics claim that animals are indeed made to be used. Is there any way to justify this view of animals that does not depend on theology?