

# Applying Stoicism: The First Decision

By Travis Hume



Four years ago, I was wholly dissatisfied with life. I held no strong wish to be wealthy, powerful, or well-known. I had no definitive dream to pursue besides bits and pieces of things I found interest in – activities that were more hobbies than pursuits. There appeared no clear means by which I could reinvigorate and point myself in the “right direction.” The basis for my pursuing my college education was little more than a guess of my “intended” career based on my personality traits, and a fear of a presumed, alternate lifetime of menial work.

In my own words at the time, I did not know who I was, what I was meant to be doing, and the means to discern an answer to either. I was adrift, basing all choices loosely on others expectations and a haphazard assumption of the progression of life. In rough order, I was “supposed” to attend college, get a career, buy a house, marry, have children, then retire. I knew no alternative paths, and believed there likely to be none. Concerning college, I was skeptical of others suggestions to “follow your interests and let the rest fall into place,” because of a seemingly equally pervasive counter-claim that “the point of college was to lead to a well-paying career.”

I possessed only rudimentary skills with math and the sciences, so my career options were (in my eyes) limited to the arts or psychology. My decision to pursue a bachelors in psychology was founded entirely on the premises that “I thought too much” and others “often seemed to open up to me.” I did not enjoy my studies, and struggled daily against thoughts that perhaps menial work was the only thing I was

suited for. I thought often on my fate and the world I inhabited; whether my choices were meaningful or meaningless.

Early in my degree I was forced by general education requirements to take an intro to philosophy course. I held a negative bias against attending the course that I did not understand or try to explain. I did not believe that philosophy had any real-world application or meaning. I believed that I would hear “old men arguing over what is good or evil,” and “that I should just take their word for it.” It followed that that was my initial view of the lessons.

Each discussed philosopher and their respective theories seemed to blend together, with the exception of one: A philosopher named Epictetus. Epictetus, the professor said, claimed that virtue (being a good person) was the only truly good thing, and vice (being a bad person) was the only truly evil thing. Further, the philosopher claimed that money, power, and fame had no value in themselves, and would never bring a person peace or make them happy. These ideas deeply resonated with me, but conflicted with my long-held beliefs of “the way things were.” Reacting to the resulting discomfort, I raised my hand and asked “Wouldn’t it be really depressing to think like that all the time?” The Professor smiled, looked down, half-nodded, shrugged, and continued the lesson. Epictetus was rarely covered the remainder of the semester, and my brief, inner conflict subsided accordingly for a time.

The discomfort emerged again when, in a span wherein I had no outstanding personal needs, it occurred to me that I nevertheless felt dissatisfied. I meekly resisted uncomfortable thoughts that arose from this realization, countering “everyone feels this way sometimes,” “that’s just life,” asking myself “who else says otherwise?” Recalling Epictetus, I considered the possibility that I was mistaken about the nature of things. I was aware to some degree that my original thought process had been instilled by twenty-odd years of social and media influences. The alternative thought process that Epictetus proposed seemed immediately attractive, such as a potential belief that it is sufficient for happiness to do the right thing for its own sake.

“Perhaps there is something to philosophy that I’m not seeing,” I recall thinking. I searched for my intro to philosophy book and set a goal to read it in its entirety over the next several months. Notably, I avoided the section on Epictetus until the very end, for two reasons: A desire to give a “fair shake” to other philosophers’ theories, and a fear that the feeling originally drawn from listening to Epictetus’s claims would amount to little. Occasionally, I came close to recovering the desired “hit home” feeling while reading other philosophers works, but I did not succeed in matching it. I read Epictetus’s section last, comprised of a very brief history on his life and the *Enchiridion*, “The Handbook,” a highly condensed version of his lessons “The Discourses.”

As I read the Enchiridion, the “hit home” feeling fully resurfaced. I found that I could not decisively argue against the claims that Epictetus was making, finding the internal rebuttal that “no-one believes or thinks this way” to be brittle and unconvincing. I asked myself: “What if it is really possible to think this way?” “Is it possible to apply something that is 2,000 years old?” According to Epictetus, it was, but only if I dedicate myself completely to incorporating the principles he described. I decided “if I am really going to apply this, I have to give it my all.”

From that day forward I sought to discern how Stoicism could be applied to my life, from moment-to-moment decision making, to responses to significant life events. Stoic principles became the foundation and driving force behind a new, earnest pursuit to involve myself in volunteering efforts for special needs organizations, participation in student government, residence life involvement, university representation work, engagement as a student leader, and commitment to a high-intensity exercise and nutrition regimen. Stoicism enabled me to discover and tap into a previously wholly unknown skill-set and self-sustaining source of drive. In time, I became determined to one day teach others in its use, so that others may benefit from it as I did.

The decision to take up Stoicism as a philosophy of life is not a light one. It tasks the bearer, daily, to assess, shape, and refine themselves. It does not serve as a cure-all, and cannot function as a band-aid – it is a craft, with the mind as its material, and the individual’s life as its testing grounds. In exchange, it provides a world-view in which little is taken for granted, and virtuous action is sufficient for enduring peace of mind, personal strength, and well-being. Drawing from Epictetus: “First say to yourself what you would be; and then do what you have to do.”

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